STUDENTS' VOICES ON SUCCESS AT VENTURA COLLEGE

5/12/2014

An Adaptation of CCCSE and Student Success (Re)Defined

Chelsea Guillermo-Wann, Ph.D.

Research Analyst, Title V/HSI Velocidad Transfer Grant
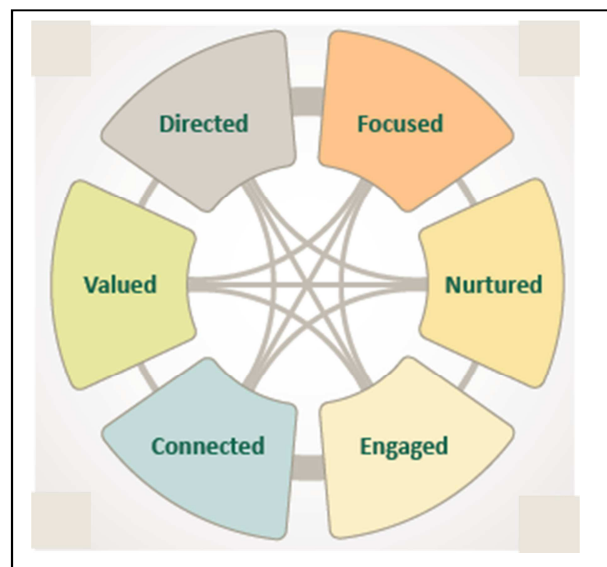
Ventura College

students' voices on success at ventura college

AN ADAPTATION OF CCCSE AND STUDENT SUCCESS (RE)DEFINED

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study of Ventura College (VC) students and student services personnel sought to understand perceptions of students' experiences at the college related to their success. The study had two components: one focused on students' matriculation experiences and the other on their curricular experiences. The twenty-seven student participants had taken at least one of twenty "barrier" courses critical for university transfer that had previously been identified as having high student enrollment and disproportionately low success rates for Latina/o students[i].

Results indicate that many students expect the community college experience to be a "stepping stone" to transfer to a four-year university, but that it could also be like a "trap." Findings also confirm those from a state-wide study by The RP Group, *Student Success (Re)Defined*; students shared examples of supports and barriers to their success with regard to being directed, focused, nurtured, engaged, connected, and valued[ii] at Ventura College. Several sub-themes emerged under the theme of being engaged, which included faculty organization, enthusiasm, pedagogy, challenge, and course material relevance to students' lives. Being nurtured was particularly salient for Latina/o students in relation to curricular success. In the matriculation process, students from all racial/ethnic groups talked about the difficulty of being directed with regard to learning steps to enrollment as well as identifying and

**Six Dimensions of Student Success
(The RP Group, 2013)**

committing to educational and career goals. This research project affirms the applicability of state-wide and national research on community college student success, and highlights ways in which faculty, staff, and administrators can purposefully impact student success at Ventura College.
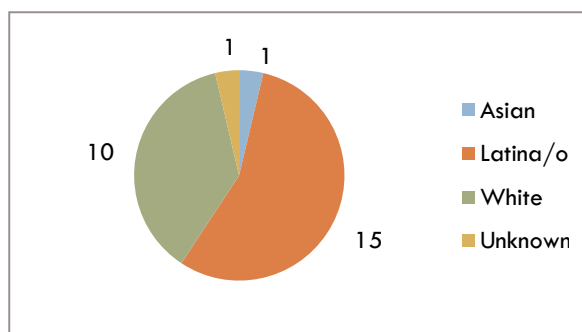
BACKGROUND

As a recipient of a federal Title V grant for individual Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), VC will receive approximately 2.9 million dollars from 2012-2017. *VC's Title V Velocidad project is designed to "scale-up transfer services, improve student academic success outcomes at barrier points, increase institutional effectiveness, and proactively work toward closing the differential in course success and transfer outcomes for Hispanic students."[iii]* This research project is part of grant efforts to understand students' experiences of the identified barrier points, and identify ways to help close the differential in success and transfer for Latina/o students.

