

**REPORT FROM THE RP/CENTER FOR STUDENT SUCCESS**

**FINDINGS FROM PILOT COMMUNITY COLLEGES  
USING THE INSTITUTIONAL SELF ASSESSMENT TOOL  
FOR EFFECTIVE PRACTICES IN BASIC SKILLS**

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**To download the report Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in  
California Community Colleges including the self-assessment tool go to:**

**<http://css.rpgroup.org>**

## OVERALL EXPERIENCES OF PILOT COLLEGES

Findings are drawn from 12 pilot college phone interviews and 29 online survey responses. Nearly all interviews included the CIO, one also included a CSSO, and three interviews included faculty. Survey responses represent eight colleges; 15 of the 29 survey responses were from faculty.

- ~ **Participants (90%<sup>1</sup>) found the self-assessment process useful and productive**, 79% felt the discussions covered all or most essential issues related to basic skills, 86% felt the literature review was very or somewhat useful, 86% felt the self-assessment tool was clearly laid out.
- ~ **The most often cited benefit thus far was cross-college dialogue, better collective consciousness, and the chance to work together to generate ideas about how to address basic skills.** Some had “never been in the same room before” and as a result of the self-assessment they developed “shared understandings” and “new working relationships”. One college said there is now a “buzz” around campus about the project. Participation in core activities ranged from a low of three people to 76 people. Median participation was 20; mean was 26. In addition, many colleges had or plan to have college-wide information sessions. Quite a few colleges also indicated interest in creating coordinator positions.
- ~ **A handful of colleges did not experience this cross-college dialogue** – reportedly in some cases due to lack of President/CIO/CSSO leadership or support. In addition, local culture and competing projects affect the thoroughness with which the self-assessment is approached at each college. At least one college complained that departments seem to feel they “own” students and are reluctant to engage in cross-discipline dialogue.
- ~ **Colleges had an advantage if there is already a structure (e.g., student success committee, STARS) in place which can be utilized.** Most colleges are using these current committees as well as developing other ongoing processes for discussing and evaluating basic skills practices (via coordinator positions, flex activities, et cetera). This suggests the potential for serious difficulties for those colleges which don't have such a structure in place already.
- ~ **Nearly all pilot colleges indicated that lack of time was a real problem.** After working steadily from February to June 2007, most pilot colleges (67%) were just beginning to address the planning matrices or had, in the case of one college, complete the matrices. Most of the other colleges had completed at least two of the four strands, and one had more-or-less failed to start the process. As one college put it, they “felt behind from day one”. On average, colleges spent 16 hours of concentrated meeting time to reach this level in the self-assessment. **Note: The timeframe has been changed; colleges now have from mid-August 2007 through May 1, 2008.**

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<sup>1</sup> 59% very worthwhile, 31% somewhat worthwhile, 3% not very worthwhile, 0% completely worthless, 7% no response

- ~ **Despite time constraints, pilots generally felt the work needed to complete the self-assessment was worth it, and that nothing should be eliminated from the self-assessment tool in order to substantially reduce it.** As one college put it, “You just need to admit that it takes time and it takes commitment.” Many felt that they had to resign themselves to a certain level of incompleteness in order to keep moving forward. Some did make suggestions about small things which could save time such as (1) have clear definitions on a handout for easy reference to reduce confusion and promote focus, (2) decide on a level of detail prior to beginning the self-assessment, (3) do not “slavishly” follow the self-assessment tool but rather use it as a framework to organize and promote understanding and discussions.
- ~ **Some colleges used focus groups or departmental meetings to collect “current practices” information** in order to have it available prior to larger, more inclusive discussions about the future. In other words, these two aspects of the self-assessment (current practices, future expansions or new initiatives) were approached using two distinct methods.
- ~ **Moreover, most colleges are approaching the planning matrices via a separate, smaller group process with an emphasis of developing overarching “themes”** drawn from the ideas generated via the core self-assessment process. Themes are used to create some order under which planned actions can be enumerated. This suggests a three-step approach might work best for many colleges. **Note: While nothing has been eliminated from the self-assessment, the planning matrices have been simplified to conform to system office requirements.**
- ~ **Many colleges indicated that leadership needs to be “expert” in the literature review** in order to inform discussions and keep the focus on effective practices, because “not all” will not have read it.
- ~ **In general, colleges did not use data to investigate problem areas or strengths.** Reasons given include “we already know where the problems are”, a desire to focus on solutions rather than blame, and a lack of clear and reliable data. Most colleges indicated they expect to use data in their action plan phase. **Note: Ideally, relevant data would inform the entire self-assessment process. Unfortunately, that was not the experience of the pilot colleges.**
- ~ **The cost-benefit tool was also not used at all;** in fact, some colleges indicated they weren’t even sure what the tool’s function is. **Note: This tool has been improved and made available via the Center for Student Success website.**
- ~ A few colleges felt unclear as to the focus of the self-assessment and its relevance for them. What is included in “basic skills”? How is the self-assessment different from what is required by accreditation; how is it not redundant?
- ~ A few colleges felt they lacked a clear understanding of the larger statewide context for the project. They want to be included in trainings and materials as the project continues. They were also interested in the particulars around funding.

