

A Brief Introduction



Welcome to *Constructing A Framework for Success: A Holistic Approach to Basic Skills*, a handbook for faculty, student services personnel and administrators working with students that have basic skills needs. Because research in California tells us that 70-85% of our entering students assess into basic skills courses in one or more areas, we know that helping them to achieve collegiate level is a task for everyone. Each of us are contributors to the college framework that houses those students' academic dreams. This handbook is for those of you with construction tools in your hands, the ones who are actively working to help these particular students succeed. You are the important folks striving to provide students with the skills needed to reach the penthouse suite of their academic goals. Some of you may be teaching specific basic skills courses or teaching transfer courses that include students with basic skills needs, staffing tutoring labs, providing student services, helping to develop Basic Skills Action Plans or acting as a Basic Skills Coordinator. Our goal is to honor your hard work and to excite you with new building techniques to try.

Why This Handbook?

In *The State of Basic Skills Instruction in California Community Colleges*

Grubb and Associates, in a national study based on observations of community college classes, found the best and the worst teaching in this arena. Instruction ranged from “the most inspired student- and learning-centered approaches and the most deadly drill-and-kill classes” (Grubb, p. 174). They cited the need for citizens and legislators to recognize the difference between the popular notion that institutions have “dumbed down” courses to match lowered student and instructor expectations and a carefully designed and rigorous course of remediation. They conclude, “we can see that developmental [i.e., basic skills] education is one of the most difficult teaching challenges and needs to be rescued from its second-hand status. (as cited in ASCCC, 2000, p.4)

Instead, pre-collegiate assessment and basic skills education acts like those regular building inspections during construction, examining weaknesses and then rebuilding foundational skills for a longer lasting more successful college career.

The California Community College Chancellor's Office *Report on the System's Current Programs in English as a Second Language (ESL) and Basic Skills* captured what is happening here in California. It stated,

Assisting underprepared students to be successful in college-level work is essential to the mission of the California Community Colleges. Research indicates that our colleges have many successes which are laudable. More than any other postsecondary segment in California, the community colleges exemplify the spirit of the California Education Code Section 66201 which affords each able Californian an unparalleled educational opportunity:

“It is the intent of the Legislature that each resident of California who has the capacity to benefit from higher education should have the opportunity to enroll in an institution of higher education. Once enrolled, each individual should have the opportunity to continue as long and as far as his or her capacity and motivation, as indicated by academic performance and commitment to educational advancement, will lead him or her to meet academic standards and institutional requirements.”
(Board of Governors, 2008, p. 32)

California is unique in that we are obligated by the Education Code to provide basic skills instruction. The Legislature has recognized that mission and its vital importance by funding the Basic Skills Initiative (BSI), a multi-year effort to improve curriculum, instruction, student services, assessment, program practices and campus culture in the areas of ESL and basic skills across the state.

This handbook is part of that BSI effort. It is packed with the kinds of specific strategies that Grubb and Associates lauded in their study; think of it as a tool kit. Many practices are designed for you to use immediately, while others, such as successful programs, will give you ideas for more long-term approaches for student success. Every strategy listed in the workbook has a track record of proven success at a California community college or is brand new, created by a statewide team of expert teachers, waiting for you to test. Each of these is accompanied by an assessment that you can use to see if the strategy will work in your particular wing of the building (look for the measuring man

symbol ).

Since every college and indeed, each course section is unique and different, built from the construction materials that arise from the needs of your particular students, it’s important for you to critically determine whether a specific technique or program works for your students, by assessing the outcomes. Yes, this is the same kind of assessment we do to meet accreditation standards and educational best practices. These assessment results can act as an advocate, improving student learning and helping you build evidence to advocate for funding the good work you’re doing with your students. (There is more about assessment in Chapter 15 and assessment samples in each discipline specific chapter.)

Some Pertinent Definitions

Before diving into the building process, we need to clarify some definitions.

Just what exactly do we mean by basic skills?

