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What's in a Name? The Challenge and Utility of Defining Promising and High-Impact Practices

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Abstract

This chapter reviews multiple complementary and divergent descriptions of practices that have been identified as holding particular promise for high impact on college student success and offers a possible map of practices to illustrate key features and relationships.

In this chapter, we seek to lay groundwork for the remainder of the volume with what should be a straightforward task but in the end was among the more difficult aspects of compiling this volume: identifying and describing high-impact and promising practices. Rather than an exhaustive accounting of the ways practices have been grouped and defined (see Hatch, Chapter 2, for an abbreviated history), we frame our descriptions around what we see as key features that serve to both distinguish and connect practices and offer a map to illustrate these key features and relationships. In describing practices, we bring attention to what we see to be issues and considerations of complementary and divergent definitions for practice, research, and policy.

Issues/Limitations in Defining Programs and Practices

Defining high-impact practices is challenging because, ultimately, labels can reveal as much as they conceal about what goes into programs and practices (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016) and so we might do well to consider their impactful mechanisms instead (Karp, Chapter 3). The term *high impact* conveys the notion of a known gold standard of best practices when in fact what we call our best may “actually turn out to be none too good or not as good as we can do” (Kay McClenney, personal communication, June, 2010). Additionally, for practitioners and researchers alike, the term *high-impact practices* may inadvertently limit continued exploration of transformative educational practice or how key mechanisms of promising practices can be broadly integrated throughout college (Karp, Chapter 3).

For instance, in conversations with instructional administrators, we learned that when implementing such promising practices, focus is typically given to tweaking elements of the practice to address local circumstances. This, in turn, may impede consideration of other possibilities beyond what the label implies and toward key mechanisms that might be broadly integrated throughout the college (Karp, Chapter 3). One example of how practices might be combined outside of programmatic labels is the emerging concept of guided pathways (Jenkins & Cho, 2013) in which multiple resources are brought to bear around a more deliberate and straightforward path to a credential or transfer instead of an overwhelming buffet of options and optional resources. Nonetheless, no matter how practices are designed, naming the ways particular college environments are created is unavoidable because labeling is fundamental to human nature and daily practice. We need working definitions at least as reference points.

Key Dimensions of High-Impact and Promising Practices

In broad terms, Levin, Cox, Cerven, and Haberler (2010) define educational practices at community colleges as “a specific form or way of organizing the educational experiences of individual students and college employees” (p. 35) and a *promising* instructional program as “one that has demonstrably improved student learning and has closed the achievement gap, as measured by course pass rates, certificate or degree attainment rates, and so forth” (p. 55). In Table 1.1, we bring together and describe practices and programs identified as “high impact” and/or “promising” by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC & U) or the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), or both (CCCSE, 2012; Kuh, 2008). We include other practices that have been shown to be positively related to student outcomes—for instance, bridge programs and mentoring (Crisp, 2010; Mitchell, Alozie, & Wathington, 2015)—that are conceptually related to named high-impact practices but not included on some lists. Both AAC & U and CCCSE’s lists of programs and practices have shaped much of the recent conversation on student success programs and were therefore important to consider. Although not all of the practices identified by AAC & U may seem immediately relevant to a community college context (for instance, undergraduate research), we feel there may be worth in exploring their potential role in the community college sector as they are premised on means to foster college student success beyond measures of access, persistence, and completion—necessary but not sufficient—to “twenty-first-century metrics for student success” including “the knowledge, capabilities, and personal qualities . . . that will enable them to both thrive and contribute in a fast-changing economy and in turbulent, highly demanding global, societal, and often personal contexts” (Schneider, 2008, p. 2). These qualities are certainly equally important for community college students.

In developing practice descriptions (particularly for programmatic interventions) and in identifying overlap and relationships between practices, we considered the following key features and dimensions: (a) purposes/goals, (b) activities and program components/structure, (c) timing/duration, (d) participants and role of institutional agents, (e) relevant contextual conditions, and (f) expected outcomes.