Inquiry Methods

Focus groups and interviews were conducted with twenty-seven Ventura College students and eleven staff and counseling faculty from the student services division; interviews followed protocol modified from the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE)[iv]. Originally, the project intended to also include instructional faculty and deans. However, given that the curricular findings were very general and pertained to a variety of courses, it was decided to involve faculty and administration in future studies that will be tailored to specific disciplines. The student participants had to have taken at least one of the identified transfer barrier courses. Student participants included 15 women, 8 of whom were age 25 or older, 5 first generation to attend college, 3 parents, 1 veteran, 3 part-time students, 21 working students, 19 on financial aid, 7 re-entry students, and 6 who did not start at VC. Resulting interview data were analyzed inductively and then deductively, applying themes from The RP Group's study *Student Success (Re)Defined* for California Community Colleges. Tailored presentations were made to various constituents on campus identified by grant leadership.

Figure 1: Student Participants by Racial Group (*n* = 27)

Legend:
- Asian
- Latina/o
- White
- Unknown

Values shown: 1, 1, 10, 15

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, the results indicate that students experience barriers and supports to student success along the dimensions of being directed, focused, nurtured, engaged, connected, and valued on campus. Being and becoming directed through the matriculation process was critical, with arising need for collaborative efforts between student services and instructional areas to support students' goal identification and goal commitment. Important factors for student engagement in the classroom included faculty being organized, enthusiastic, using interactive pedagogy, challenging students with high expectations, and making coursework relevant to students' lives.

Figure 2: Six Dimensions of Student Success (Re)Defined (The RP Group, 2013)
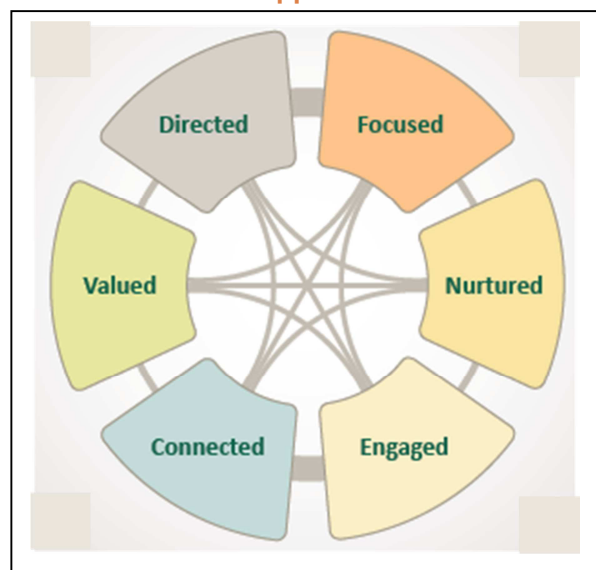
DIRECTED: Students have a goal and know how to achieve it

Students' expectations of VC bore out in their experiences of barriers and supports to being directed in college. Many students perceived the college to be both a "stepping stone" towards university transfer as well as a "trap" that is difficult to get out of on one's own. This was fairly uniform across racial groups and was articulated by a white male student, who said, "My perception of community college… has been that it's almost a stepping stone towards transferring to a university, but many get lost in that process. So in other words… it would almost be like sort of a trap, unless you can manage to get out of that trap and almost steer yourself by your own independent ways and be able to make it as far as going towards a university."

To that end, the issue of goal-identification and goal-commitment was a challenge for students across all racial groups as well. Students' career, transfer or associate's degree, and major choice were often discussed in juxtaposition to the immediate need of picking classes for a semester, often without being sure of what their goals were or how their classes might help them achieve such goals. Students perceived counselors as functioning in the role to help students make goals, but identified many steps they had to go through before they could see a counselor. Once they did, students felt the thirty minute appointments were inadequate to address goal-identification and that while Transfer Center and Career Center counselors were able to do more, the centers were understaffed.

