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### Supporting the Students of the Future

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# SUPPORTING THE STUDENTS OF THE FUTURE

By Diego Navarro

Meet Gloria, a 19-year-old community college student with a problem. She has just finished her first semester of college, having completed only six units. She's discouraged. Her teachers approached English and math like they did in high school. It didn't work for her then, and it doesn't now.

She thinks she's a good writer, but she was placed in a lower-level course before she could register for transfer-level English. She had more difficulty there than she had expected—she was supposed to do most of her writing in class or in the writing lab, but she felt she did her best work at home. Then she missed several classes to take her mother to a series of medical appointments. She withdrew from the class midway through the semester as it became clear that she probably wouldn't pass.

She also took the first of the two developmental math courses she needed before she could enroll in a course that counted toward her associate's degree. She passed that course with a C and a typing class with a C-, but she's not sure she can do as well next semester, and she has a long way to go.

Gloria lives with her parents in a tough neighborhood and has a part-time job at a store. During high school she mostly managed to avoid trouble, but her brother was injured in a street fight and was later arrested. She knows how to watch her back.

Some of her siblings say that she is wasting her time and should quit school and work more to help out at home. Her father, who didn't go to high school and works intermittently as a laborer for a landscape firm, wants her to get an education, but he thinks she isn't doing anything when she's reading, that she's being lazy. Her ill mother, a high-school graduate, supports her and wants her to go to college. Gloria's friends just want to have fun, and really, she does too.

College was Gloria's dream, but it is harder than she thought and she's not sure it's worth it. She goes to class but has no friends on campus. She's not sure she can do the work or fit in. Should she just bail out now? After all, what difference will it make in the long run?

"Gloria" is a composite portrait of a fairly typical student now entering our community colleges and many four-year colleges. These underprepared students come to us because they have hope for a better life and the courage to attempt

something difficult. But having dreams and aspirations is not enough: Without some sort of intervention and support, Gloria's chances of completing college are poor.

## Children Living in Poverty

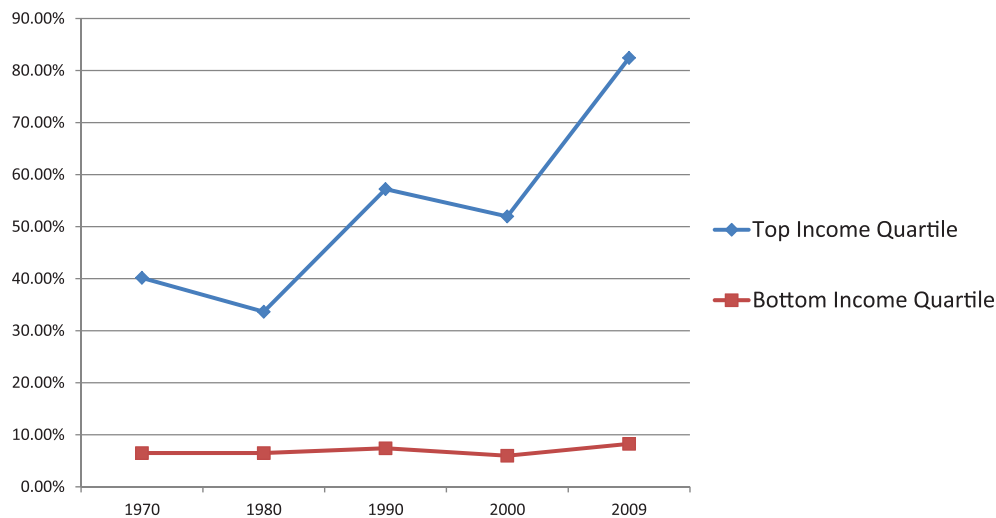
	In Millions	Percentage
Latino children	6.1	35%
African-American children	5.0	39%
White children	4.4	12%

Pew Hispanic Center. (2011, September 28). *The Toll of the Great Recession: Childhood Poverty Among Hispanics Sets Record, Leads Nation.*

The US college student population is increasingly made up of students like Gloria, and their educational needs are different from those students had when our college systems were designed. They also bring a wealth of life experience and survival skills with them, though: Those who start off furthest behind academically may have persisted through negative experiences in high school, difficult life circumstances, and the pressures of street life and poverty. They often have a strong desire to succeed.

Many challenged students nevertheless lack the academic confidence and interpersonal skills that success requires. They may not understand the social and cultural norms of academic life. They need help with these things, along with

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Source: Tom Mortenson (2010, November). Bachelor's degree attainment by age 24 by family income quartiles, 1970 to 2009. *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*.

assistance in overcoming their academic deficiencies quickly so that they can move forward before they become discouraged. If we're going to improve their completion rates, we need to find more effective ways to help large numbers of these students through the transition to college and the difficult period of developmental education and give them the resources and motivation to persist and succeed in college.

## THE ACADEMY FOR COLLEGE EXCELLENCE: A CURRICULUM- AND COHORT-BASED PERSISTENCE MODEL

Enter the Academy for College Excellence (ACE), which was founded in 2002 to serve students who are considered at high risk of failure. ACE is currently operating in five colleges in California and one in Pennsylvania—Berkeley City College, Cabrillo College, Delaware County Community College (outside of Philadelphia), Hartnell College, Las Positas College, and Los Medanos College—with plans to expand as we build capacity.