Purposes/Goals. According to Melguizo, Kienzl, and Kosiewicz (2013), the purpose of programs might be categorized as either academic preparation or providing information to students. For example, accelerated remediation, bridge programs, and supplemental instruction are practices most often designed to support students' academic preparation. At the same time, it is not uncommon for practices to be designed with multiple and/or overlapping purposes and goals. For instance, the purposes or goals of a learning community may include academic preparation and providing various forms of information to support students' transition to college.

Activities and Program Components/Structure. The typology of programmatic student success interventions proposed by Hatch and Bohlig (2016) suggests that "what distinguishes programs is not so much differences in their main purpose, but differences in the curricular and programmatic elements used to enact those purposes" (p. 22). For example, learning communities receive a lot of attention for their potential impact and typologies have been created to distinguish nuances among them. Yet, aside from their fundamental characteristic of linked courses, learning communities—at least in the community college setting—often share many of the same curricular features of other first-year seminars and student success courses. Similarly, the emerging trend of corequisite remediation in community colleges often links college-level courses with supplementary coursework or integrates tutoring and supplemental instruction. Arguably, this model is not unlike the design of learning communities more broadly.

Timing/Duration. It is notable that many recommended practices are typically provided as early college experiences. CCCSE (2012) characterized several practices as geared toward "planning" and "initiating" for success (p. 8), while recognizing that meaningful improvements to student outcomes require effective practices that are provided throughout students' experiences in college (Bailey & Smith Jaggars, 2015). We concur that several of the practices that prototypically happen early on (e.g., academic planning and goal setting) should be an ongoing process throughout students' experiences. Other practices such as early alert systems, tutoring, class attendance, and service learning have been developed to "sustain success" (CCCSE, 2012, p. 8). Additionally, a few practices such as research and capstone projects naturally occur later in a student's college experience. Among all practices discussed in this issue, the duration varies widely across instances and institutions according to local circumstances.

Participants and Role of Institutional Agents. Naturally, students are the primary participants of interest in programs and practices. Many

practices, such as learning communities and orientation, are often specifically designed for targeted groups of students who are thought to require higher levels of support (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). Various practices often target certain groups of students including those from historically underrepresented and marginalized groups (Finley & McNair, 2013), those who place into developmental coursework, or students who enroll in targeted disciplines such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), to name just a few.

Levin and colleagues (2010) assert that “program practices derive more from people than they do from policies, and promising practices derive especially from the adaptability of those involved with the program, including faculty members, staff members, and administrators” (p. 54). As such, we consider institutional agents to be an important feature in distinguishing and describing promising practices. Whereas some practices may, and often do, rely on a relatively well-defined team of staff, faculty, and administrators (in the case of orientation and first-year seminars, for instance), other practices, such as broad curricular features or practices we categorize as interventions, junctures, policies, and procedures, are typically decentralized and managed by faculty, staff, and administrators in the course of their regular work.

Relevant Contextual Conditions. Young and Keup (Chapter 5) emphasize the importance of understanding the features of the educational environment that lead to improved educational outcomes for particular groups of students. Astin (1993) notes that, “in its broadest sense, the environment encompasses everything that happens to a student during the course of an educational program that might conceivably influence the outcomes under consideration. This includes not only the programs, personnel, curricula, teaching practices, and facilities that we consider to be part of any educational program but also the social and institutional climate in which the program operates” (p. 81). Unfortunately, the context or environment surrounding practices is too often not taken into consideration when adopting and adapting practices across contexts. Similarly, current research too often relies on single-institutions studies that limit the comparability of findings across studies (Crisp & Taggart, 2013). Although not well studied or documented, additional contextual conditions such as resources, concurrent practices/programs, connections with the local community, administrative support, and campus culture, among others may perhaps serve to meaningfully characterize practices on community college campuses (Haberler & Levin, 2014).

