

Basic Skills: the Promise of Access for California Community College Students



Basic Skills provides open access, support services, basic skills courses, resources, and equipment/technology to California Community College students.

by Rachel Winston



All people deserve to succeed in their lives and careers.
All people should have access to higher education.
Lifelong learning is powerful, motivational, and enriching.
An educated citizenry is the basis for democracy.

FUNDAMENTAL BASIC SKILLS COMMITMENTS

1. Empowering students to go as far in life as their talents and persistence will take them.
2. Providing education and access to all people in our community who want to learn.
3. Offering lifelong education, vocational training, wellness/creative learning, and transfer opportunities to higher levels of education.
4. Offering new and innovative outreach programs to our community and through the Internet so as to create cutting edge classes with up-to-date services and courses.
5. Creating a community that serves the learning needs of individuals, organizations, companies, military, and those whose distance learning needs have brought them to California Community Colleges.
6. Developing a smooth transition for students to continue their education at the university level by offering transferable courses, making students aware that they can go on, they can succeed, they can pay for their education, and that there are no barriers they cannot overcome.
7. Creating a positive, creative, fun, open environment for all people in our community to grow.

DEFINITION:

The term "Basic Skills" comprises many areas; some are listed below. The essence of college in general, and basic skills in particular, is to develop skills which will allow students to think abstractly, understand complex concepts, synthesize information, solve multi-step problems, read books and articles, communicate effectively, and leave college with the ability to live, work, and become involved in issues and activities within the community.

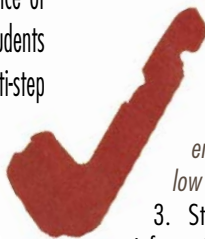
BASIC SKILLS PROGRAMS OFTEN INCLUDE:

Tutoring	Counseling
Computer Skills	Re-entry Students
Writing Paragraphs/Ideas	ESL Students
Vocabulary/Grammar	DSPS Students
Developmental Reading	Support Services
Literacy	Matriculation/Assessment
Study Groups	Basic Math Skills
Learning Communities	Problem Solving Techniques
Career Counseling	Tracking Students who have failed in traditional education
Master Student Courses	

CHALLENGES TO BASIC SKILLS

STUDENTS:

1. Students dislike the stigma of being labeled a "Basic Skills Student."
2. Students do not want to take prerequisite courses that "don't count." *"I didn't want to waste two more years in junior college taking enough algebra classes to graduate, since I would have to start off at a low level. Math has never been my best subject..."*
3. Students often do not have the ability to write, organize, and analyze information for success in transfer level classes.
4. While online classes are perceived as being easier, few students are prepared for the online environment. This perception is exacerbated by the number of classes that have no oversight/proctoring/proof of authenticity of the students doing the actual work. *"Why do I have to have a proctor? Other teachers don't require this."*
5. Although they may resist this, students should take courses on levels that are appropriate to their skills and needs, rather than those that "count" for transfer status. While they would like the freedom to choose not to come to class, attendance in all classes is critical. Students often do not understand the importance of regular attendance, consistent homework practice, or effective scheduling to their success.
6. Students are impacted by the cost of books and often do not purchase these for their classes. They assume the teacher will cover the material or that they can check out the book from the reserve desk in the library. Many students cannot read the material contained in their textbooks.



As presented in the Statewide Academic Senate, *Issues in Basic Skills Assessment and Placement in the California Community Colleges*, "A central mission of the California community colleges is to provide instruction and support services to students who are not prepared to succeed in college-level coursework." Data from the Chancellor's Office show that in many districts, 50-70 percent of students are under-prepared.

Community college students knock on the doors of our colleges with a variety of backgrounds, yet many have difficulty preparing research papers, reading assigned articles and textbooks, understanding graphs and formulas, and using the technology that is increasingly required in our classes.

Although this discussion has occurred for decades in most colleges, districts, and on the statewide level, still a large percentage of students in need of basic skills coursework do not take basic skills courses. Many students do not realize the relationship between taking this foundation courses and their future success. Others do not want the stigma associated with taking lower level courses that are not "required" to finish their degree quickly and thus choose to bypass nontransferable basic skills courses.

There is a great need to increase the number of counselors available to students to explain the importance of basic skills classes, assist in creating an academic plan, and orient incoming students to the college environment. With additional counselors, students would have greater access to critical information regarding pathways they may take, available student support resources, and the individual attention to assist in planning for career and transfer options. The Chancellor's Office Web site cites that in 2002-03, only 550,000 of the 1.5 million students directed to counselors received counseling services.

Companies who hire our students cite the need for improved oral and written communication skills, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and adaptability to on the job computer requirements. Simultaneously, some legislators consider funding the additional years of education in "extra" courses required by the majority of community college students unnecessary, yet at the same time, they acknowledge that these are critical for success in

future college courses, transfer preparedness, and in developing skills for the workforce. Frankly, many of these are "high school classes;" yet, the students who enter community colleges often did not obtain these skills while in high school or are returning to college decades afterwards to improve the quality of their life, obtain the education required for the workforce, and updating their skills. With writing, reading, mathematics, technology, and study/test taking skills preparation, students would significantly improve their chances of success in all future coursework and career opportunities.

With more than half of our students under-prepared, our students must climb over the basic skills roadblock. This is often compounded by socioeconomic challenges and difficulties immigrant families face who, themselves, have limited basic skills and cannot provide the home support for the family members who want to further their education. Often, the energy required to overcome deficiencies in English and mathematics barriers is great and some students must repeat these basic skills classes in order to obtain a solid foundation for career transition, graduation, or transfer status. As counselors and faculty members, we can be the support team that encourages and inspires these students to take the necessary courses to become successful in rising to the next level of awareness, enlightenment, and prosperity. Education is the best investment a person of any age can make in order to realize success in the workforce. Our community colleges are the best place for students to obtain this training. ■



Rachel Winston is a member of the FACCC Board of Governors. As a member of the Executive Committee, she serves as the liaison to Communications Committee, Professional Development Committee, and the Political Action Committee. She holds graduate degrees in mathematics and computers, and teaches full-time at Cerro Coso College, where she is Academic Senate vice president, and part-time at Orange Coast College.