Funded by the National Science Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the James Irvine Foundation, the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, ACE has nine years of experience working with challenged, and challenging, students—using practice-informed research to understand what makes these students vulnerable and

how to meet their needs, and then pilot testing and refining a curriculum that moves not only the learning but the support they need into the classroom. ACE is centered in community colleges because that is a prime place to work with underprepared and vulnerable students.

ACE can combine well with and supplement other programs that provide support for at-risk students, improved instruction in the academic disciplines, and improved developmental education. While these programs share the intent of increasing student success and may use similar approaches to doing so, there are distinct differences, too. ACE:

- invests in student's affective development through an up-front, intensive, 56-hour Foundation Course that also establishes the student cohort;
- helps students identify, name, and develop their strengths, as well as see the styles and strengths of others;
- focuses on experiential learning, including a primary research project on a social-justice topic that has affected the lives of the students;
- develops professional and collaborative leadership skills;
- develops the mindfulness of students;
- accelerates learning;
- supports students through peer networks reinforced by the curriculum and a faculty cohort; and
- requires full-time attendance.

## Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities

Over the past nine years, part of our foundational work has been to collect data on the demographic and personal backgrounds of the over 2,400 students whom we have served in order to identify the risk factors that make many underprepared students vulnerable. Here we will share some of what we have learned about the kinds of students who will be entering college in increasing numbers.

To identify risk factors, in 2003 we developed an intake survey that is part of the application that our students complete when they enter the ACE program. Done online, it gives us information about students' demographics and the effects of the poverty in which many young people in the country live.

Among them are underperforming schools, unsafe neighborhoods, parental worries about money, drugs, gangs, arrests/convictions, teenage pregnancy, and violence—with its attendant post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A study by researchers at Stanford University shows that children living in urban poverty show the symptoms of PTSD at nearly twice the rate found in soldiers returning from Iraq (Tucker, 2007, pp. 1–7).

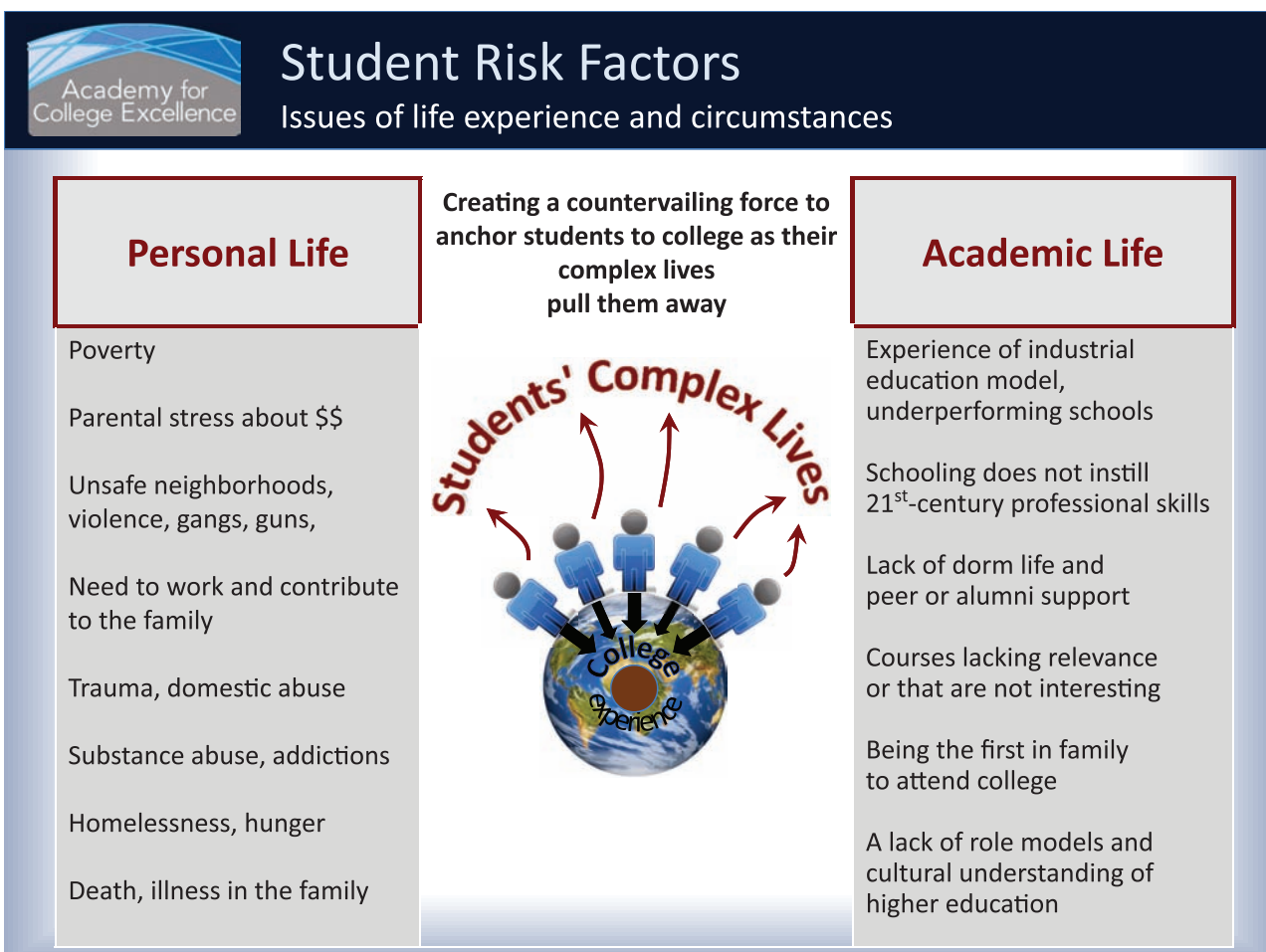
These factors and a lack of academic success work against students' commitment to college. That commitment is likely to be shaky to begin with: Many were not encouraged in high school to plan for college and do not have identities as

college-bound students. Negative experiences in high school have also tended to undermine their confidence in their intelligence, and they have had little opportunity to develop some of the life skills (e.g., organization and planning, effective communication, personal responsibility) that they need to do well in college and the work world. As seen in Figure 1, our job is to overcome the pull of their complex lives and to anchor them in college.