Expected Outcomes. As previously mentioned, AAC & U High-Impact Practices, including undergraduate research, common intellectual experiences, and collaborative assignments, are largely centered around and designed to promote student engagement and learning outcomes. In contrast, CCCSE promising practices are predominantly focused on academic student success outcomes (both intermediary and longitudinal).

For instance, interventions and policies, such as regular class attendance and early alert and intervention, are commonly designed to promote short-term academic outcomes such as within-term retention and class completion whereas other practices, such as goal setting and planning and first-year seminars, may be more focused toward longer-term outcomes (e.g., year-to-year retention and degree completion).

Describing and Mapping High-Impact and Promising Practices

We offer readers Figure 1 as one way to map recognized practices in terms of at least some of the five features just described. We do not necessarily offer this map as a conceptual framework but rather as a *heuristic* map—a visual tool for exploring a wide variety of practices and how their key features or dimensions may distinguish or connect them to each other. The vertical axis in Figure 1.1 represents how practices may be more or less “curricular” in nature and thus reflects an important aspect of a program’s purposes and activities. We propose five rough categories of practices along this continuum that we tentatively call (a) programmatic interventions, (b) broad curricular features, (c) support services and ancillary instruction, (d) interventions and junctures, and (e) policies and procedures. In turn, Table 1.1 organizes our descriptions around these five groupings. The horizontal axis in Figure 1.1 reflects the timing/duration of practices, with practices mapped roughly to where they ideally, typically, or prototypically occur. Other features and dimensions of high-impact practices are not mapped but are noted in our descriptions.

Although not exhaustive, and certainly not meant to be mutually exclusive, this list of what may be called *promising* or—pending more

