

Where They Are

The English department at City College of San Francisco (CCSF) was well prepared to address the curricular changes required by AB 705, the state legislation requiring colleges to provide incoming students the opportunity to complete transfer-level English and math in their first year. They reached compliance early by building off existing work with developing accelerated courses to revise their composition sequence. With these changes, all students entering the college receive an English placement in either English 1A or the combination of English 1A and 1AS, a two-unit support class. The combination of revising course sequences to remove remediation, building supports into transfer-level English, and changing placement using multiple measures increased throughput of students by large percentages across all student groups. While the success of the English 1A and 1AS combination has allowed far more students to complete their college composition requirement, the equity gaps in completion rates between student groups are persisting. Like other English, math, and ESL departments across the state working both intensely and intentionally to meet AB 705 compliance, CCSF English faculty were surprised by this data. After years spent revising their course sequence, increasing participation in professional development in acceleration and equity, and embarking on a journey towards being an anti-racist English department with nearly every faculty member in the department working in a small community of practice focused on increasing equity, English faculty decided to learn more about the experience of students in their classes and how to design further interventions.

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What They Are Doing

English department faculty decided to dive deeper into understanding how they might increase the success in English 1A and English 1AS of student groups disproportionately impacted by these gaps, namely Black, Latinx, Filipino/Pacific Islander, foster youth, and disabled students. A small group of English faculty leaders decided they needed to better understand the experiences students were having in the classroom and they wanted to explore ways to deepen learning. This led them to launch a small learning community exploring active and applied learning as a strategy for deepening student engagement in the curriculum.

Student Focus Groups

Career Ladders Project held focus groups with 34 students over three days in fall 2021. Students were put in affinity groups with one group for each of the following populations: Hispanic/Latinx; Black/African American; Filipino/Pacific Islander; former foster youth; students participating in DSPS; and a general population/non-specific focus group open to all.

The focus groups were designed to gather information from the students on the following outcomes:

Outcome 1: To assess student engagement and determine to what degree students feel included or excluded, welcome or unwelcome, motivated or unmotivated in an academic setting more broadly and in English 1A classes in particular.

Outcome 2: To assess whether students feel their academic experience, and particularly English 1A, connects to their cultural identity and/or reflects the greater diversity of the CCSF student body.

Outcome 3: To determine whether students feel the skills learned in English 1A feel integral or relevant to their career and life goals.

Outcome 4: To assess students' experiences of distance learning – whether it is more an asset or obstacle to their academic success, what problems generally arise given a Zoom-centric academic experience, what solutions or workarounds students have used, and what faculty should know to best benefit students in this situation.

Key Findings

- Across all groups, participants noted that simple gestures of faculty friendliness, openness, and flexibility helped them feel welcome and comfortable in the classroom.
- Students expressed that it is easy to feel lost and disconnected in online and remote learning. They noted that more inclusive instructors brought in contributions from all students, not just the ones comfortable speaking in class, referencing student contributions to online forums and mentioning students by name.
- Most students saw the relevance of English 1A only in the context of the university and did not see how the skills learned in English would have any utility in their lives and careers.
- A number of students said that they missed the social world of the in-person classroom. Students with jobs and families expressed appreciation for the flexibility of online and hybrid courses, as well as the time saved on commuting to school.

Professional Development

English department faculty received AB 705 funding to support an English Community of Practice focused on closing equity gaps in English 1A and 1AS. Due to the size of the department, they are focusing their efforts in several small groups to encourage open and honest discussion, learning, and intervention design. The specific interventions will be shared widely in the department at the end of the academic year.

Communities of Practice by Topic

- Beyond English: Honoring Multilingualism in an English Department
- Feminist anti-racist citation practices – Centering diverse voices in the curriculum
- Racial identity as it intertwines with academic identity and implications for curriculum and pedagogy
- Instructor persona and an inclusive classroom

Additionally, English and math faculty came together to participate in an active and applied learning summit in fall 2021 to explore ways they might work together to develop curriculum and collaborations that provide students the opportunity to examine real world problems from different disciplines. English and math faculty found points of intersection where students would benefit from deeper collaboration across departments that includes sharing pedagogy and practices. They also explored ways to develop contextualized curriculum that would support students in seeing the connection between the disciplines, their majors, and career pathways.

