

Research in Brief: *The Student Achievement Gap*

The Student Achievement Gap

This issue of the *Research and SLO News* explores a topic that has increasingly been part of the conversation about the effectiveness of community colleges. While community colleges have succeeded in opening their doors, they face a real challenge in closing the achievement gap among different groups of students. Three questions are addressed in this issue: What is the achievement gap? Why does the gap exist? How can colleges narrow this gap?

What is the Achievement Gap?

The achievement gap refers to the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. This gap shows up in a number of ways including course success and retention, degrees and certificates awarded, transfer to four-year institutions, grade point averages, standardized test scores, and placement in courses after high school graduation. Lately, the achievement gap is most often used to describe the academic performance gap between African-American and White students and between Hispanic and White students. Achievement gaps

of the African Americans. The reasons for this reversal are not clear, but the social and economic implications of this gap make it a profound state and national issue.

The achievement gap in course success rates also exists at other community colleges in California with some slight variation from those at DVC. The disparity at the state level is slightly narrower for African Americans, but wider for Hispanics. Gaps in transfer and in the awarding of degrees and certificates also exist but are not as wide as those of the course success rates.

Why Does the Gap Exist?

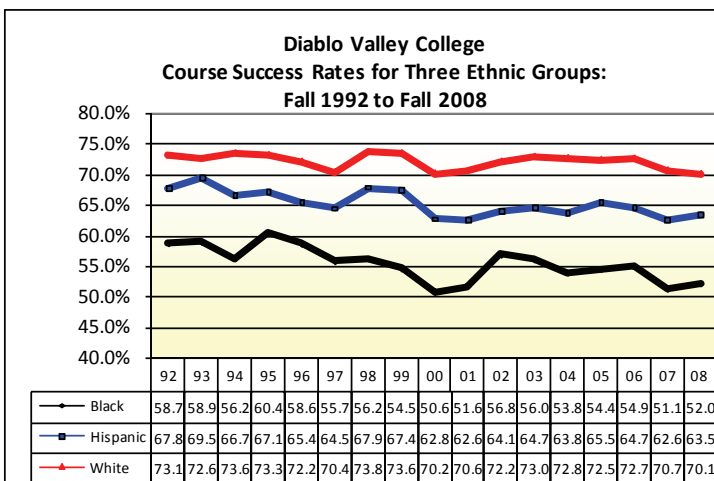
Achievement gaps are often attributed to socioeconomic factors. The culture and environment in which children are raised may play a role in the achievement gap. The achievement gap that begins early in life is carried through college education as well. There is a fair amount of research that supports the idea that some minorities may begin their educational career at a disadvantage. The large number of single-parent households and the increase in non-English-speaking parents put the children at a disadvantage.

There are other variables that tend to impact course success rates including work hours per week, family responsibilities, family income, and pre-collegiate academic preparation. These factors may result in carrying a full-time or a part-time course load. At DVC, full-time students tend to succeed at higher rates, compared to part timers.

Students who come from low-income households are more likely to attend poorly funded schools. These schools tend to employ less-qualified teachers and may have fewer educational resources. Examination of the household income by cities and scores on the Academic Performance Index (API) by high schools in Central Contra Costa County provides ample support for this observation. High schools located in cities with the highest income per household had the highest API scores and those living in cities with lower household income had relatively lower API scores. High school preparation tends to impact college academic performance.

How Can Colleges Narrow the Gap?

- “We know what works but we don’t do it” was the conclusion reached by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy in February 2008. In its publication entitled [*It Could Happen: Unleashing the Potential of California Community Colleges to help Students Succeed and California Thrive*](#), the institute identified the following strategies that have been shown to promote student success:



may also exist between genders, age groups, disciplines, and among other groups of students.

The accompanying chart shows that Black and Hispanic students made some attempts to narrow the breach that separated them from their White peers. However, this progress seems to have come to a halt. For example, in fall 1995, the course success rate (grades of A, B, C, and P) for White students stood at 73.3%, compared to 60.4% for African Americans, a gap of 12.9%. However, the gap in success rate widened to reach 19.6% in fall 2007 and 18.1% in fall 2008. For Hispanic students, there were similar experiences; albeit the gap was much narrower than that

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- Increase student’s *readiness* for college before they arrive
- Help students achieve *early success* by directing them to the right classes at the beginning, including remedial work if they need it
- Help students establish *clear educational goals and pathways* for achieving their goals
- Encourage students to follow *effective enrollment patterns*—such as attending full-time and continuously (without stopping out and re-starting)
- Provide the *intensive support services* students need to succeed in and out of the classroom
- **Use data to inform decisions** about helping students succeed

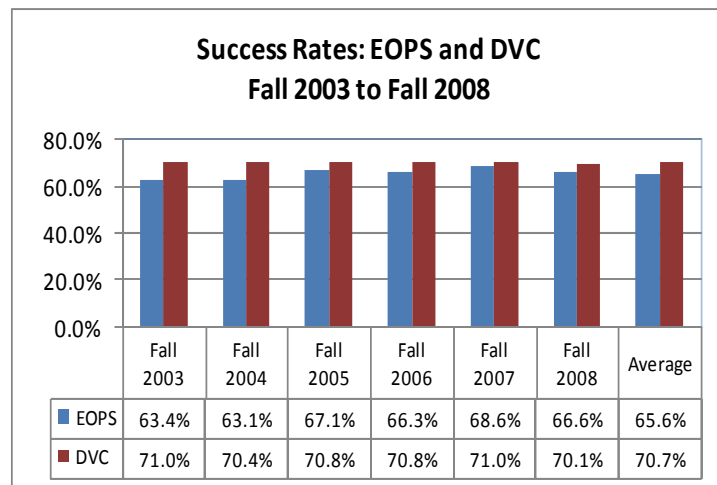
Successful Interventions. Effective interventions seem to make a difference in student success. Two examples of successful interventions at DVC include the Puente program and Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS).

