

English Academy fast tracks students towards their goals

By Grace Smith, Published September 28, 2015

The United States has the highest college dropout rates in the industrialized world, and studies have shown that too many prerequisites contribute to the problem – especially for underrepresented students. The new English Academy at Santa Monica College (SMC) in California is one of many ways the college is experimenting with removing roadblocks and moving students faster towards transfer or a career.

The program – which debuted this summer – compresses up to two semesters' worth of fundamental college writing instruction into a rigorous, two-week boot camp for students who otherwise would have to enroll in at least one pre-college level class before moving to college-level English 1, the research-oriented reading and writing course that satisfies the English requirement for an associate degree. It is also transferable to a University of California or California State University campus.

A good start

Of the 164 students in the inaugural English Academy held in August, 150 — or 91 percent — passed directly into English 1.

"Most students who place into my basic skills, or pre-college level English class, have to overcome difficult circumstances to persist – far more than the typical college student," says SMC English Professor Eleni Hioureas. "A lot of things can happen in one semester to keep them from coming back – financial and health setbacks, things that may confirm a wrong impression that they cannot succeed. The English Academy is a big deal because it challenges them towards success, saves time and money, and fast tracks them to transfer."

SMC student and English Academy participant Stephanie Santos-Cruz agrees.

"The program definitely helps keep you from falling into the equity gap," says Santos-Cruz, in reference to the disparity that exists in academic achievement between traditionally underrepresented students and their peers. Time is precious for Santos-Cruz, who plans to study child cognitive psychology. Riding the bus from home to class alone takes up to 90 minutes per trip.

The English Academy enabled her to confront the equity gap that faces many traditionally underrepresented students in another way. For her research paper, she focused on high school college counseling and its role in the equity gap. The program also gave her the confidence and experience to write research papers.

"If I was able to do a research paper in two weeks, without a full semester of instruction, I know I can definitely do it now that I'm in English 1," she says.

Relevant connections

The English Academy's tight schedule of 10 three-hour workshops was a careful choice.

"We were very deliberate about choosing the intensive approach," says SMC English Professor Gordon Dossett, co-faculty leader for the program. "The students were able to focus exclusively on this. And we used peers as writing assistants, a model that's proven effective."

Having students explore topics relevant to their own lives was another key strategy.

"The assignments helped them see the connection between their own lives and the experience, problems and solutions that they were writing about," explains English Professor Kevin Menton, English Academy co-faculty leader.

Ten English professors joined Dossett and Menton in developing the curriculum for the program and teaching the participants. Two librarians helped introduce students to research resources, while the student writing assistants provided one-to-one support.

SMC student Chris Guidos – who commutes from South Los Angeles – found that the workshops helped improve his writing skills and also helped him overcome his shyness in class.

"I learned to speak up," he says.

Guidos was on a student panel that presented their research findings to an audience of peers, faculty and administrators at SMC, at the end of the academy. He talked about how domestic violence and alcohol abuse affects student learning – from

personal experience.

Guidos – who wants to major in kinesiology with a physical therapy emphasis – enjoyed the program’s collaborative, “workshop-style” atmosphere. Of his own growth through the program, he adds, “I don’t feel as pressured or intimidated in class as I did before.”

Thanks to state funding

The English Academy was one of several academic support pilot projects funded by California’s new \$69.5 million “student equity” budget for California community colleges in 2014-15. SMC received a little over \$1 million of these funds last year and developed a comprehensive plan – a multipronged answer to the state’s call for community colleges to help close the equity gap – which includes devoting resources to ongoing research and inquiry into assessing the challenges faced by underrepresented students, and bolstering existing student support services.

Other equity-funded projects in full swing or upcoming at SMC include a sociology and history-coaching program; a learning library for low-income, early-childhood education students; tutoring and outreach for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) students; and chemistry and math boot camps, also for STEM students.

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