*Risk and vulnerability are not identical. Risk factors are about students' external environment and experiences, whereas vulnerability is the internal legacy of those things and makes up their sense of self. We really don't understand why, but the effects of risk factors adhere to some people, impacting their sense of identity and personal effectiveness, while they do not affect others in the same way.*

Take two students from the same background, with similar risk factors: One may be uncertain and have a negative sense of self and poor interpersonal skills, while another may have a great deal of self-confidence and good communication skills, even though he or she is not academically ready for college. Both may have grown up in unsafe neighborhoods. Both may be very bright. Both may have gone to underperforming and uninspiring high schools and need remedial work. However, one student will probably do what it takes to persist and the other will not.

FIGURE 1



**A study by researchers at Stanford University shows that children living in urban poverty show the symptoms of PTSD at nearly twice the rate found in soldiers returning from Iraq.**

We have found that vulnerabilities may include a sense of hypervigilance caused by living in unsafe conditions, a fear about survival, a lack of self-management and self-regulation habits, insufficient academic self-agency, misunderstandings about and a misreading of college culture, unfamiliarity with collaborative communication approaches, and a lack of awareness of internal states and feelings. We recognize that the level and kind of support students need

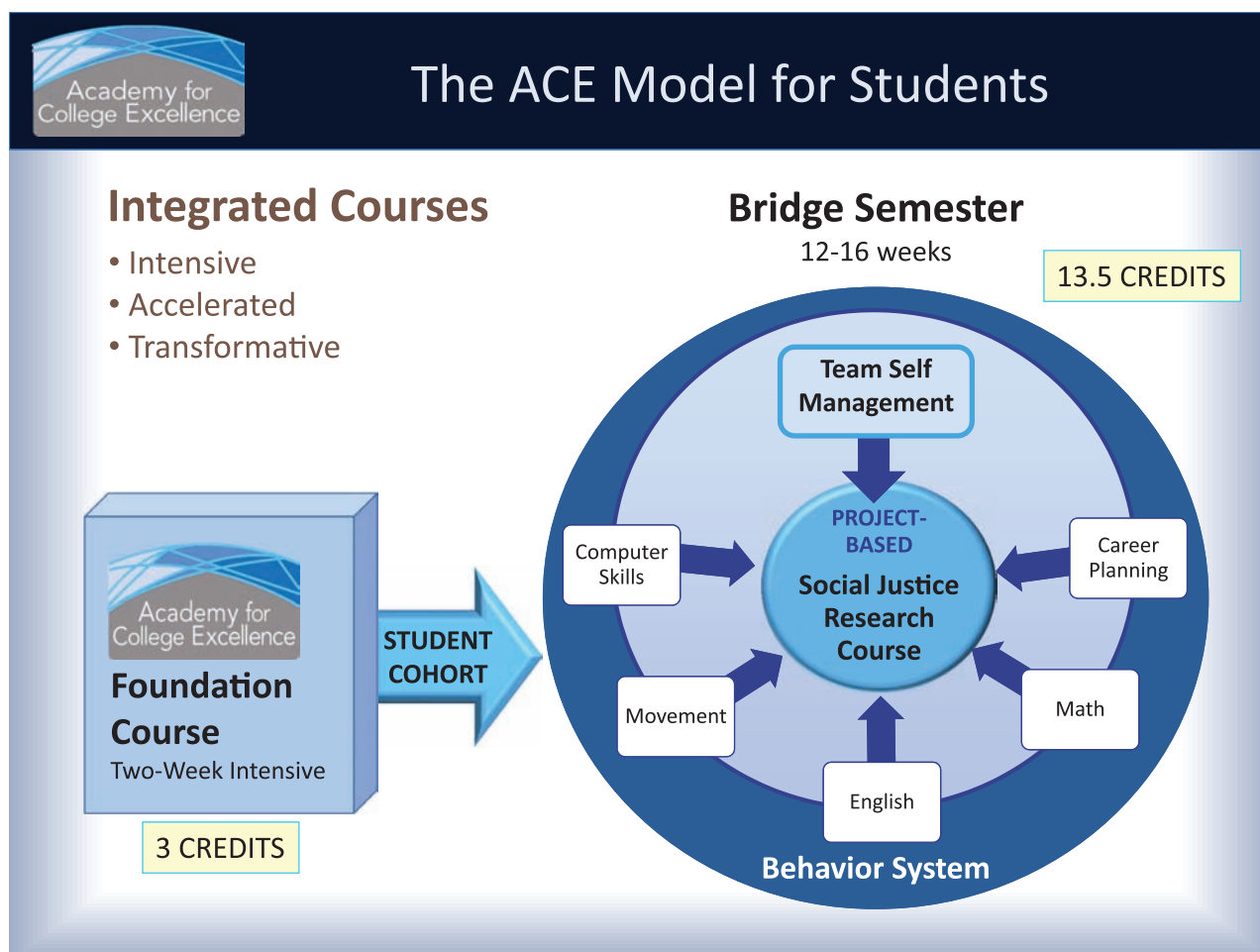
correlates with their level and kind of vulnerability. The most vulnerable need very intense support, at least in the beginning of their time in college, including someone they can call on at almost any time for help.

