

# Merced College



## Introduction

The Academic Wellness Educators (AWE) subcommittee (Meryl Brooks, Anne Cavagnaro, Melissa Colón, Patricia Harrelson, Susan Medeiros, Adrienne Webster) visited Merced College on February 16, 2007. Our host was [Jennifer McBride](#) who organized meetings with key college staff involved in learning support activities: [Susan Flat](#), [Trish Schade](#), [Marie Bruley](#), [Caroline Dawson](#), and [Marian Fritzemeier](#).

Learning Support at Merced College is decentralized though the long-range plan is to centralize and streamline services. The college has several grant funded projects directed at increasing the retention, success, and persistence rates of under-prepared students. Ms McBride and others described the following grant supported projects:

- [Hewlett/Carnegie/SPECC](#) (Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges) funding is directed at developing learning communities and fostering the Reading Apprenticeship program.
- [Irvine/MDRC/ SPPIRE](#) (Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources & Education) funding is directed at developing academic support, a Writing Center, and tutor training.
- A Title V Cooperative grant with CSU Stanislaus and Modesto Junior College is focused on Supplemental Instruction in English and Math.

While these projects appear to have well-established lines of communication, they are nevertheless independently managed. Managers of the grants report taking “baby steps” toward centralization, and they have drafted a vision for a comprehensive center that houses all the support services for students and teachers in one place.



## Description

Merced College has several learning support activities that were initiated and funded by the grant projects and operate separately from the campus Tutorial Center. The following activities focus on developing well-trained staff who offer quality services to students, something the grant managers feel is lacking in other support programs on campus.

- **Study Central**

Study Central is a new program at Merced, only in its second semester, and is pivotal to the idea of centralizing services. Study Central is temporarily housed at the back of the cafeteria. The area, which is open for services four hours a day, is staffed by various faculty members (an instructor or a counselor).

Study Central is an information hub for all student services rather than a tutorial center. It is promoted as a comfortable place to study in groups or individually, a place where academic inquiry/dialogue is modeled and encouraged. The staff field questions about assignments or services. Informal study sessions crop up and SI Leaders sometimes join students at Study Central for a quick pre-test review.

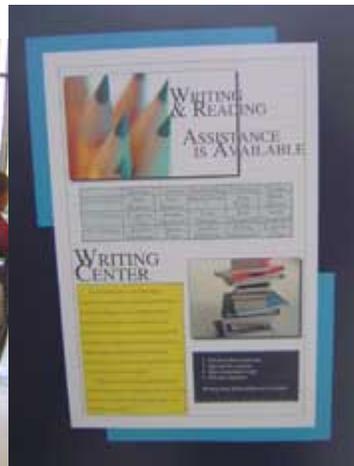
To date, evaluation of the program is anecdotal and qualitative. Because the activity takes place in the cafeteria, it is not possible to have students “swipe” their ID cards in a computer to record the number of students using the service. Once each hour, the faculty on duty count how many students are working in the area. The accumulative data indicates that an average of 37 students per hour are working in the area.





- **Writing Center**

Writing Assistance is available two hours a day at a specified table in Study Central. Initially adjunct faculty were enlisted to provide assistance at this table, but during the second semester, full-time faculty began assisting students. The student is assigned to work with an instructor, observing and advising. The plan is to phase out the faculty position and replace it with peer tutors. Eventually the Writing Center will merge with the Tutorial Center.



- **Learning Communities**

At Merced College, learning communities have been a grass root effort for the past seven years. Early versions included a program, referenced by the acronym GOAL, which placed all at-risk students in specified sections and paired them with a counselor. Collecting the weakest students in one class proved untenable and the GOAL program faded.

The faculty next employed ideas promoted by Norton Grubb, site director for the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, in his book *[Honored But Invisible](#)*. The GRUB group developed learning communities that were focused on basic skills for vocational students. The core idea revolved around contextualizing skill building in accord with vocational classes. For instance, welding students took a reading class in which a welding book served as the primary text.

Under the Carnegie grant, similar learning communities have evolved such as a Child Development class paired with a composition class. When such courses are paired, students must enroll in both sections, creating what Ms McBride calls a *hard link*. To facilitate the *hard link*, a form is submitted to the curriculum committee indicating the intention to pair two courses. Each semester, a pamphlet is published advertising and promoting the Learning Community courses. For Spring 2007, seven paired courses were offered.

Faculty who are teaching these courses work closely with their partners often attending one another's class. There are regular meetings open to all faculty but required by those teaching paired classes. Faculty who are teaching paired classes receive a stipend funded by the grant.

Ms McBride and Ms Fritzemeier emphasized the need for counselors to be informed about and promote these courses, especially with under-prepared students. They also indicated that evaluation of the Learning Community courses to date is qualitative and anecdotal. Students who enroll in these courses report satisfaction regarding simultaneous enrollment and paired curriculum, and they appear to persist and enroll in subsequent courses.

- **Reading Apprenticeship**

Reading Apprenticeship is an approach that helps students develop the knowledge, strategies, and dispositions they need to become more powerful readers. It draws on what teachers themselves know and do as readers. Reading involves complex, invisible processes. The developers of Reading Apprenticeship believe it is necessary to make these processes visible in order to help students become independent, strategic readers.

At Merced College, several faculty are trained in Reading Apprenticeship which is only recently being employed with community college students having originated among K-12 educators. Marie Bruley and Trish Schade employ Reading Apprenticeship in pre-collegiate math and English courses respectively. Both have found the strategies to be highly successful.

Since reading is a skill used in every course, these women are promoting the strategies as useful across the curriculum, and they are training other faculty in their use. Ms Schade will soon be a certified trainer in Reading Apprenticeship

and will be available to work at other campuses. There is Leadership Institute in the methodology in June 2007 that will focus on Community College instruction.

- **Supplemental Instruction**

Merced College has employed the UMKC model for [Supplemental Instruction](#) (SI) in a unique way. Typically, SI has been used in historically difficult courses with high attrition rates. In many cases, this means SI is offered in science and math transfer level courses. Only rarely is SI paired with humanities courses. Merced decided to use SI in developmental English and math courses.

The other departure Merced from the UMKC model is to employ basic skills students as their SI Leaders rather than students who are more advanced in their educational journey. In other words, the SI Leaders for these courses are peers who have only recently passed the course and in most cases are enrolled only one course above the target course. Another feature of SI at Merced is advertising in the schedule of classes that SI is paired with the developmental courses.

Both quantitative and qualitative data indicate the approach has been successful despite skepticism on the part of the other institutions involved in the cooperative Title V grant. Ms. McBride and Ms. Lawson indicated the need initially to persevere in continuing SI Sessions for these courses even when attendance was low.

## **Conclusion**

Jennifer McBride described the difficulties inherent with decentralized support at Merced, most notably ineffective and inconsistent services to students. For this reason, their long range planning is aimed at centralizing services. In the meantime, the need for high levels of communication and coordination is clearly apparent. Equally important is their extensive effort to promote the vision of unified Academic Support Center.

The representatives we spoke with at Merced are focused on taking baby-steps. They also said they know that have to be willing to make mistakes. In addition to appreciating the willingness and initiative of the Merced team, the AWE subcommittee recognized many elements in their support activities that we hope to work into our planning agenda.