Basic Skills Committee  
March 16, 2004  

(Next Basic Skills meeting will be: Tuesday, 4/13, 2:30 to 4 PM, in Arts 303.)

Almost 40 people from around the campuses participated in a meeting in which we continued our series of listening sessions by hearing from the LAC, the Mentoring Program, and the Multicultural Infusion Project. Afterward, we had time to discuss how the process is going so far and to reflect on what we’ve learned.

(We have appended at the end an article by Sanford C. Shugart, President of Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida. Disclaimer: we do not agree with everything Shugart argues, but it is a thoughtful article that speaks to some of the discussion we had during the meeting.)

Summaries are below: Please feel free to post back to the listserv in response to these notes. Simply send an email to BasicSkillsCommittee@ccsf.edu.

Speakers from the LAC: Nadine Rosenthal, Alexandra Teague, Alisa Messer, Carol Heard, Erika Delacorte

Comments and suggestions included:

1. There are a large number of workshops available for students who need extra help. Getting the word out about what is available and organizing it so students, faculty, and staff understand is important.
2. Connecting lab work and classroom work is important, especially if the lab work is required as part of a class.
3. ESL does not use peer tutors because even advanced ESL students do not have the experience and skills necessary for tutoring ESL students.
4. The monthly meeting for ESL faculty tutors is important for maintaining well-coordinated and organized services for ESL students.
5. In the Writing Success Project (WSP), peer tutors were not as effective or efficient as professional tutors. The current stability among the professional tutors has greatly enhanced the WSP’s ability to create relationships with its students that last throughout the students’ work in the English sequence.
6. On the other hand, the writing lab and other tutoring components in the LAC find that peer-tutors, mixed with professional and faculty tutors, are an important part of providing more complete support for their students. Tutor training is crucial. The growth opportunity for student tutors must also be a part of the decision to use peer tutors versus professional or faculty tutors.

Speaker from the Mentoring Program: Christine Francisco

Comments and suggestions included:

1. The Mentoring Program has no basic skills mentoring projects at this time, but the program is certainly open to that possibility in the future.
2. A mentoring project is faculty-driven and succeeds because of the commitment of the faculty to make it work.
3. Service learning may be a way to generate positive energy about learning skills such as math or reading, because it provides students with an opportunity to see how they can help others in their communities through those skills.

Speakers from Multicultural Infusion Project (MIP): Sue Homer, Lynda Hirose

Comments and suggestions included:

1. Myth: Multicultural education only deals with content. Reality: Multicultural education impacts all disciplines. It is about understanding the student point of view so that faculty can more effectively teach, including learning styles, learning strategies, and other pedagogical theory and practice.

2. Myth: Multicultural education is about race. Reality: Multicultural education addresses all aspects of identity (e.g., gender, class, sexuality, etc.). It is about talking about things that are uncomfortable to talk about and developing a stronger sense of self and community through that discussion.

3. This year MIP is working with a group of about 20 faculty members who meet once a month on a Friday afternoon to work with workshop leader Jackie Reza of the University of San Francisco and De Anza College.

4. One of the best things results of those workshops is the sense of community and camaraderie that the workshops create among the attendees.

5. MIP will be running the workshops again next year and are looking for interested faculty. They are especially looking for faculty who teach basic skills courses. Anyone interested should contact Sue Homer or Lynda Hirose ASAP.

6. Because many of the issues addressed in the MIP workshops overlap with the best practice list that we’ve assembled so far, there is potential for a synergistic alliance between MIP and the Basic Skills Subcommittee.

General discussion:

1. There are a lot of academic support services available and we need to work on connecting students with the appropriate services. Perhaps this can be done through a website or other media, but it is important to remember that a personal referral is probably most effective. As such, it is the job of every faculty, staff, and administrator to help inform students and encourage them to take advantage of all the help they can get.

2. This issue is especially difficult for non-credit students, most of whom are not on the Ocean campus where most of the services are. As a result they are often intimidated and miss out on potential help.

3. Sometimes, requiring students to participate in services may be the most effective way to get them involved, especially for the less diligent students who are often the ones most in need of assistance. More “early alert” and other intervention programs may be needed for students in danger of failing.

The Recovery of Persons
Sanford C. Shugart
“Organization kills spirit” (Greenleaf).

There’s a cheerful thought for the future of our colleges. In the context of Greenleaf’s argument, however, this was meant to convey something essential about the behavior of our institutions as they mature.
Greenleaf would argue that our great institutions are both the glory and the bane of the modern era. Until the last century, only the very wealthy could count on access to services we take for granted. Education, health care, social services, and even ordinary access to many consumer goods and services simply wasn’t available to the masses until our society began to perfect the great institutions we take for granted. Our colleges, schools, hospitals, and other servant institutions are to be celebrated as perhaps the greatest achievements of the 20th century. On the other hand, they can be dreadful places. They can exploit, use, manipulate, and dehumanize the very souls they were created to serve. They do this because organizations, like organisms, have lives of their own that are more than the sum of the individuals who work in them. They will act in ways that assure their survival, even at the expense of their mission.