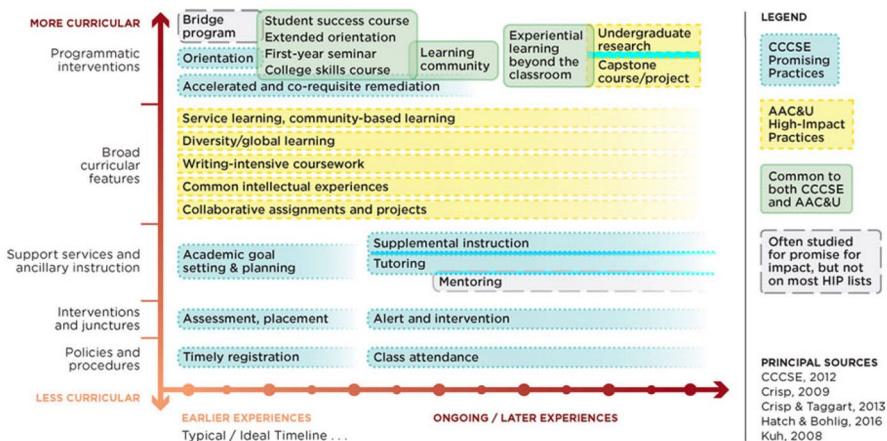


Figure 1. Heuristic Map of Proposed Promising and High-Impact Practices

Table 1. Descriptions of High-Impact and Promising Practices

<i>Programs and Practices</i>	<i>Description</i>
Programmatic Interventions	
First-Year Seminars/Student Success Courses*,†	Designed to provide skills, knowledge, and support networks for successful college-going. Curriculum and structure vary but may include campus information, noncognitive skills, career exploration, and goal setting, among many other learning outcomes. Often tailored for students new to college or other at-risk populations (e.g., first-generation and developmental).
Learning Communities*,†	Designed to engage students in multiple ways and establish academic and social networks. Involves the coenrollment of a cohort of students into multiple courses that are integrated or linked. May include an integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum. The curriculum may share similarities with first-year seminars and student success courses. May or may not target particular groups of students.
Orientation†	Curriculum varies in length and content ranging from a single meeting for students new to an institution to a full-length credit-bearing course substantively equivalent to first-year seminars and student success courses.
Bridge Programs	Accelerated learning opportunities provided to students the summer prior to entering college. Use a variety of tutoring, workshops, and classroom instruction, including college skills and knowledge akin to orientation, first-year seminars, and student success courses.
Accelerated and Corequisite Remediation†	Policies and courses designed to move underprepared students into college-level math or English in an accelerated time frame and/or support these students to successfully complete these gateway courses. Formats vary from placement test preparation, self-paced modules, bundled developmental courses, developmental courses paired with college-level courses, or ancillary instruction.
Experiential Learning Beyond the Classroom (Including Internships)*, †	Experiential learning designed to provide students with practical work experiences.
Undergraduate Research*	Designed to engage students in the process of systematic empirical investigation. Most commonly used in science disciplines. In community colleges, increasingly offered in collaboration with 4-year universities.
Capstone Courses/Projects*	Summative experience required toward the end of an academic program that requires students to synthesize and apply what they have learned. May include a paper, portfolio, exhibit, or other assignment.

(Continued)

Table 1.1 Continued

<i>Programs and Practices</i>	<i>Description</i>
Broad Curricular Features	
Service Learning, Community-Based Learning*	Field-based experiential learning strategy that involves community service. Typically part of a formal course. Aimed at promoting self-reflection and civic engagement.
Diversity/Global Learning*	Class or program designed to assist students in exploring world-views, perspectives, and cultures different from their own.
Writing-Intensive Coursework*	Coursework that emphasizes writing assignments/projects across the curriculum. Students write for various audiences in different disciplines.
Common Intellectual Experiences*	Shared curricular and cocurricular options for students that include participation in a set of required common courses or organized general education program. May center on broad themes, such as technology.
Collaborative Assignments and Projects*	Learning approach that teaches students to work together to solve problems and listen and learn from others. May involve activities, such as study groups, cooperative assignments, or team-based learning activities.
Support Services and Ancillary Instruction	
Goal Setting and Planning†	Advising experiences that guide students in setting academic goals and appropriate program plans, optimally in light of work, family, and other demands.
Supplemental Instruction†	A form of tutoring that involves a trained assistant (often a former student who successfully completed the course) providing academic support.
Tutoring†	Participation in required or voluntary tutoring services, as recipients and/or providers.
Mentoring‡	Students engage in relationships with mentors on and off-campus that provide various types of support, including academic and subject knowledge support, psychological and emotional support, degree and career support, and the presence of a role model.
Interventions and Junctures	
Assessment, Placement†	Placement preparation and exams to ascertain appropriate level of coursework.
Early Alert and Intervention†	Active or passive academic warning systems to identify students who need early support.
Policies and Procedures	
Timely Registration†	Requiring or encouraging students to enroll in courses prior to the first class meeting.
Class Attendance†	Attendance policies that encourage students to attend classes on a regular basis throughout the term.

* High-Impact Educational Practice identified by AAC & U.

† Promising Practice identified by CCCSE.

‡ Forms of mentoring support proposed by Crisp.

§ Sources: Bers & Younger, 2014; CCCSE, 2012; Cho & Karp, 2013; Crisp, 2009; Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Hatch & Bohlig, 2016; Jaggars, Hodara, Cho, & Xu, 2014; Karp, Raufman, Efthimiou, & Ritze, 2015; Kuh, 2008; Melguizo, Kienzl, & Kosiewicz, 2013; Mitchell, Alozie, & Wathington, 2015; Taggart & Crisp, 2011; Weiss et al., 2014.

evidence in our view—*high-impact practices*, we hope these definitions offer for practitioners in particular an expansive view of practices to potentially adopt, adapt, and assess according to local needs. Instead of a list of distinct practices, we would offer that the idea of *high-impact practices* is an invitation to continue working to identify and verify which practices are indeed the best to which we can aspire and actually implement given practical limitations. Similarly, for researchers, the term *high-impact practices* proposes a hypothesis to be tested, a call to gather evidence to verify the claim of impact and to explore the experience of individuals and institutions in pursuing them.

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