What I Learned about California Colleges from Reading 149 Proposals

By Rose Asera, Ph.D., Program Co-chair for SSSC 2019

The theme of the 2019 Strengthening Student Success Conference was “It takes a community college”. It was cultivated around the idea that transforming an institution takes all the members of its community and its collective strength. It also spoke to the resounding call in recent years to make our campuses coherent, effective, and more equitable through the student experience lens. This, too, requires all of the voices and perspectives across the college.

Background and Evolution

Fourteen years ago community colleges tended to be inward looking and educators tended to work in isolation. The RP Group with partner organizations — including the Statewide Academic Senate, ACCJC, and Cal Pass — recognized a need to create a setting where educators could share effective practices and learn from each other.

The result was the Strengthening Student Success Conference.

For the first two or three years of the conference, the sessions most often presented examples that were pockets of innovation, boutique programs, or individual faculty projects. Only a small number of these had data that showed effect.

Over the years, the work in the field has grown, strengthened, and matured. Community colleges across the system now are acknowledging common problems and attempting to address them in their local context.

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Here’s What We learned...

Half of the proposals were sent in the last 10 hours of the extended deadline, which seems to be an indicator of just how impacted our educators truly are and have been. There were also colleagues who told us that they were so busy that they didn’t have time to write a proposal about the work they are doing.

A quick look at a few of the conference strand illustrates the breadth and depth of the work:

All About AB 705 and ESL

In the strand, Implementation of AB 705, proposals covered placement, design of co-requisite courses, and embedded learning assistance. Along with growing work in English and math, this year there were an increased number of proposals about ESL. The CAP directors have presented every year on ESL-related programs and efforts since the first conference and have inspired others to join them in the effort.

Guided Pathways Lead to New Places

The proposals in Guided Pathways illustrated how far reaching institutional transformation can be. Proposals covered not only the evident stages of Guided Pathways such as inquiry and program mapping, but also stretched to cover program review, enrollment management, data coaching, and contextualization, and connection to career education.

Collaboration in Effect

Proposals in the Collaborating across Sectors and Segments: Partnerships and Networks strand recognized the need to reach beyond campus boundaries. For example, there were more than half a dozen proposals on K-12 partnerships and dual enrollment.

Examples of community partnerships focused on workforce development, adult education, and programs for current and formerly incarcerated students.

Collaborations that crossed silos on campus included several proposals about the roles libraries are playing, as well as interdisciplinary collaborations.

Overall it seems that colleges are looking outwardly more often to provide students with effective educational experiences.
Professional Development Goes Deeper for Educators

The examples in the *Building a Culture of Improvement: Professional Learning and Leadership Development* strand demonstrate a range of professional learning strategies and structures, including communities of practice, student voice as part of professional development, and support of leadership development.

The conference itself, too, (and its increase in the number of type of participants) also reflects a sea change in professional development.

Not that long ago, professional development was thought of as an add-on, something people went away to, or an arbitrary annual FLEX day. Now educators in all positions — instructors, counselors, administrators, and classified professionals — seek opportunities for ongoing learning with and from colleagues.

Three Cross-Cutting Themes

Three more cross-cutting themes are evident in reading across the collected SSC proposals:

- **Attention to data and evidence:** The call for proposals asks for evidence of effect. Some proposals draw on research literature to illustrate the need or support the approach they are using. *Increasingly, proposals also include local data to show effect, particularly when data are disaggregated or at scale.*

- **Equity:** The range of proposals reflects the many ways that equity is being addressed with strategies that draw the campus together as a whole, as an essential in program design that address student needs, campus-wide and in the classroom. *Disaggregated data continually draw attention to student populations that have been disproportionally impacted.*

- **Student co-presenters:** Five years ago the Umoja Community brought students to the conference. Their presence demonstrated the strengths students bring and reminded educators about the reasons they chose to work in community colleges. For the last two years, the conference has had a student plenary speaker and encouraged other session to have student co-presenters. *Among this year’s submissions, fourteen proposals included student co-presenters and others have examples of student voice and work.*
The Work of Proposal Selection

The satisfaction and excitement of seeing this powerful overview of work across the system through the lens of conference proposals is only confounded by limitations of the conference schedule and that fact that there is only space to accept about half of the proposals.

Choosing which proposals to accept is not an easy task; it also takes a community.

The steering committee and practitioners from the field help make these hard decisions. For each strand, a review panel includes a member of the steering committee, as well as three to four community college practitioners with relevant experience in the area. These individuals take the time to read, review with a rubric, and discuss proposals for a strand. Since every proposal has the option of being reviewed in two strands, this year, each strand had between thirty-some and fifty-some proposals — many more possible proposals than spaces.

It is standard practice that proposal reviewers (in any setting) take an initial first pass and then “toss” those that are “not in the ballpark.”

For us, however, there were almost no easy outs. All of the proposals reflected the spirit of strengthening the student experience.

While this may be a desirable problem to have, and much better than a scarcity of good work to share, the steering committee and program committee feel the weight of choosing.

Because the body of work we received was exceptional, we want to thank each and every one of our submitters for sharing your work and encourage you to submit again in future years. We also encourage you to reach out to us with any questions, requests for feedback on initial proposal ideas, and more.