Instructional faculty played a supportive role in students' goal-identification and goal-commitment; however, it was often portrayed as luck or chance. A transfer-bound Latina public relations major spoke of this (right). Given that community college students spend the majority of their time on campus in classrooms with faculty, faculty are uniquely positioned to help students in becoming "directed," if simply by recognizing and affirming students' abilities. Intentional efforts might help maximize the positive impact instructional faculty can have on students' as they explore possible goals with the guidance of a counselor.

> "Uh, I think it was one of my English teachers that I was taking. [S/he] really um, inspired me and made me feel good about different strengths that I had in that specific area of my education. And so I explored a little further into different majors, and that's how I found my major and finalized it – from a teacher that kinda gave me inspiration to try to look for that."

FOCUSED: Students stay on track, keeping their eyes on the prize

The notion of being focused is also described by The RP Group as "fostering students' motivation and helping them develop the skills they need to achieve their goals." This theme was more salient amongst women students regardless of racial group.

Barriers to being motivated and staying on track were often discussed in relation to being directed or lack thereof. A transfer-bound Latina student majoring in a STEM field said, "When I first – this is like probably five or six years ago – when I first came to [this college], I didn't really have guidance, I didn't really have anybody telling me, 'Ok, this is to help you reach your goal.' Um, I kinda was kinda lost, so that's probably why I dropped out of college, and then I started working for like four years, and then four years later I come back, and finally I had a goal. And it was all because like, me, I started digging deep into myself, like you know, 'This is not what I want to do forever' so that's why I came back to school." It's important to note that she attributes the outcome of stopping out to not having a goal, and re-entering the college because she had a goal to pursue; she was directed and focused, but unfortunately not due to her experiences at the college.

THE PURPOSE OF VENTURA COLLEGE'S TITLE V VELOCIDAD GRANT IS TO INCREASE VC'S CAPACITY TO GRADUATE AND TRANSFER HISPANIC STUDENTS.

GOAL 1: INCREASE # OF STUDENTS WHO TRANSFER TO 4-YEAR COLLEGES

GOAL 2: IMPROVE STUDENT SUCCESS RATES IN 20 IDENTIFIED HIGH RISK/TRANSFER BARRIER COURSES

GOAL 3: DECREASE SUCCESS AND ACHIEVEMENT GAPS BETWEEN HISPANIC STUDENTS AND THE VC AVERAGE

GOAL 4: MEET ALL RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO WASC STANDARDS FOR INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

On the other hand, an Asian American female student majoring in math talked about a math professor who helped her develop the skill of seeking help so that she could achieve her immediate goal of learning the course material. She said, "[My math professor] kind of made me think, 'Yeah, I would be stupid to not take advantage of the instructor for help, because like, I could either ask them a thirty-second-answer-question right now, or spend three hours over the weekend trying to puzzle out what [s/he] did in this one step.' It's like, you just have to say to yourself, 'Like you know what, it's ok not to know. It's ok not to know. It's ok to – it's ok to be ignorant because it's stupid when the source is right in front of you and you don't use it.' It's like, 'Being thirsty is ok. You can be thirsty. But if someone is handing you water, right now, while you're thirsty, drink the water.'" The simple realization that students are not alone in not knowing or understanding what is being taught seems to help remove barriers that prevent them for asking for help. This student had a goal, and was supported in learning how to achieve it by developing help-seeking behaviors, which helped her keep focused.

NURTURED: Students feel somebody wants and helps them succeed

This theme was most prominent amongst the Latina/o student participants, signaling that this may be more impactful for this group of students. While this may be a challenge for faculty as class sizes grow, there may be general ways to communicate to students that instructors care, and ways to avoid giving the opposite impression.