**Peer Support: Virtual Dormitories**

However, that support does not need to be provided exclusively by the faculty and staff. In the ACE program students develop peer networks that provide the majority of this support via a cohort model, with the classroom curriculum designed to build and maintain that peer community. Students know and call on each other 24/7 for help in dealing with school and life circumstances. This allows counselors to focus on academic advisement and planning services of the sort that they provide to all students.

One of the major differences between community colleges and four-year institutions is that community colleges usually do not have dormitories, and students find it harder to develop the social networks that are characteristic of residential students in four-year colleges. Some students have described this as “not having a real college experience.” The peer networks that we foster in the ACE program serve as a virtual dormitory and help students build the connections (friendships, supportive relationships, study groups, etc.) that draw them into the academic world and counteract the elements

**FIGURE 2**



in their lives that undercut their college identities. Many of these connections last long after the ACE semester.

### The Curriculum

The ACE curriculum begins with the two-week intensive, immersion-style Foundation Course, given either just before the semester begins or during the first two weeks of it (depending on the college and its needs and policies). The course leads students through an examination of their prior educational and life experiences, assists them in understanding their own (and other people's) working styles, helps them know and work from their strengths, begins teaching them how to work in teams, and shows them how to monitor their own behaviors and communicate more effectively. It rapidly builds strong cohort bonds and inspires students to embrace learning.

The Foundation Course is followed by the Bridge Semester courses, which are integrated and all of which count toward college credit. The Team Self-Management Course continues the work of the Foundation Course, with an emphasis on teamwork and communications. Faculty from any discipline can teach these two courses, with ACE training and mentoring.

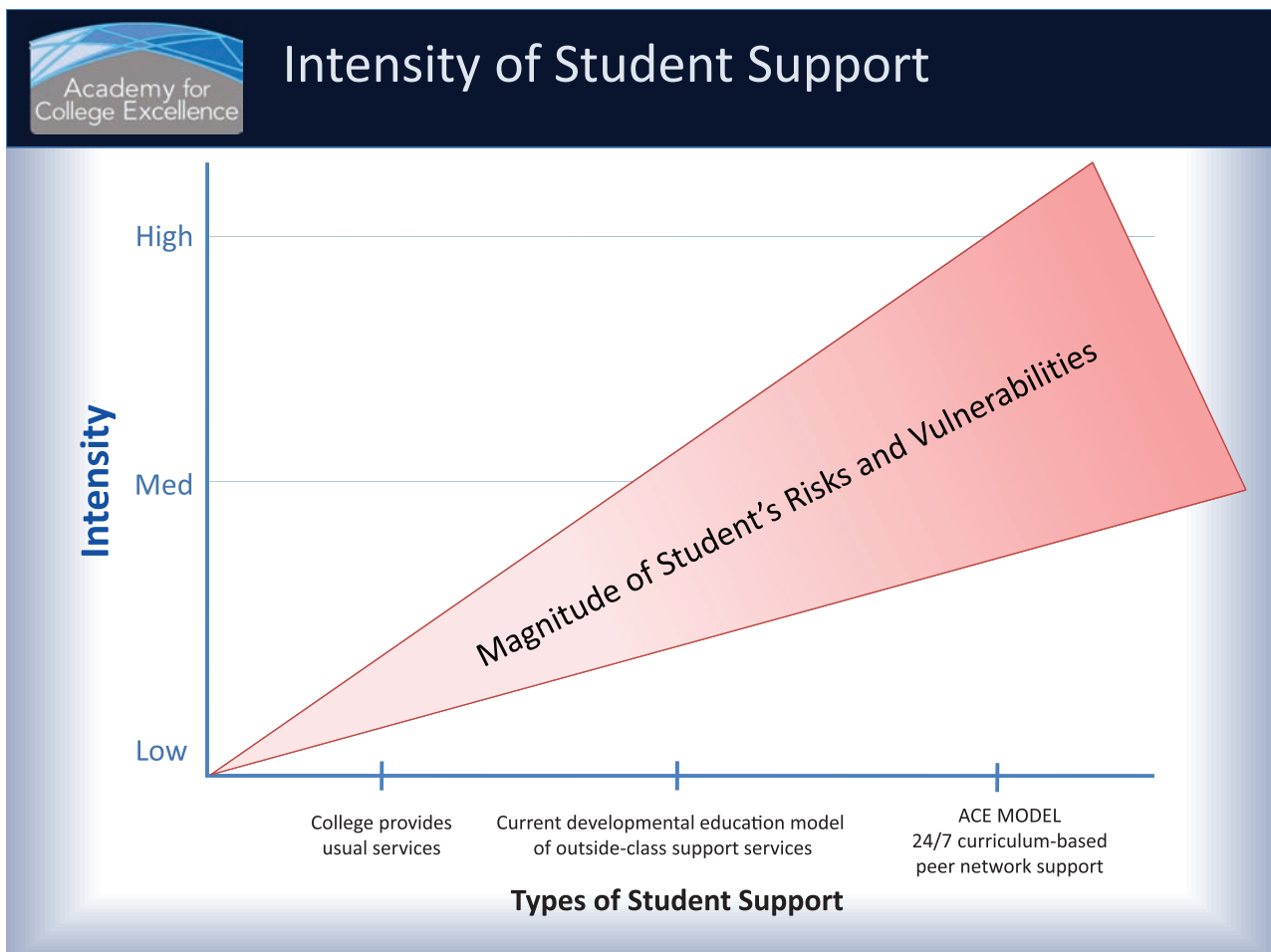
The other Bridge Semester courses are taught by faculty from the appropriate disciplines; they cover English and/or math, computer skills, career planning, and contemplative

physical movement (to date, this has included yoga and theater arts). (See Figure 2.)