## TIPS DRAWN FROM PILOT COLLEGES' EXPERIENCES

These tips describing **what colleges felt worked well** and **what they'd do "next time"** are drawn from 12 pilot college phone interviews and 29 online survey responses. Nearly all interviews included the CIO, one also included a CSSO, and three interviews included faculty. Survey responses represent eight colleges; 15 of the 29 survey responses were from faculty.

- Start now! Lack of time was a major hurdle for all the pilots. Colleges will now have twice as long (almost two semesters rather than one) to complete the self-assessment. However, we would still advise you to "start now". Do not have larger groups meet more frequently than every two weeks as participants need time to reflect and gather information between meetings.
- If possible, use an existing committee or other existing structure for the bulk of the self-assessment discussions. Alternately, consider a "retreat" approach to "get away from campus" in order to spend significant time discussing complex issues. In either case, have all the key players there. At least one college provided flex credit to faculty who participated. A few provided food.
- Colleges who were most satisfied with the self-assessment process had visible support from college leadership and substantial participation of faculty. Consider asking key department chairs (English, ESL, mathematics, counseling, learning assistance) to recommend 2-4 faculty members for participation. Most colleges tried to get as many faculty involved as possible.
- When gathering participants, consider how commitments to other major college projects may impinge on the time participants can give to the self-assessment. If possible, find ways to create synergy between projects. Pilot colleges were divided about which was more important for participants to have: energy or experience.
- Review accreditation-related and other college documents which may be useful for the self-assessment. Do not "reinvent the wheel" or replicate work. When possible, build on what you already have. *Example:* One pilot college was preparing for an accreditation review cycle and therefore starting a revision of both their Educational Master Plan and Strategic Plan. When possible, they plan to integrate items from the basic skills self-assessment planning matrices into these to institutional plans. One of the challenges that has already emerged is the need to separate what is specifically being done in basic skills from broader institutional initiatives. So, for example, in the initial consideration of staff development, there was a perception that the college is particularly strong in staff development. However, once they looked at staff development that focused on basic skills, they found that they did not do a very good job of providing staff development in the basic skills area.
- **CRITICAL.** Have leaders who are well versed in literature review. One suggestion is to "task" committee members with responsibility for being versed in the literature review-- ideally have several experts for each area. The literature review was used by most of

the pilots to provide context, create a common framework and provide legitimacy for the self-assessment process.

