

How did De Anza College use data to understand and strengthen its learning communities?

De Anza has offered learning communities since 1997 – nine years before SSPIRE was launched. During the last decade, De Anza has conducted its own research on the success of its learning community students, especially those who place into developmental reading and writing. In the course of the SSPIRE initiative, De Anza worked with Cal-PASS and MDRC to supplement this research with descriptive, longitudinal data on its learning community students and various comparison groups. These data served to deepen De Anza's understanding about the achievement trends amongst its learning communities students.

De Anza's pre-SSPIRE research showed that, between 1999 and 2004, the pass rate for new students enrolled in the learning community that pairs the highest-level developmental reading and writing courses was roughly the same as that of new students who took the equivalent developmental writing class outside of the learning community. However, successful learning community students then went on to attempt the first transfer-level English class at higher rates than students who had taken the developmental writing class. Overall, about 75 percent of students who started in the developmental reading and writing learning community went on to complete college English, compared with about 64 percent of students who started in the standalone developmental writing class.

These data were shared with senior administrators at De Anza to advocate for the learning community approach to teaching developmental reading and writing. The learning communities' coordinators were convinced by these data that they were on the right track and they believed that participation in SSPIRE could help the college expand and strengthen their learning communities. After the launch of SSPIRE, more than 1,300 students participated in a learning community at De Anza during the academic years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008; nearly half of these students were in developmental reading and writing learning communities. Among developmental reading and writing students, women and African-Americans are more likely than their peers to enroll in learning communities as opposed to standalone developmental writing courses.

During SSPIRE, program coordinators maintained their commitment to use data for program review and improvement. Two key indicators were regularly tracked for SSPIRE participants – course success rates and persistence rates – and broken out for those who attempted developmental reading and writing learning communities. The course success rate data for students in the developmental reading and writing learning communities are promising, and comparable to the success rates in these learning communities before SSPIRE began:

- 84 percent of learning community students passed the learning community one level below transfer during the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 academic years.
- 79 percent of learning community students passed the newly developed learning community two levels below transfer during the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 academic years.

As part of the SSPIRE initiative, several sections of the developmental reading and writing learning community were launched with a counseling class included in the link. According to data from De Anza,

during the 2007-2008 academic year, the course success rates of the learning communities with the counseling class (four sections serving about 100 students) exceeded 90 percent – higher than the overall developmental reading and writing learning community success rates during the time that SSPIRE was operating. While this increase could be the result of any combination of factors, such as a changing student population, or differences between faculty grading standards or quality of teaching, the learning community coordinators at De Anza believe the higher success rates are largely attributable to the addition of the counseling class.

Data available in Cal-PASS also made it possible to compare outcome measures for students who enrolled in developmental-level learning communities during SSPIRE, with outcomes for students who attempted developmental reading and writing outside of a learning community. Readers are reminded that this is not a rigorous comparison, because the data do not control for differences between students who attempted these courses within and outside of learning communities; as stated above, demographic differences exist between these two groups, and differences in other unmeasured factors, such as prior high school performance, students' motivation, family income and educational levels, may also exist.

Outcomes for Students in De Anza's Developmental Reading and Writing Learning Communities, Compared to Students in Stand-Alone Developmental Reading and Writing Courses, By Semester of Enrollment

The analysis examined one measure of success – the course pass rate – and two measures of persistence. Both the course pass rate and persistence data for students who attempted developmental reading and writing learning communities varied by term and differed from students who attempted developmental reading and writing outside of learning communities (see Table 2.5). Overall, the pass rates and persistence rates of learning community students are higher than these outcomes for the comparison group:

- In total, 82 percent of students who attempted developmental reading and writing in a learning community passed the course, compared with 77 percent of students who attempted developmental reading and writing outside of a learning community
- In total, 87 percent of students who attempted developmental reading and writing in a learning community persisted to the next term compared with 81 percent of students who attempted developmental reading and writing outside of a learning community.
- In total, 84 percent of students who attempted developmental reading and writing in a learning community persisted to the next academic year, roughly equal to the 83 percent of students who attempted developmental reading and writing outside of a learning community.