These courses provide skills “just in time,” as needed by a project-based social justice research course that allows students to examine a local issue, conduct primary research, and present their results to the public—although some of the colleges use a strategy not based on the social justice model. For example, one that uses ACE in its nursing program coordinates the ACE curriculum with nursing courses instead. Other college offerings include green technology, agriculture, diesel technology, and medical assisting. ACE is adaptable to local needs and priorities.

Through its signature courses—the Foundation Course, the Team Self-Management course, and the social justice primary research curriculum—the ACE program helps students learn and transform themselves from the inside out as they rethink their relationship to learning and to college. Since many ACE students' lives have provided them with the equivalent of PhDs in social injustice, the curriculum leverages this strength. We recognize, with Yeats, that “education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire,” a fire for academic learning that for many of our developmental-education students has died down along the way. Asking them to work on issues affecting their lives and communities is a way to rekindle it.

FIGURE 3



## Faculty Development and Communities

Many college faculty members find it challenging to work with underprepared students who also may not have good social and communications skills. We provide professional development to help them to teach in an integrated and experiential model that is oriented toward teamwork and action-based problem solving.

Faculty at a college interested in ACE attend a Faculty Experiential Learning Institute (FELI) that covers a large portion of the curriculum used in the ACE Foundation Course, but is focused on the theme of reconceptualizing community college instruction. Faculty experience a version of the activities that students engage in. This not only helps them understand the students—it also serves their own professional growth. Much of this curriculum is derived from high-level executive training programs. Some of the faculty who attend the FELI then choose to teach the Foundation Course; others become content teachers in the integrated ACE learning-community courses.

We find that faculty need to change the way they connect with and teach vulnerable students, and we can teach them to do so. A benefit of the ACE model is that faculty members also get focused support from colleagues with whom they teach in the integrated semester. They convene once a week

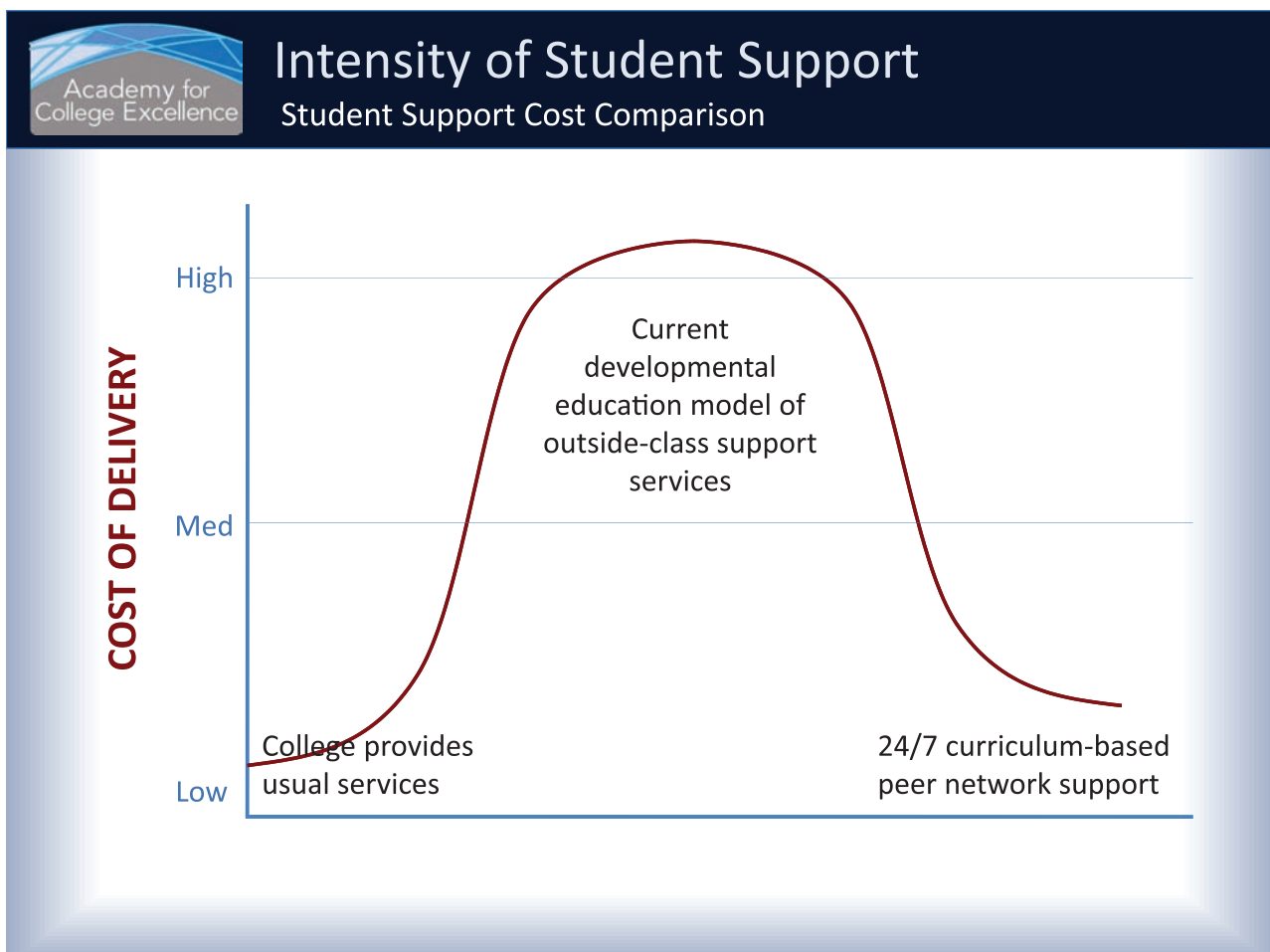
to review student performance and coordinate the curriculum. Moreover, participating ACE faculty from colleges regionally have begun meeting at least once a semester in a community of practice. The teachers share experiences and support one another in ways similar to those that the students employ.