For the purposes of this handbook, we are using the definition of basic skills proposed in *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Success in California Community Colleges* “Basic Skills are those foundation skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and English as a Second Language, as well as learning skills and study

skills, which are necessary for students to succeed in college-level work” (Center for Student Success, 2007, p.13).

What are we referring to when we use the term “student success?”

For the purposes of this handbook, we do not define student success as the grade of C or better in a course. We mean it in a much broader context. What have students learned in a class, from an entire program or an encounter in student support services or the library? What do students need in order to successfully complete their academic dreams? Think beyond grades. “Success” includes attitudes toward learning, specific skills such as time management or organization, social abilities and content knowledge. Student success occurs inside the classroom and out. Everyone working on a campus contributes to student success, either directly or indirectly, in one way or the other.

What about the term “Effective Practice”?

Basic Skills as a Foundation for Success in California Community Colleges (sometimes called “The Poppy Copy” in reference to its orange cover) defined effective practices as “organizational, administrative, instructional or support activities engaged in by highly successful programs, as validated by research and literature sources relating to developmental education” (Center for Student Success, 2007, p. 13). The Poppy Copy divided those practices into four major areas and listed specific examples of each, taken from colleges across the state. In this handbook, an effective practice may include those specific strategies already listed in the Poppy Copy but also refers to practices that have developed since it was published. An **effective practice** is a teaching and learning or student support services strategy that has been successful for students with basic skills needs. An **emerging practice** is a good idea, a strategy that is just now being explored, without data to demonstrate its effectiveness.



Finally, what do we mean by assessment, accompanied by the graphic of the measuring man?

The word “assessment” does not refer to the important act of placing a student in the right English or mathematics class when he or she enters a college. Placement assessment, while impacting students with basic skills needs in a major way at the beginning of their college career, is not the emphasis here. Rather, we mean assessment as an activity used to gauge how well students are doing at the end of a specific class session, the end of a course or program or even at the end of an entire college experience. Assessment answers these kinds of questions: What have students learned? What needs and issues have been revealed by their performance? Most importantly, what can you do to help them improve? Assessment is an on-going process aimed at improving student learning. It asks that faculty and student service providers make their learning expectations explicit and public, measure whether students have met them and then make changes to the teaching-learning process based on the results. The three steps compose what is sometimes called “closing the assessment loop.”



Before you drop this handbook and run screaming from the room, let us remind you that this is what good academic practitioners always do. How many times, at the end of a class meeting, a counseling session or a college governance meeting, have you run over the experience in your mind, evaluating what went well and what you’d do differently next time? Assessment simply formalizes that process,

asking you to think about what you're doing in the classroom, your department or college in a more systematic way. And here's the good news: for basic skills faculty and staff, assessment can also act as a very effective advocate. We know that the work you do is often undervalued or misunderstood. Assessment results, when shared with those in charge of college planning or allocating resources, not to mention the public or even state legislators, can be a powerful persuader for more funding, better equipment or the creation of innovative programs. We know of an English department that received funding to bring in a national expert on integrating the teaching of reading and writing when assessment results revealed that students, both basic skills and transfer, weren't thinking critically because they couldn't read well. Another college conducted an assessment to see how many students were unable to see a counselor to get help with registration. The numbers were huge. As a result, the college put the time and resources into developing an online process to provide "just in time" counseling. The online process now serves as many students as in-person counseling, and enrollments at the college have increased. Assessment can be your best friend.

But wait, you say. Isn't assessment just another educational fad or worse, a political imposition from folks who don't have any idea of what we do? Isn't this "No Child Left Behind" (No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001) in another guise? The answer is no. Across California, community college faculty have been defining assessment as a proactive, faculty driven process to explore our work in greater depth, to dialogue together about what we do and to help us improve. When done effectively, assessment is a tool that can enrich our colleges. As faculty have defined it, assessment includes:



Examining pedagogy and curriculum— Am I teaching the right content in the best way? Is the educational experience full of accurate and current material, correctly targeting the student populations I teach?