For example, a barrier to success was the absence of a nurturing learning environment. This was described by a white re-entry female student who is planning to get an Associate's Degree, but is uncertain about transferring, in part due to some negative experiences she has had at VC with faculty and staff. She shares, "I did have a … teacher … [s/he] was mean. People would ask questions … if you ask a question, especially of the teacher, the teacher should give you a respectful answer and answer your question and instead [s/he'd] be, 'Come on, you don't get that? Aren't you paying attention?' I mean, just rude and just outright blatantly, in front of the whole entire class, belittling and demeaning students and that was my first semester back after all this time and I was like, 'Oh, my gosh, this is horrible.'" A series of un-nurturing experiences lead this student to question whether or not returning to college was the right thing for her to do. On the positive side, this example is a relatively easy fix in terms of faculty communication with students in the classroom.

In contrast, students also shared many supportive examples of how they have felt nurtured at VC. A re-entry transfer-bound Latina student majoring in Political Science shared how she felt supported

by her English instructor in her early time of re-learning how to become a student. She states, "The instructor … listened to what someone else had to say…, would take that information, **validate** it, and reframe it in a way, 'It sounds like you're saying is….' So in reframing what they thought they heard this person express, they **validated** that student's idea…. So yes, … [the instructor] **validate**[**d**] however the student is able to communicate what they have to share and then kind of restructure it and reframe it to **validate**…to number one **validate** and number two, "Did I understand you correctly?" And then someone else…and then they would take that and reframe it in a way to ask maybe the other side of the discussion. OK, and then it would, it would just go back and forth, so I really appreciated that. I was like, "Oh, so that's how it's done." The issue of validation of Latina/o community college students in English classes has been well documented in higher education research by leading scholars such as Laura Rendón[v], and is shown here in modeling academic discourse for students so that they can learn how it can be done.

Another example of being nurtured by instructional faculty was depicted by a transfer-bound white female sociology major (right). Although this may be more feasible for full-time faculty, there are other ways faculty can help students get academic support such as connecting students to the Tutoring Center, the Math Center, and the Reading and Writing Center, and this can be communicated in a nurturing way. The important part here is that the student felt that faculty's willingness to help students learn "made [her] not afraid of math anymore" - a remarkable outcome attributed to feeling nurtured.

> "I was really nervous about taking math … [the instructor] was really good … [s/he] was available for office hours, [s/he] stayed after class and helped tutor a lot of students. [S/he] really was dedicated in helping everyone pass that class and I ended up getting an A and doing really well, so *it made me not afraid of math anymore.*"

ENGAGED: Students actively participate in class and extra-curricular activities

Student examples of barriers and supports to their engagement were the most prominent theme in the data, likely due to the use of research tools focused on student engagement. In addition, this theme was more prominent amongst Latina/o students than white students, suggesting that these may be high-impact practices for increasing our Latina/o student success at VC. When asked about what their best teachers do that makes them feel like they were learning, or not learning, student participants spoke to several sub-themes from the Student Success (Re)Defined Study, the most prominent being pedagogy, challenge, and relevance. Two additional sub-themes emerged: faculty organization, and faculty enthusiasm. This section will discuss sub-themes starting with those that were mentioned most frequently; data focus more on in-class engagement due to the nature of the question posed to the participants.

Pedagogy and Andragogy

Not surprisingly, how teachers teach can have a substantial impact on student learning. This sub-theme is about "creating opportunities for open dialogue and interaction in class" (The PR Group, 2013), and was the most prominent sub-theme mentioned when students talked about their best teachers and what helped them feel like they were learning. Barriers and supports to learning through pedagogy and andragogy were exemplified by two students. First, a transfer-bound white female said, "Sometimes … [faculty] think you know it so well when they teach it and they don't teach it, they just talk about it …they just kind of assume that you know it as well as they do and you just don't…." In contrast, an example of engaging pedagogy was offered by a transfer-bound Latina (below). Acknowledging and teaching to different learning styles is

> "I appreciated all the different attempts and all the various ways that [my math instructor] tried to make sure that it was sinking in, so [s/he] would engage the class, we would have break-out groups, so each group would work on [a problem] and then [s/he] would facilitate discussion, [s/he] would even ask us to come up to the board, take a marker, wrote what you had, so those kinds of things."

important, including direct instruction through lecture, as several students also said they like taking notes during lecture and learn that way as well, but the lecture needs to be engaging through the other sub-themes in this section on student engagement.