- Consider the use of a separate, initial process such as preceding departmental meetings to document “existing practices”. A focus group approach may also work, but it may be more difficult to get participants.
- In order to keep focus, ask new participants to review the working definition of “basic skills” on page 13 of the Basic Skills as a Foundation... publication. For the purposes of the self-assessment, the terms “basic skills” and “developmental education” are used interchangeably.
- Fostering cross-college dialogue is a primary purpose of and benefit from the self-assessment process. It is important for leadership and participants to remain open to the discussion of ideas—particularly those drawn from the 26 effective practices presented in the literature review.
- There can be a tendency for participants to respond to each item with, “Oh, we do that.” Moreover, it is difficult to get people to thoroughly read and comprehend the lit review prior to engaging in the process. Therefore, at least two colleges started with the self-assessment items, allowed participants to express their ideas, then sent participants back to the literature review for verification or revision of their assessment. This process allowed the colleges to focus more specifically on the practice or strategy.
- The self-assessment will help you develop an action plan. Keep the overall picture in mind; don’t get bogged down in lots of details which can be attended to later.
- Remember that the self-assessment tool is an internal document<sup>2</sup>. Use the tool in the ways most helpful to your college. As one survey respondent put it, do not “slavishly” follow the self-assessment tool. “I think that it can become distracting to try and fill in each of these boxes. It seems to me that it’s less of a priority that we respond to every “best practice,” and more important that we identify some practices that we want to pursue [based upon the literature review] and discuss how to proceed.”
- Decide ahead of time how to handle complaints such as “we cannot make assessment mandatory” or “we don’t have the money to do xyz”. Bad attitudes are contagious (so are good attitudes!) Sometimes people need time to vent; at the same time, avoid too much self-congratulation or immediately jumping into enthusiastic “spending mode”. Set a productive and optimistic (yet realistic) tone. Focus on what can be done.
- Plan ahead on how to include non-developmental education faculty in the self-assessment process. You may have to occasionally remind them that we all serve students with developmental education needs.
- There is a learning curve to consider when sequencing the strands. At least one pilot college felt very clear that it was important to tackle the Instructional Practices strand after participants were comfortable using and relying on the literature review.

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<sup>2</sup> Except the planning matrices / action plans, which must be submitted to the system office.

- Other tools to facilitate and focus discussions include handouts with definitions and literature review key points. These are especially helpful if there are “newbies” at each meeting—so valuable time is not spent orienting them.
- Facilitators should be experienced and should not “hold the marker” (i.e. use note takers for flip charts). One college used a clicker approach to ascertain the level of agreement on various items, then further discussed items for which there was not yet agreement. Another college hung “blow ups” of the self-assessment pages in order to keep discussions focused.
- “Repetition” may arise as working groups come up with similar ideas (e.g., “we need a developmental education coordinator”). You can take the view that this is positive as it confirms the desired direction of the college. Realize that having more small work groups (e.g., doing separate breakout groups for each effective practice) will “spread the work” but will also increase the amount of repetition.
- After ideas are generated, consider using a smaller group to organize them into “themes” in order to complete the planning matrices. It is difficult for a larger group to discuss budget implications.
- Use the support of other colleges in the CCC system. One college used a visiting team which they found quite helpful. Other colleges wish they had communicated more with sister institutions.
- Include a researcher to assist the self-assessment process in interpreting the available research--not as a source of blame or bad news, but as a tool for understanding institutional effectiveness.

## BASIC SKILLS SELF-ASSESSMENT

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING THE SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

- Familiarize yourself with the funding and reporting structure email sent by the System Office between June 26 and 28, 2007.
- Read *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Success in California Community Colleges* (updated version posted August 1, 2007).
- Note the substantive changes in the Planning Matrices on pp. 113, 119, 126, & 138. They have been simplified and revised to conform to what is being requested by the System Office: due May 1, 2008.
- The actual Self-Assessment Tool Word document (pp. 105-138 of *Basic Skills* document) can be converted by your college to HTML if you want to make this a web-based tool. [Do they already know where to retrieve this? Even if they do, a reminder here is probably good.]
- Matrix and answer spaces in the Word document will expand as you enter text.
- Develop your Basic Skills teams (pp. 105, 114, 120 & 127).
- In developing your college's approach to completing the Self-Assessment Tool, review the feedback from those colleges that piloted the Self-Assessment Tool.
- Review the working definition of "Basic Skills" (p. 13 of *Basic Skills* document).
- Not all suggested plans need to involve funds (both one-time and on-going); think about the improvements your college can make without new funds.
- If your college is not able to generate your desired quantitative data, you may wish to contact the RP Group (<http://rpgroup.org>) for technical assistance with data mining.