Measuring student study skills and commitment – How committed are my students to learning? Are they aware of the ingredients necessary to be successful in college?



Gauging faculty awareness of student needs and effective teaching strategies -- What kinds of attitudes do other faculty hold about students? What do they know about effective practices that have been shown to help them? What do they see as their own responsibility in helping students achieve their academic dreams?



Evaluating student abilities at the beginning of an academic endeavor and then looking at them again after it is finished -- What do my students know when they begin my class or program? How can I get a sense of the varying levels of student knowledge, skills and values before they tackle new material? What have they learned and what can they do as a result of this educational experience?

Assessment is NOT:

- An end in itself or busy work that has no relation to teaching and learning.
- A means to evaluate individual faculty or staff.
- A way to impinge on academic freedom.
- A solution to every problem on campus or an answer to all questions about students and learning.

Here is an example of how assessment can work in your favor. At a recent Carnegie meeting discussing the importance of assessment data and student information, Myra Snell, mathematics instructor at Los Medanos College, reported “This information [data on the relative success rates in elementary algebra of students who had different levels of preparation] was instrumental in several changes: We established a prerequisite for elementary algebra, changed scheduling patterns in the math department, and are now experimenting with different modes of instruction for basic skills curriculum” (Hutchinson & Shulman, 2007, ¶4).

A great deal has been written about the assessment of student learning outcomes. We will attempt to cover some of the basics in this handbook in Chapters 15 and 16, using examples from basic skills courses and programs, but this is only a beginning. You will probably want to know more. Two user-friendly resources on the web are *Assessing Student Learning in Higher Education* by Dr. Janet Fulks at online.bakersfieldcollege.edu/courseassessment/default.htm and Cabrillo College’s Student Learning Outcomes website at pro.cabrillo.edu/slos/index/html. An additional website with examples of evidence-based practices throughout California community colleges may provide useful models for specific disciplines or services <http://css.rpgroup.org/index.php>.

How to Use This Handbook

This workbook is like a building plan, organized into different areas, floors and wings. If you are brand new to teaching basic skills courses or a transfer instructor whose classes are increasingly filled with students with basic skills needs, you may want to start from the beginning and work through each chapter in chronological order. If you are an experienced builder but new to the idea of assessing your “constructions” or practices, you might want to start with either Chapters 4 and 6 (for student service providers and faculty) or Chapter 5 (for discipline faculty) and then move on to the effective practices for your discipline Chapters 7 through 14. Administrators may find Chapters 2, 3, 6 and 19 the most helpful while Basic Skills Coordinators may want to start with Chapters 2, 3, 6 and 18 and then move on to other relevant chapters.

More Information

We are only at the beginning of gathering the effective practices and assessments that are listed in this handbook. Think of this as a builder’s guide-in-progress. We are collecting effective practices and will host them on a website at Basic Skills Initiative <http://www.cccbsi.org>. In addition, you can help us continue to build this builder’s guide by listing the effective programs and practices at your college on the new ASCCC BSI survey. The Basic Skills Initiative, funded by a grant from the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, is developing a web-based resource to

showcase successful programs, strategies and projects that increase success rates of basic skills level students, and professional development programs.

While there are a number of projects demonstrating student success across the United States, a repository containing data-driven effective practices accessible to all does not exist. Many times educators search different websites to gather useful research. It is anticipated that this database will provide educators with this important resource at one location.

One of our goals is to include at least one program, strategy, and/or project from each California community college that is data driven and supported, as well as other successful programs from across the United States. However, we need your assistance in collecting the information. As many of us know, there is a lot of good work happening in developmental education. We can all learn by sharing.

The survey link is: <http://bsi.cccco.edu/>

In order to catch up on the history of the Basic Skills Initiative and associated issues, you will find additional information at the website or in the papers listed in the references section:

Basic Skills Initiative <http://www.cccbsi.org>.

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