Faculty Organization

This emergent sub-theme of student engagement is about students' perceptions that instructors' level of organization or lack thereof, contributes to or hinders their academic success. Barriers and supports to student success regarding course organization were the second most frequently mentioned sub-theme pertaining to student engagement. It is a bit troubling to see it arise in the data because it is perhaps one of the most foundational aspects to teaching. The fact that this was mentioned in response to questions about what helps or hinders student learning suggests that course organization may not be normative on campus. That is, for students to notice and appreciate it there has to be an absence of it as well. Students talked about overall course structure as well as organization in class sessions and assignments.

An example of lack of organization as barrier was detailed by a transfer-bound white female student majoring in psychology. In recounting a general education science course, she said, "[The] lecture … appears disorganized and it's really hard to follow. A lot of times [the instructor] adds stuff … that aren't [sic] in the book and [will] kind of go off on these tangents and you have no idea if [s/he's] going to test you on it or not or if it's important…. We have to write discussions on the experiments that we did and a lot of times, even in the lab there's nothing that outlines what's supposed to be in the discussion or what we're supposed to talk about or what parts of our results we're supposed to discuss, what [the instructor] wants to see from this, and then [the instructor] marks you down and it's like, "This isn't what I wanted." It's like, "Well, you didn't tell us what you wanted first of all," and when [they do] … this just happened last week ... [it was] three hours before it's due." In contrast, a white male student in a STEM field remarked about the importance of syllabi (right). This sub-theme is similar to the theme Directed, in that students need a clear goal and pathway to follow in a specific course, rather than for educational and career goals. Faculty providing an organized course and class sessions is a simple way to support student success.

> "It really comes down to how organized your teacher is the first day. A good syllabus is awesome. It's a good first impression of how your teacher is aoina to be."

Challenge

The sub-theme of Challenge is about faculty "challenging learners to do the best they could, and having high expectations" (The PR Group, 2013); it was the third most frequently discussed factor under student engagement. It is succinctly demonstrated by a transfer-bound Latino student who said he liked, "Having the teacher challenge us, 'Ok, that would be the right answer, but there's a better answer.'" This both affirms a student for participating in class, and pushes them to think more deeply about the subject.

Relevance

This sub-theme of student engagement is about "delivering relevant coursework with real-world, practical applications" (The RP Group, 2013), and was the fourth most frequently mentioned factor when students talked about feeling engaged in their own learning. Students identified this as an effective component of teaching, and it was described well by a transfer-bound Latino student (right). An example of this came from a transfer-bound white female student who said of her history teacher, "[S/he] gives good examples and helps us connect things better. Like when you're talking the Stamp Act, [s/he] connected to how all I guess cigarette packets have to have a sticker on it to show that the taxes were paid on it or something. So [s/he] just gives us a lot of opportunities to help us connect and [s/he] gives us real-world examples … it's interesting. [S/he] makes it…I don't know, [s/he's] able to connect it and give it personality and [s/he's] telling more of a story than just giving us facts." This was a class in which there was a substantial amount of lecture, but the way the instructor made the information relevant to the present day engaged the student.

Faculty Enthusiasm and Personality

Students spoke about the importance of teachers being enthusiastic about their subject, and having some sort of personality that helps engage students in listening and learning. It is again a simple quality that can have direct impact on student engagement. A white female gave an example of a barrier stating, "Two instructors I had last semester that made it difficult. One of them … [was] just very monotone, very drawn out, no… there's nothing of the way that he taught that made it retainable, you know." On the other hand, a transfer-bound white male reflected, "I feel if a teacher really loves his subject, he'll be really enthusiastic and that spreads to the class and it helps you learn as well, you get more into the subject and what's going on, you pay more attention…. So… and they have to have a personality, just any personality works (everyone laughing). Pretty much any personality works." Again, students directly associated faculty enthusiasm and personality to helping them engage so that they can learn.