Puente. Students are enrolled in the Puente program as a cohort for one year. The academic program, which started in 1997, focuses on three aspects, counseling; teaching (English and Counseling); and mentoring, which combine to create a multi-leveled support system to enhance student retention and success. The program enrolls students into a pre-transfer level English course (English 118) in the fall semester, along with either a counseling course or a personal development psychology course. In the spring semester, successful students move on to a transfer-level English course (English 122) and continue with either counseling or psychology. The final part of the program is the mentoring that is available to the Puente students during the academic portion of the program. Once the academic portion of the program is over, Puente students continue to receive services through sustained counseling until they transfer. Hispanic students represent the majority of students enrolled in this program. Students who participated in the Puente program have higher success rates in English courses (English 118 and 122) compared to their counterparts enrolled in the same courses.

EOPS. The EOPS program is designed to help low income and educationally disadvantaged students have a successful college experience. EOPS provides comprehensive support services including orientation, counseling, progress reports, tutoring, peer advising, priority registration, and transfer assistance. The gap in the success rates between EOPS students and the college as a whole was only 3.5 percentage points in fall 2008. This gap has narrowed considerably in the past seven years due to the strong commitment of the EOPS staff and faculty participation in the EOPS progress report process.

Conclusions

The achievement gap has persisted for more than two decades. Closing this gap is not the responsibility of one



person or one office; it is the collective responsibility of the entire college. It is unlikely that this gap will disappear on college campuses in the near future. Finding the best strategies to address it will continue to challenge educators and policy makers at all levels of education (K-16). Substantial investments of financial and human capital are needed to narrow this disparity. Unfortunately, the latest budget cuts in categorical programs such as matriculation and EOPS will hamper efforts to close the achievement gap on college campuses. While the gap may not be eliminated altogether, the college should not allow it to persist for another 20 years.

References

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SLOs in Brief: *What's in Store for 2009–2010*

2009–2010: The Year of Instructional SLO Assessment

Thanks to a collegewide effort last semester, the faculty completed the task of specifying outcomes for all courses and the degree and certificate programs offered by DVC and recognized by the Chancellor's Office. All of the identified searchable outcomes have been entered into **eSLOs** and are published on the DVC website (<http://www.dvc.edu/slos>).

Goals of the faculty SLO committee for this year include

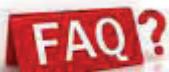
- Continuation of program and course assessment cycles
- Alignment of course-, program-, and institutional-level outcomes
- Technology-assisted assessment methods

Faculty SLO Committee Division Reps

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Applied & Fine Arts | Isabel Izquierdo, Naomi Nezuka |
| Biol & Health Sci | Hilton Carter, Karen Gard |
| Business | Brian McGlynn |
| Counseling/Library | Lupe Dannels, Andy Kivel |
| English | Tamar Baskind, Toni Fannin, Irene Menegas, David Vela, Nancy Zink |
| Math/Comp Sci | Robert Burns |
| PE, Athletics, Dance | Kimberly Valmore |
| Physical Sci/Engr | Garen Avanesian, Binita Sinha, Joe Valdez |
| Social Science | Janet Mason |
| San Ramon Campus | Jennifer Tejada, Mario Tejada |
| ASDVC representative | Dongyang Zhou |
| Ex-officio members | Mohamed Eisa, Susan Lamb (designee Rachel Westlake) |
| Committee Chair | Judy Foster |

If you would like to attend a Faculty SLO Committee meeting, the fall 2009 meetings are held on Friday mornings, 9–11 a.m., in L-151:

| | |
|--------------|-------------|
| August 28 | October 30 |
| September 18 | November 13 |
| October 16 | December 4 |



How many times should we do an assessment cycle?

Sufficient cycles assessing a representative sample of course sections should be completed so that evidence will show that student learning has occurred. A pre- and post-test method might provide evidence in one semester, for example, while a final project might require assessment in multiple semesters.

What evidence do we need to keep and for how long?

All assessments used for SLO measurement needn't be kept; however, keep summary sheets and three samples of student work representing excellent, average, and poor student work. Maintain the files until the next comprehensive accreditation visit has taken place.

Student Support Areas See Results!

Student service units continue to assess their SLOs and to use the results to improve student learning and success. Examples from the 2008–09 assessments include

- **Career & Employment Services** — One assessed SLO focused on the students' ability to locate jobs on the online job search system. In the next assessment cycle, modifications that will be incorporated include increased staff assistance for walk-in customers to demonstrate the system, improving on-screen instructions for new users, and considering an alternate job search system.
- **DSS** — As a result of its assessment of students' ability to use the Kurzweil system, an adaptive technology software program, and Dragon Naturally Speaking, it was found that students using the High Tech Center were better able to use the adaptive programs. For the 2009-10 cycle, a revised LRNSK-56 course with additional modules to provide a more structured learning environment in the High Tech Center will be offered so that students will gain greater assistive technological skills.
- **Financial Aid Office** — Modifications made to the assessment quiz used to gather evidence in the Entrance and Exit workshops resulted in significant improvements in the three questions most frequently answered incorrectly. The Financial Aid Office will further expand the workshops to emphasize primary topics to continue improving student learning.