## Cost

Traditional community college support services include financial aid, academic counseling, sometimes mental-health counseling, tutoring, supplemental instruction, support for different kinds of disabilities, and health services for all students. In addition, community colleges may offer developmental-education programs designed to support the most at-risk students. The services provided by these programs are usually provided outside of the classroom as external support services.

When the costs of these developmental-education programs are covered by outside grants, the services often end when the grants do. When these programs are supported by general funds, they may only serve a small group of students. They don't easily scale to reach larger numbers of students because of their cost. As seen in Figure 3, students with higher risks and vulnerabilities may need more intensive program interventions and a more supportive environment.

FIGURE 4



The ACE program has been designed to be cost effective. Although there are real costs, as there are with any other program, they are entailed largely during the adoption phase in the form of training resources and the adaptation of college systems to the cohort-based learning-community model (e.g., scheduling, recruiting, data collection, and curriculum tools).

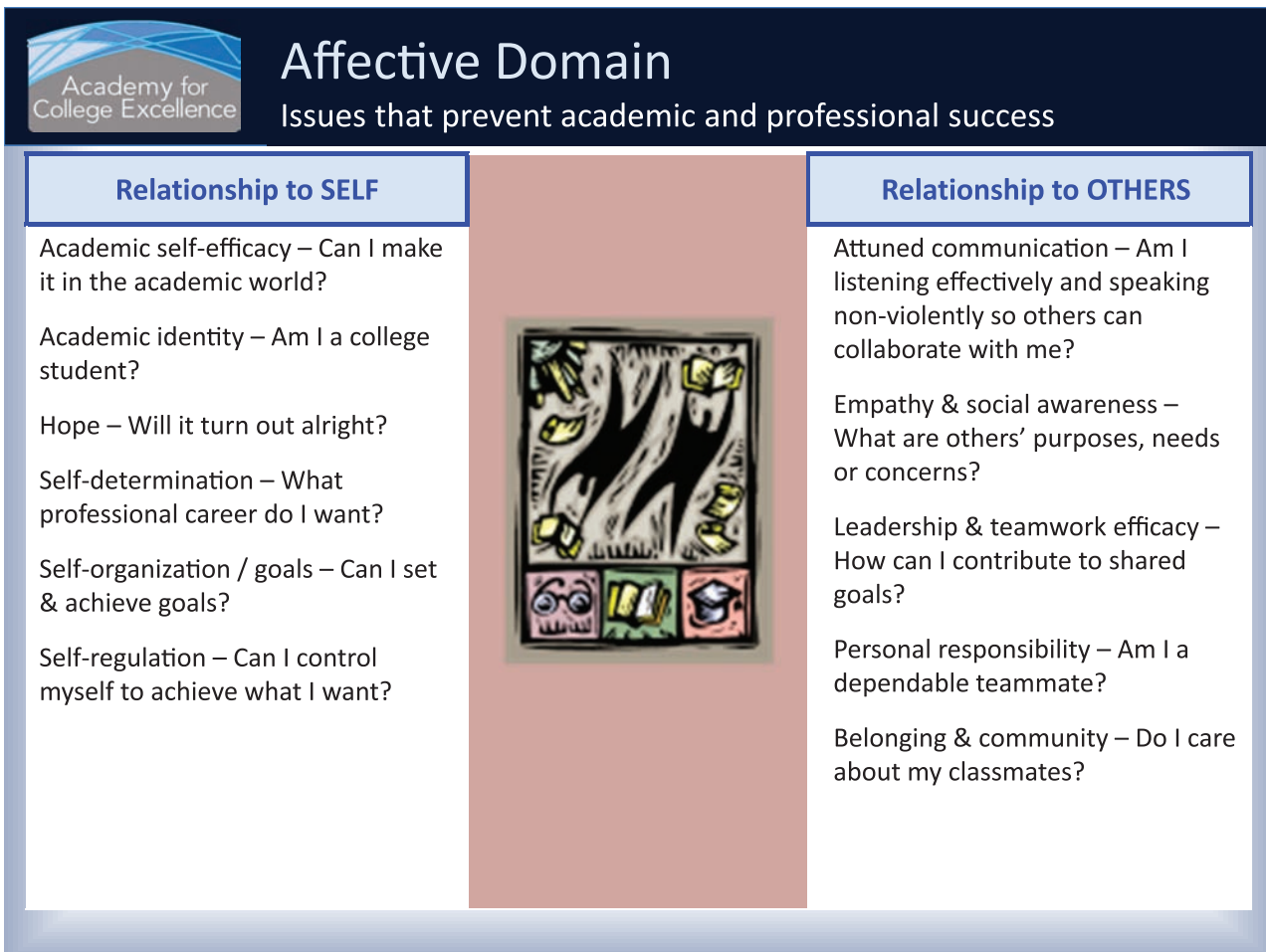
After the program is established, the costs become minimal. By locating student learning and student support within the curriculum and classroom, the cost per student is significantly less than that of various models based on outside counseling and support services, while the intensity of support increases.