> "Everything that they discuss and everything that they teach us, they can put in terms of things today. You know, it's not just like bookwork like read a bunch of big words kind of deal, learn this, memorize it. It's like, 'Hey, this is what it is and also this is how it applies in real life. Look, these are examples of it and you do this every day, you don't even know it,' and things like that and they can take time to explain to me."
> — Transfer-bound Latino

CONNECTED: Students feel like they are part of the college community

Students' sense of belonging is a critical factor in the research on student retention, particularly for underrepresented racial groups, and is impacted by the campus climate for diversity[vi]. Students' stories in this project suggest that many students did not feel connected to the campus unless they engaged themselves in extracurricular activities, or were connected to existing support structures through their major. **Participants expressed a strong desire for greater connection and belonging to the campus, particularly around their major field of study,** and some staff were keenly aware that making personal connections with staff and faculty as well as with peers is a key component in students' success.

Becoming connected to the college community was mentioned more frequently amongst white students than Latina/os, so it would be interesting to see if Latina/s feel more connected and a greater sense of belonging

compared to other racial groups at this Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). One transfer-bound Latino majoring in Sociology said one way to make VC better would be "to instill some sort of belonging here I guess, but not only that, but making that because if you feel belonging, you want to continue to achieve …." When asked if he felt that sense of belonging at VC, he responded, "I mean, I wouldn't call it a belonging, I'd more call is [sic] like a channel, I'm just going through it, no attachment." Importantly, this student directly associates belonging with motivation to achieve, or focus. A white male majoring in a STEM field demonstrated awareness that students in other majors do not have the same structure of opportunity for connection. He said, "Like MESA is great, you know. You meet you so many people, all these people in your major and everything, but there's not really anything like that for the humanities or any other … majors…. My whole point about MESA was the resources…. It's awesome, you have Whiteboards in there, you've got academic advisors in there, you've got computers to use in there. You have friends in there who are (laughing) - it goes without saying." A Latina STEM major chimed in, "Texbooks," to which he responded, "Textbooks, other kids, smart kids that understand calculus." Students stressed the importance of having a space and resources that were more permanent than clubs, and more accessible on a regular basis where peer-to-peer learning and interaction around common fields of study.

VALUED: Students' skills, talents, abilities and experiences are recognized; they have opportunities to contribute on campus and feel their contributions are appreciated

Students shared many examples of how they have felt valued, rather than de-valued, many of which relate to other dimensions of success. This is seen in the example about feeling connected to the campus community when learning from peers in MESA (Connected). Most examples that students shared were about how they were selected to tutor other students, formally or informally, which made them feel valued and often enhanced their own learning.

> "In … [math] class I started realizing, 'Wow, I'm good at this.' And what [the instructor] did, is [s/he] sort of assigned me a couple of students in the class to try to like tutor them because they were having trouble – I mean we all were having trouble… but we worked together and I realized I started getting better at understanding problems that way."

An example of an informal way students can be valued was discussed by an Asian American re-entry female student who has decided to major in math, despite having felt she was never good at it until taking courses at VC (left). Her self-confidence was boosted as was her learning simply by the instructor recognizing her abilities and giving her an opportunity to contribute in a way she felt was appreciated.

