

Project Success: Grossmont Community College

We learn as much about ourselves as our academic studies.

—Project Success students

*The program's continued
attraction for developmental
students—now promoted
by word of mouth—is the
selection of books that people
read, talk, and write about
each semester . . .*

At Grossmont Community College in San Diego, California, Project Success teaches to the whole student. This philosophy continues to inform an award-winning program that has grown from a single experimental developmental reading and developmental writing link in 1985 to more than fifty links in 2003. Described as a program “for strengthening skills and promoting cooperative learning.” Project Success began in developmental education and now provides fundamental and transfer program strands. Of 1,200 to 1,500 students annually involved in Project Success, 600 are developmental students.

In the fundamental strand, Project Success combines developmental reading and developmental writing at two levels, reading and writing (English 105 with English 101), and reading and composition (English 106 with English 110). English 105 and English 106 provide specific instruction in comprehension skills, vocabulary improvement, and college reading techniques; English 101 focuses on paragraph and essay development while English 110 emphasizes more sophisticated essay forms.

The program's continued attraction for developmental students—now promoted by word of mouth—is the selection of books that people read, talk, and write about each semester, such as *Warriors Don't Cry*, *The Color of Water*, and *It is not about the Bike*. Typically, the books are nonfiction and their authors are courageous people whose stories inspire others to do their best. In a learning environment where the majority of students' lives often reflect the “barriers” described in research on at-risk students, themes about overcoming challenges engage people in personal ways. In turn, the connections students draw between their experience and the course content provides anxious learners with a less threatening entry point for developing academic abilities.

The majority of Project Success students move from one developmental reading and developmental writing link to the next level or to transfer links that combine general education English courses with general education courses in other academic fields and disciplines such as humanities, psychology, history, and speech. Honors courses are now included in this learning communities program. Project Success faculty encourage all students to develop study groups that share common goals.

The story of Project Success speaks to the wisdom of building on what works for students and for faculty. In an institution where low class enrollments are not acceptable and no release time or stipends are available to integrate curriculum, Project Success invites faculty to work collaboratively in the context of a learning community model that most closely resembles their actual teaching assignments and working conditions. When the program began to expand in response to student demand, the two founding faculty looked for colleagues who they thought would enjoy working collaboratively. As Mary Donnelly and Sue Jensen report, “we simply sell it to our colleagues as the most rewarding teaching any of us has ever done. We enjoy teaching with another colleague and helping students see that knowledge and ideas transfer from one class to another. We just really believe in it and love it and a lot of our colleagues who teach these links agree with us.” Since sections have been added slowly over the years, new

teachers are partnered with veterans who serve as mentors. Faculty teams work hard to integrate curriculum and assignments, and meet regularly to track each student's personal and intellectual development and to discuss the program's philosophy and implications for teaching practice.

Two studies conducted by the Office of Research, Planning, and Academic Services document the program's success. A 1995 study confirmed earlier research done by Donnelly: students participating in learning communities had higher success, retention, persistence, and transition rates than comparable students in equivalent non-Project Success classes. A 2000 study compared program data from fall 1996 to spring 2000: Project Success students had higher retention, persistence, and transfer rates than their counterparts enrolled in the same two developmental levels of English courses; they also had a higher mean semester GPA. In fall 2001, a survey of 313 students included these responses: 72 percent took Project Success because they thought a combined course would help them improve their skills; 89 percent had not been enrolled in a Project Success link; and 88 percent would enroll in another Project Success learning community link.

Website: <http://www.grossmont.net>

Contact: Sue Jensen, sue.Jensen@gcccd.net