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Noncredit Students in California Community Colleges: A Community at Risk

The early 1980s saw a dramatic increase in the number of second language students entering community college noncredit ESL classes throughout California. In response to this need, many noncredit continuing education programs expanded offerings in the community and at the major noncredit sites. Because of the rapid expansion, many noncredit ESL programs were developed independently from the credit ESL programs, and little effort was given to articulation of curriculum. Even in those community colleges where attempts were made to articulate the two programs and create a continuum of language instruction, inherent student issues such as individual goals, financial need, and levels of educational preparation were not fully explored, and few noncredit students moved into college-credit ESL classes.

Although in many instances faculty and administrators continued to discuss the need to more closely articulate the two programs, few formal efforts were undertaken. Consequently, it was not unusual for the two ESL programs to develop independently of each other and for the separate faculty groups to have little contact beyond the efforts of a few individuals. However, when the amnesty program of the late 1980s brought an overwhelming number of students into California college districts via noncredit instruction, the resulting enrollment expansion made it necessary for districts to reexamine how noncredit ESL students could be matriculated to compensate for a declining credit student population.

It became apparent that with shrinking state dollars for education and a downward shift in credit enrollments, community colleges that fared best throughout the state were those which had large, growing noncredit programs that could offset financial losses on the credit side. The higher reimbursement for college-credit ADA, even with the state imposed enrollment limitations, made the movement of students into credit offerings highly desirable.

In developing effective matriculation models, community colleges faced several challenges. One of these was the reluctance on the part of noncredit and credit faculty groups to recognize the need to articulate courses to ensure a smooth instructional transition from noncredit instruction to credit. Students who completed the highest level of noncredit instruction often had to be tested for placement in credit ESL courses, and expectations for student success in these classes were not clearly defined for the noncredit faculty. One result of this was the sense on the part of the college-credit English/ESL faculty that matriculated students entering their classes were underprepared, especially in the area of writing. The internal college culture often perceived the problem as stemming from the differences in "casual" noncredit and "academic" instruction.

It also became very clear to college districts that many noncredit ESL students lacked knowledge of how to access college programs, and that proximity to classes was a key enrollment factor. While locating noncredit programs in the community was critical for students, it presented a major challenge when students had to leave local sites and move to one of the two college campuses. Second language students also found it extremely difficult to initially maneuver through the registration process, and because many colleges maintained separate student numbers and data bases for noncredit and credit students, re-registering was often required when students entered credit ESL classes.

In 1986, Rancho Santiago College, a large urban community college in Orange County, applied for and received a Title III grant that was renewable for three years at approximately \$200,000 per year. One goal of this federal grant, designed to financially strengthen postsecondary institutions, was to transition noncredit ESL students into college-credit programs, including English as a second language. Developing such a model for Rancho Santiago College made it clear that the students enrolled in the two college ESL programs, credit and noncredit, had unique needs that had to be addressed and that merely establishing courses would not result in an effective or efficient student matriculation model.

The ACCESS Program developed from this federal Title III grant attempted to address these issues through a model with both instructional and student service components. The instructional component focused on two areas, reading and mathematics. Courses developed in these disciplines were designed to bridge the gap between the basic skills of noncredit instruction and the entry level courses in the college. These courses were offered on the Santa Ana college campus and scheduled so that matriculated students could take classes in multiple disciplines as indicated through individual student assessment. Because the college did not offer specific

reading classes for second language learners, an ACCESS reading class was developed to meet the reading needs of transitioning students.

However, the transition class that proved to be most successful was Counseling N45: *Orientation to College*, offered at continuing education sites in the community and designed to provide students with knowledge about college and university systems as well as specific information about Rancho Santiago College programs. Students were assisted with registration, fees were collected, and a field trip to the college campus was scheduled. Through enrollment in this course, students "became" college students—they were offered early registration and were familiarized with services available to them on the campus. Although this approach required a major commitment of resources, students quickly learned how to handle the college system and required fewer student support services.

The student services component of the ACCESS Program emphasized outreach, orientation, assessment, and ongoing counseling support. Presentations were given in the noncredit basic skills classes and in the higher levels of ESL. In order to address faculty concerns about student enrollments and levels of readiness, faculty were recruited to assist with outreach activities and student assessment. Student placement became a joint effort with input from all faculty concerned. Students had a designated counseling location at the Santa Ana campus, where support was readily available. This was also where program staff were housed and student records maintained. Linking matriculating students with a specific program and clearly identifying services was critical for student success.

At the end of the three-year grant period, the program was incorporated into the college structure, and the student services component was integrated into the existing student support system. Although the counseling staff continued to be designated as ACCESS staff, the scope of their responsibility was expanded to include other district counseling activities. Student outreach activities recognized as crucial for student transition were maintained but also made part of overall college activities.

Although Rancho Santiago College made a commitment to have noncredit and credit ESL course offerings at all major sites, limited instructional space made this difficult to achieve. However, through the development of the ACCESS Program, it became clear that any successful matriculation model must include a structure that provided easily accessible instruction regardless of student level, and that dialogue between faculty in the two divisions was a key factor for any approach. In addition, issues surrounding student placement, effective assessment practices, course content, credit and noncredit designation, and enrollment in impacted disciplines must be clearly identified and resolved with student success as the focus.

Unfortunately, recent educational developments and trends at the state level continue to compound the issue of matriculation by excluding non-credit students from the many areas of reform that have shaped instructional practices at California community colleges. Matriculation dollars that focus only on students enrolled for credit have made it difficult for colleges to provide services for the growing number of second language students who enter the system through noncredit programs. The change in Title V2 regulations that provide for the development of nondegree-applicable courses, funded at the higher rate of state apportionment, has created a disincentive for many colleges to expand their noncredit offerings even though there is an increasing number of students, especially second language learners, for whom this mode of instruction is more appropriate.

In assessing current statewide practices, instructional models with sequential courses that fail to address the time needed to effectively acquire language skills if matriculation is to be even a possibility, have helped to create a group of students in local communities with limited access to higher levels of education. Adding to this problem is the tendency for colleges to provide libraries, financial aid offices, and specially designed outreach and support programs only on credit campuses, effectively excluding the noncredit students whose needs for these services are in many cases greater than those of other students. The main source of change, however, has to come from within the culture of the individual colleges. The administration, faculty, and staff have to recognize that the second language student population is a dynamic population and that to ignore the unique instructional needs of these students puts colleges, communities, and ultimately the state at risk. ■