It is no wonder that a defining characteristic of the postmodern era is alienation and cynical distrust of institutions. The old industrial model of institutional life depersonalized people by treating them like cattle: nameless, faceless, numbered units. In a myriad of institutional details, efficiency outweighed authenticity in serving those for whom we were created. It seems certain, in hindsight, that if people are treated often enough and authoritatively enough as mere numbers, they will ultimately come to behave that way.

Now that we have entered the postmodern era of organizational life, our institutions are adopting the habits, technologies, and perspectives of the postmodern marketplace. The new paradigm is dominated by consumer capitalism that marries the view of everyone as customer with powerful technologies such as database marketing, virtual commerce, and product branding. These tools can be used to customize our response to meet the needs of those we serve. However, more often than not, they are used simply to stimulate their appetite for something we have to sell. It is hard to imagine a trend more destructive of authentic community and civic virtues.

In our colleges, such technologies are manifested in systems such as enrollment management, direct mail, automated telephone communication systems, and web-portal technologies that seek to gather information on our students and convert it into a strategic market advantage. In the end, students are treated as units of consumption and the educational enterprise reduced to a retail operation. Such culture ultimately creeps into every area of the organization, including the classroom. The potential of this outcome argues persuasively against viewing students as customers.

The question, then, of how we use these new tools and how we shape institutional culture in the service of students and society is of great moment. Since we are serving the first generation of truly postmodern students, the challenge to our colleges is to reclaim the truly personal in our work. We must adopt a set of radical notions about authentic service that can transform the use of tools at our disposal. Students deserve a distinct response, and it is possible that these new technologies and systems can enable us to render just that. I offer three such principles here, with a limited discussion of each: be a person, serve a person, and love your values more than your systems.

BE A PERSON
Institutions do not render authentic human service, only persons do. The institution is only a set of tools, an environment that enables persons to do the work better. Here are some of the ways a community college might assure that it is behaving personally:
Ruthlessly avoid all forms of automation that depersonalize the student and staff. If you have a computer telephoning your students during their dinner hour to deliver a canned message, hand it over to the Luddites and hold a ritual burning! Always provide a name when you are serving, a real name of the real person rendering the service. Create a culture of personal freedom in what the rules and procedures may dictate. Enrich the personal dignity of front-line staff. No one can serve persons well if they are burned out, angry, bitter, and feel that they are being manipulated. Value and nurture a deeply respectful culture in the classroom, student to teacher, teacher to student, and student to student. Recognize that this may take many forms, from friendly and informal to rather formal and professional. The style can vary greatly, but the principle of respect should be indelible.

SERVE A PERSON
You cannot serve a group, a class, a population, or even a community. You can only serve persons. Ideally, every interaction at the institution should be marked by a deep commitment to recognize the individual personhood of every student and staff member. Here are some easy examples:

Every communication from the institution should be personalized to the individual receiving it. In other words, no “occupant” or “dear student” mail should be tolerated unless it is absolutely unavoidable. Fortunately, this is where powerful, integrated databases can help us personalize the college. Similarly, the person receiving the communication should be able to respond to the originator directly.

Persons, unlike numbers, exercise choice. So be sure that they are given real choices to make about how they will engage the college, conduct business with the college, and get the help they need to navigate the organization. Use the tools to understand and capture the preferences students have for being served, and try to honor these. This may mean creating systems that allow students to opt out of what may be most efficient to the college if they find it unhelpful or disrespectful.

LOVE YOUR VALUES MORE THAN YOUR SYSTEMS
“Sure, but if I did this for you, I'd have to do it for everybody.” Who hasn't heard this excuse for a decision that is otherwise unsupportable? It reveals the very bedrock of bureaucratic dysfunction. The college staff has to feel free to do the right thing for each student, even if it means breaking a rule to maintain a value.

Because serving means rendering a unique response, our rules and procedures will always be inadequate. There is no substitute for good judgment based on shared principles. Therefore, the principles that govern your college’s work are in many ways more important than your systems. This is why they should be discussed, written, revisited, and discussed again, not at mission-writing time, but in the midst of real decision. Before making a budget or designing a building or starting the recruitment and hiring process, colleges should agree on what the actions should mean when they are completed. We call these design principles in our processes. They are born out of powerful conversations that involve not just articulating values, but challenging the ways the college attempts to serve. Our best value statements come from our confessions, not our professions. When this kind of attention to values becomes common in your organization, it is easier to trust the people than the procedures.
The recovery of persons at the center of our work is especially vital now because of the sea change in our culture. I have come to believe in the importance of this work for our future out of a particular worldview that the universe is essentially personal. Though not a popular view, especially in academia for the past century, it is a hypothesis worth considering. I can find no other ground on which to build a principle-centered work community, a college worthy of the mission to educate and to serve.

Sanford C. Shugart is President of Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida. This article appears in Perspectives in the Community College: A Journey of Discovery.