These findings were roughly comparable to those detected in other studies of learning communities. Although not shown in the table, among the first two developmental reading and writing learning community cohorts (Fall 2006 and Winter 2007), more than 60 percent were still enrolled at De Anza four quarters after initially taking part in a learning community.

Table 2.5

**Outcomes for Students in De Anza's
Developmental Reading and Writing Learning Communities,
Compared to Students in Stand-Alone Developmental Reading and Writing Courses,
By Semester of Enrollment^a**

Indicator	Learning Community Students	Number of students	Students in Stand-Alone	
			Classes	Number of students
Course Pass Rate (%)				
Fall 2006	89.8	127	78.8	1444
Winter 2007	79.0	138	78.6	1171
Spring 2007	75.4	57	69.0	829
Fall 2007	80.1	141	78.7	1490
Total	81.9	402	77.2	4127
Persistence to Next Term (%)				
Fall 2006	90.6	127	89.2	1444
Winter 2007	94.9	138	87.5	1171
Spring 2007 ^b	56.1	57	46.2	829
Fall 2007	90.8	141	86.4	1490
Total	87.1	402	80.7	4127
Persistence to Next Year (%)				
Fall 2006	84.3	127	80.3	1444
Winter 2007	84.8	138	84.5	1171
Spring 2007	86.0	57	87.1	829
Total	84.1	271	83.4	2637

SOURCE: Cal-PASS.

NOTES: ^aThis table compares outcomes of students who attempted a developmental reading and writing learning community (LART 100, LART 200) with outcomes of students who attempted developmental reading and writing courses outside of a learning community (Fundamentals of Writing, Preparatory Reading and Writing Skills, Reading Fundamentals and Developmental Reading. Students are grouped by the semester in which they enrolled in either the learning community or the stand-alone classes.

Limitations to this comparison include small sample for learning communities, and inability to control for background characteristics or motivation levels of students.

^bFor students who enrolled in the courses in question during Spring 2007, "Persistence to Next Term" is the percent of students who enrolled during the Summer 2007 term; for this reason, these numbers tend to be lower for both Learning Community students and students in stand-alone classes than persistence after other semesters.

De Anza also worked with Cal-PASS to conduct a special analysis on transfer rates of learning community students to San Jose State University, by linking institutional data on 3,000 learning community students between 2001 and 2007 with Cal-PASS data from San Jose State. Transfer to a four-year college is an institutional priority at De Anza, and these data helped faculty and administrators better understand the long-term achievements of its learning community students.

The analysis revealed that transfer rates for learning community students were similar to rates for non-learning community students – roughly 10 percent. Moreover, grade point averages at San Jose State were about the same for learning community and non-learning community De Anza transfer students. The analysis also documented that a slightly higher percentage of developmental reading and writing learning community students transfer to San Jose State University than their non-learning community counterparts. This last finding was critical for the learning communities' coordinators, who now have longitudinal evidence that students in the college's developmental learning communities are transferring to a four-year college, and that participation in the learning communities may increase the likelihood that a developmental-level student will transfer to a four-year college.

The learning communities coordinators at De Anza have a long history of producing and using a wealth of interesting data on student persistence and performance in the learning communities and in those learning communities as enhanced by SSPIRE. As discussed in Chapter 1, these data are used to paint a picture of what happens when students, particularly developmental-level students, enroll in learning communities at De Anza; based on these data, the coordinators and administrators have seen a pattern of modest improvement that reinforces their commitment to integrating student services into their existing learning communities program.

In addition to the quantitative analyses described above, the coordinators at De Anza conduct ongoing qualitative research to learn about and improve how the learning communities are implemented in the classroom. Most notably, De Anza uses student feedback to help instructors refine their approach to teaching in learning communities. Program coordinators conduct facilitated student focus groups, called Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF), in each new instructor's learning community classroom, and in the classrooms of many of the more experienced instructors as well. The SGIFs take place midway through the term, and are based around a structured discussion of how students are experiencing the course and what issues or questions they may have. The coordinator then provides this feedback to the instructors to help them adjust their teaching to best meet their students' needs. The coordinators also use this feedback to identify common issues across classes and teaching teams, and include these topics in the summer institute or other trainings for learning community faculty.