Another student spoke of how becoming a Supplemental Instruction (S.I.) tutor has helped her succeed at VC. A transfer-bound Latina reflected, "being an S.I. [tutor] really really helped me as far as also learning to engage, learning to communicate, pass my study skills on to someone else, the whole modeling, and then live what I preach or whatever that little expression is." Such informal and formal opportunities value students and help them and other students succeed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the grant focus on increasing capacity to graduate and transfer Latina/o students, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, SELF-ASSESSMENT THORUGH ACTION RESEARCH, AND COLABORATION BETWEEN FACULTY, STAFF AND ADMINISTRATION MAY BE THE MOST VALUEABLE INVESTMENT IN THE COLLEGE'S ASSETS. It is through the people who make the college what it is that the institution can directly transform students' learning environment. Accordingly, there are also opportunities for administration to consider for future planning cycles.

This adaptation of the CCCSE and Student Success Re(Defined) emphasizes that state and national studies are relevant to VC and our students. Faculty, staff, and administration may confidently implement suggestions from such research. Conversely, investment in more tailored studies and action research at VC may better uncover unique problems and actionable solutions at the local level, and must include instructional faculty when focusing on specific transfer barrier courses for Latina/o students.

Specific recommendations for each of the Student Success (Re) Defined themes include:

DIRECTED

- Collaboration between student services and instructional divisions to support student goal-identification and goal-commitment

- Clarification, simplification, and communication of the matriculation steps to all incoming students once changes are made for SSSP

FOCUSED

- Action research for faculty self-assessment and professional development

- Address in hiring process for instructional faculty

- Ensure SSSP educational goals and plans are meaningful for students

- Support faculty in creating learning environments focused on deep learning rather than competition and performance – tied to greater likelihood of students seeking academic help

NURTURED

- Address in hiring process for instructional faculty

- As class size increases to meet FTE, provide instructional faculty with professional development and action-research opportunities for self-assessment

- Develop relationships with students as much as possible around their learning

- Engage students in office hours and other activities that expresses an interest in their success

ENGAGED

- Action research for faculty self-assessment and professional development

- Address in hiring process for instructional faculty

- Use a variety of pedagogical approaches

- Use a variety of classroom assessment techniques

- Present an organized course in the syllabus; use syllabi review tools from USC's Center for Urban Education (CUE) as part of the action-research component of the Velocidad grant

- Use lesson planning to create organized and engaging class sessions; ensure material covered is clearly communicated

- Communicate high expectations and challenge students in their learning

- Link course material to real-life so that it becomes relevant for students

- Let your love for your subject and teaching show – rekindle it frequently

CONNECTED

- Action research for faculty self-assessment and professional development

- Address in hiring process for instructional faculty

- Create ways to socially connect students to each other through their disciplines

- Research and identify scalable ways to connect students to faculty and staff, e.g. learning communities

- Create student cohorts in college orientation, general education, and major sequences

- Create study groups for students in class to be an informal support to each other

- Use interactive pedagogy to increase peer-to-peer learning

VALUED

- Action research for faculty self-assessment and professional development

- Address in hiring process for instructional faculty

- Continue recognition ceremonies, e.g. Dean's list, scholarship awards, transfer celebrations

- Continue to fund on-campus work opportunities, e.g. Supplemental Instruction

- Identify ways that VC can create more formal opportunities to recognize student talent, for students to contribute to the college, and to recognize students' contributions

NOTES

[i] http://www.venturacollege.edu/faculty_staff/title_v/highrisk_barriercourses.shtml

[ii] The RP Group. (2013). *Using student voices to redefine support: What community college students say institutions, instructors and others can do to help them succeed.* Student Success (Re)Defined.

[iii] www.venturacollege.edu /faculty_staff/title_v/index.shtml

[iv] http://www.ccsse.org/center/initiatives/iss/focusgrouptoolkit.cfm

[v] Rendón, L.I. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education, 19*(1), 33-51. Rendón, L.I. (2002). C*ommunity college Puente: A validating model of education. Educational Policy, 16*(4), 642-666.

[vi] Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino college students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education, 70*(4), 324-345. See also Hurtado, S., Alvarez, C. L., Guillermo-Wann, C., Cuellar, M., & Arellano, L. (2012). A model for diverse learning environments. In *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 41-122). Springer Netherlands.