## Results

We decided to measure the effectiveness of ACE in helping students overcome the affective barriers to success. In fall 2003, we asked students who had been in the program to answer the question, “How have you changed since you joined the ACE program?”

We found that students mentioned 21 distinct changes, including being responsible for choices they make in their lives, being able to reflect on how they feel, judging people less, caring about school, and thinking before speaking. These changes are tied directly to the skills that the original ACE faculty believed students needed to master.

FIGURE 5

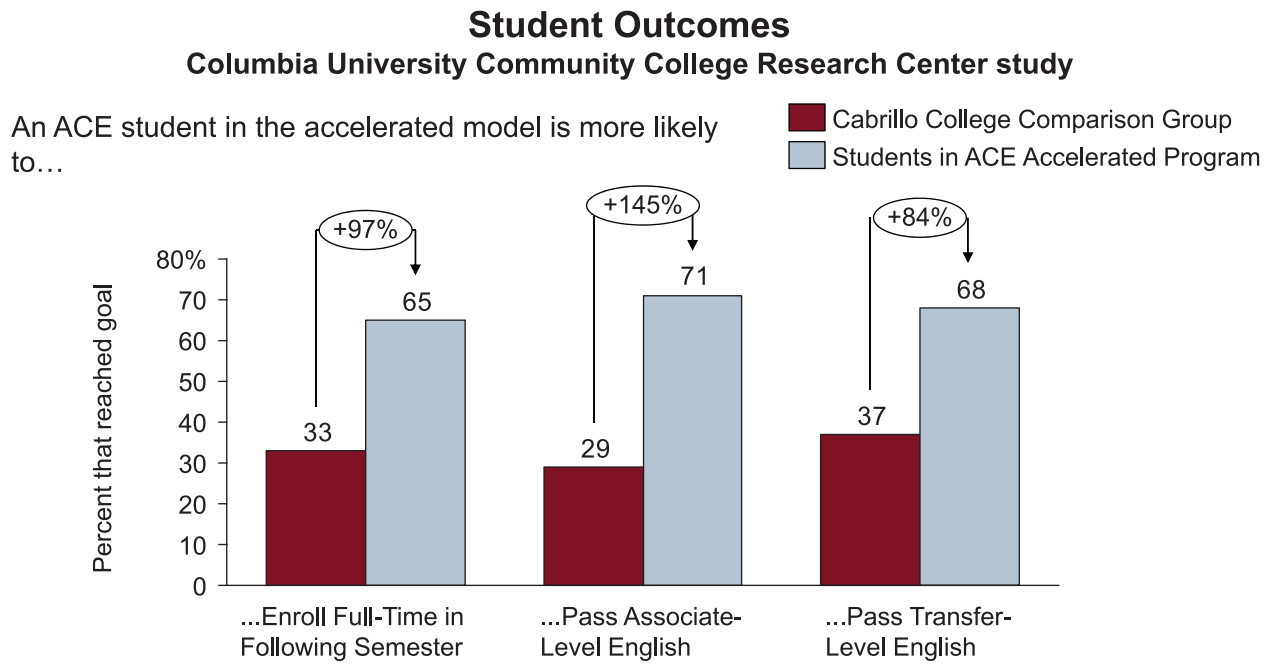


In fall 2010, FSG Social Impact Advisors studied the costs of implementing and sustaining ACE cohorts at the partner colleges, including those associated with faculty development (factoring in faculty attrition) and offering the curriculum. Since the ACE model does not rely on external support services except for those that the colleges already provide to all students and is classroom and curriculum based, they found that ACE cohorts can almost be sustained within the typical cost parameters for instruction. The cost of all the courses in the ACE model are covered by tuition and/or the state funding that the college normally receives for delivering instruction. Figure 4 shows a cost comparison of these different student-support approaches.

This led us to develop a survey (not based on standardized instruments) covering these areas, administered before and after the Foundation Course and at the end of the semester. Subsequently, we decided to replace it with something more robust. Over the past year and a half, our external evaluator, MPR Associates, has worked with the ACE team and Martin Chemers (professor *emeritus* in psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz)—with funding and technical assistance from the Bill and Melinda Gates and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundations—to design, pilot, and implement a more standardized self-report measure (the College Student Self Assessment Survey, or CSSAS).



FIGURE 6



On average, ACE students also earned an estimated 21 more credits than those in the assessment cohorts

**Note:** Comparison group of over 11,000 Cabrillo College students.

Source: Jenkins, D., Zeidenberg, M., and Wachen, J. (2009)

This assessment is based on social science research and factors that we identified as significant in measuring student vulnerabilities and predicting student success. While the list in Figure 5 is not exhaustive, it captures the most important affective and socio-cultural problems that we and others have identified as sources of failure for college students.