What's Next

Department Strategic Plan for Equity

In spring 2022, English faculty will review the student focus group findings and recommendations report, as well as student success and retention data across all English Composition classes to develop a departmental strategic plan for closing existing equity gaps with a concentration on English 1A and 1AS as a starting point. The focus groups provide key insights into specific needs of students and highlights where the department needs to gather more information from specific populations.

Contextualized Curriculum for English 1A

In fall 2022, a small group of faculty will work across the college to develop transdisciplinary curriculum that enables students to make real world connections to their major and career interests while learning reading, writing, critical thinking, and research skills needed throughout college. The goal of this approach is to offer courses aligned with the college's Academic & Career Communities that support students in exploring the opportunities for them in college that intersect with their interests and future careers.

Continuing English Communities of Practice

The English department has found that communities of practice are a successful model for supporting continued professional development. As the communities develop and implement strategies and interventions, the department plans to track the impacts of those changes. This will help the department identify specific practices that support students disproportionately impacted by opportunity gaps.

Appendix

Focus Group Protocol

Facilitator Introduction

Allow about 5 minutes for participants to join

Thank you for agreeing to talk with us today. CLP has been asked to include student voices and experiences in discussions with your college's leaders and faculty about how the English department can better serve students.

CLP will write a summary of all participants' responses and we will not be using your names to ensure your responses stay anonymous. We want you to know that we think everything you have to say is important, and we are here to learn from you and your experiences here at CCSF.

Would it be OK to record the conversation, so that we can capture your ideas as you present them? If so, please type "yes" in the chat.

Wait until everyone person has agreed, and then press record

Thank you, just a friendly reminder that we would like to hear from everyone, whether your experiences are similar to or different from others. You can also use the chat if you feel more comfortable. We also ask that you please keep your mic muted unless you are speaking. Are there any questions?

General Group Questions

Let's go around, introduce yourself using your fake name, and please tell us about a time you have felt welcomed or valued in an educational setting?

1. How are you doing during the current remote learning situation?
 - Probe: If there was one thing you wished faculty and staff knew, did, or continued doing for students like you during the COVID-19 pandemic, what would it be?
2. Do you feel engaged with your courses and the activities? What does (or doesn't) your professor do that contributes to that?
 - Probe: What has been the most difficult adjustment? Can you explain the difficult adjustments you have experienced?

English 1A Focused Questions

Facilitator: We will now shift our focus to English 1A specifically...

3. Do you feel like the reading and writing skills you're learning about in English 1A connect to your life/goals?
 - Probe: Does your instructor share how these skills will be used in or connect to other parts of your life?

4. How does your instructor include activities/assignments/ readings that reflect you and your culture?
 - Probe: Are the books/ articles interesting? What else do you like to read?
5. Because we live in a diverse society, has your experience in English 1A reflected that diversity?
 - Probe: cultural diversity, language diversity, ethnic diversity, racial diversity, etc.
6. What has made you feel included in the class?
 - Probe: Tell us about a time you've felt included in the class
7. What's made you feel excluded?
 - Probe: Tell us about a time you've felt excluded in the class
 - Probe: What does (or doesn't) your professor do that contributes to that?
8. What makes you feel motivated, excited, empowered in your English 1A class?
 - Probe: What do you want faculty/staff to know in order to better support your success?

Rules and Guidelines of English 1A

Facilitator: Now we are going to ask you about the rules and guidelines in your English 1A class...

9. Do you feel like your instructors have a good balance of holding students responsible for doing the work while still being flexible?
 - Probe: How do you feel about how your work is graded? How does that affect your motivation, perseverance, etc.?

Conclusion

10. What keeps you motivated to continue on your educational path?
 - Probe: What makes it challenging to stay motivated in college?

Closing Comments

Now, we are close to the end. We have talked about many things. Let us take a moment to think through what might be most important when it comes to helping more students finish English 1A successfully. Let's go around and share any final thoughts you may have on this—maybe something we talked about, or something that just occurred to you.