Along with academic placement testing and the ACE intake survey, which provides demographic and risk-factor data, entering students now complete the CSSAS online, so that we have baseline data regarding their sense of self; they then take it three more times during college (after they complete the Foundation Course, after the ACE semester, and after two more semesters of college) to measure the progress they have made.

For the past three semesters all ACE students at six colleges in two states have taken the CSSAS—about 865 students in all. Two colleges currently are assessing all their incoming students, and two more colleges are considering doing so. The results will allow us to determine the effects an ACE experience has on students compared to similar students who do not participate in ACE. (More information on the CSSAS assessment can be found at <http://academyforcollegeexcellence.org/learn-more-about-cssas/>.)

We would like to implement the CSSAS in such a way that entering students can be referred to ACE or other programs, according to their needs, by counselors or even

directly via the college's webpage. That way, students like Gloria will find programs to help them acquire the skills they need to address the difficulties they face early in their college experience.

Early results of a pre-Foundation Course and post-Foundation Course CSSAS study of 409 ACE students at seven colleges reveal a statistically significant increase in students' scores on measures of academic self-efficacy, hope, academic identity, self-awareness (mindfulness), goals, persistence and self-regulation, personal responsibility, communication, and leadership and teamwork efficacy after completing the two-week Foundation Course.

Finally, as Figure 6 indicates, ACE accelerated students do better than their non-ACE peers in terms of outcomes such as persistence, full-time enrollment, and progress toward completion.

#### WHY IT MATTERS

To address student vulnerabilities and needs, we designed the ACE program to include accelerated academics, social networks and support, behavioral changes, career planning, communications skills, and socio-cultural and affective learning to get them working at the college level rapidly. Students need to change both the way they see themselves and how they work with others. They also need support to manage their complex lives, in which they

have appointments with the food-stamp office, probation department, child-custody office, child-care worker, and the court, any one of which can cause them to miss class and distract them from their focus on school.

Community colleges were designed during the 1950's and 1960's for students who were very different from many of today's students, who are increasingly diverse, poorer, and underprepared for college work. But they may be very bright, and many of them have persisted despite difficult life circumstances and poorly performing high schools. ACE helps these students make their strengths work for them in the academic environment.

College is their best opportunity to find productive and meaningful lives. If they do not do so, it affects both them individually and our society as a whole. It is important for us to do a better job of identifying those students who need support to do well and providing effective programs to help them. We need to recognize the vulnerabilities of our students, which go beyond academics alone, and offer them the means to succeed.

### AN ALTERNATIVE SCENARIO FOR GLORIA

*While perusing her local community college's website, Gloria is encouraged to take the CSSAS. She is steered toward the Academy for College Excellence, designed to help students like her overcome some of their vulnerabilities, find support, and catch up academically.*

*She has to attend full-time; the first two weeks consist of all-day, intensive sessions in an ACE Foundation Course. The thirty students in her cohort develop strong bonds and even friendships and learn how to work together in new ways.*

*By the end of the course, she has begun to think about herself and school differently; she is transforming herself into a college student. For the rest of the semester, she stays with the same cohort of students in an intensive learning community, and her teachers integrate their classes.*

*This time Gloria is excited by her English class. Because the class enrolls two levels of students, she passes and obtains credit for the higher-level English course, even though she was placed at the lower level. In addition, this course*

*is integrated with the ACE social justice primary research course, which focuses on a local social-justice topic that the students choose and investigate in research teams.*

*After collectively canvassing 150 people using a survey they developed, her research team analyzes the results statistically, writes about it, and presents their conclusions to the public. By focusing their academic work on a topic from their life experience, they become the experts.*

*Her math class is the first of a two-course sequence in an accelerated statistics program. It allows her to pass the transfer-level statistics requirement at the end of the second semester and enables her to present the findings of her research project statistically. She has always lacked the motivation to do math, but since the social justice data she collected with her research team is about a problem that has affected her deeply, she begins to overcome her resistance to the struggle of learning math.*

*Her ACE Team Self-Management class includes experiential exercises and discussions about some of the issues she deals with—how to fit in culturally, how to behave, what is expected, how her personal decisions affect her goals, and how to be responsible. In addition, in the ACE Foundation Course she learns a lot about how she learns, how others learn, how to work in teams, how to plan ahead and organize her life, and how to communicate effectively. She even learns how to scope out her teachers (and classmates) and understand their working styles, which sometimes caused her confusion in earlier classes.*

*She also forms a group of friends that she can turn to 24 hours a day, seven days a week for help. She has talked with several of them in the middle of the night, sharing the trials and tribulations of their complex lives as they become successful college students. The ACE Team Self-Management course provides a support structure in which students can help one another.*

*At the end of the semester she passes sixteen and a half college credits, more than she ever thought possible. She knows that her success is not guaranteed, but she also knows she has the capacity to do the work and reach her educational goals. ☐*

## RESOURCES

■ Jenkins, D., Zeidenberg, M., & Wachen, J. (2009). *Educational outcomes of Cabrillo College's Digital Bridge Academy: Findings from a multivariate analysis*. New York, NY: Community College Research Center, Teacher's College, Columbia University.

■ Tucker, J. (2007, August 26). Children who survive urban warfare suffer from PTSD, too. *San Francisco Gate*, pp. 1–7.