Dispatches from Community Colleges Transforming Remediation

Because students have the capacity to succeed in challenging courses and we have the capacity to support them.

Corequisite Models Yield Gains Across Student GPAs

By Leslie Henson and Katie Hern

New research from the Multiple Measures Assessment Project (MMAP) shows that students in corequisite models of transfer-level English and math have higher completion rates than students who start in either remedial prerequisites or standard transfer-level courses.

MMAP researchers examined data from thirteen colleges that offered English composition with corequisite support (n=4,332), five that offered statistics with support (n=1,888), and one that offered transfer-level B-STEM math with support (n=241). To understand the impact of corequisite models on different student groups, they disaggregated the data according to the high, middle, and low GPA ranges from the statewide default placement rules.

(continued on page 1)
In statistics and business/STEM math, students in corequisite models had higher success rates across all GPA groups than students taking standard transfer-level courses (Figures 1 & 2).

In English, students with high- and mid-range high school GPAs saw substantial gains from enrolling in a corequisite, compared to a standard college English class or a remedial prerequisite. Among students with the lowest GPAs (below 1.9), enrolling directly in the transfer-level made them much more likely to complete than enrolling in a remedial course, but corequisite models produced only a slight gain compared to a standard college English class (Figure 3).

The results indicate that while corequisite support is producing dramatic gains in completion, particularly when compared to remedial prerequisite courses, further inquiry is needed to understand the challenges and needs of students coming in with GPAs below 1.9.

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### Corequisite Models Yield Gains Across Student GPAs

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### Completion of Transferable Business-STEM Math

![Bar Chart](Figure 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GPA ≤ 2.6 and no precalculus</th>
<th>GPA ≥ 2.6 &amp; enrolled in precalculus</th>
<th>GPA ≥ 3.4 or ≥ 2.6 &amp; enrolled in calculus</th>
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<td>34%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
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<td>28%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Analysis by the Multiple Measures Assessment Project**

Statewide Data from 2007-2014
Corequisite Data from Pre-Calc & Business Calc F’2016-F’2018 (N=241)

### Completion of Transferable English Composition

![Bar Chart](Figure 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GPA &lt; 1.9</th>
<th>GPA 1.9 - 2.59</th>
<th>GPA ≥ 2.6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>75%</td>
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**Analysis by the Multiple Measures Assessment Project**

Statewide Data from 2007-2014
Corequisite Data from F’2016-F’2018 (N=4,332)

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"The hard questions are about how to teach the content, how to facilitate the groups, how to tell if the students are learning. We are trying to let the students do the heavy lifting in class, not us."

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A Community of Teachers
By Rachel Polakoski and Hal Huntsman

Cuyamaca College
When Terrie Nichols first began teaching in Cuyamaca’s accelerated statistics pathway, it wasn’t easy. “This style of teaching was new to me,” she says. “I had to work through many face-plants alone.”

So in 2016, when the college eliminated most traditional remedial courses and began allowing students to enroll in transfer-level courses with corequisite support, Nichols helped create a community of practice for faculty. “I knew that instructors making this paradigm shift would need ‘group therapy,’” she says.

The community of practice is grounded in a recognition that teachers, like students, need support to take risks and grow, and people to turn to when things get tough. Faculty meet every other Friday for two hours, and in addition to the group meetings, a mentoring system pairs new corequisite faculty with veterans with whom they can communicate about their teaching.

Meetings usually start with a “whip-around” where teachers share their progress in the course and any problems they are having. Then they work together on lesson plans, create exams, share strategies for collaborative learning, and discuss key course concepts and common student misconceptions.

“Questions about content are the easy ones,” says Shelly Ruderman, an early participant in the statistics community of practice who became the group’s facilitator in spring 2019. “We can clarify that in just a few minutes. The hard questions are about how to teach the content, how to facilitate the groups, how to tell if the students are learning. We are trying to let the students do the heavy lifting in class, not us.”

One of Nichols’ favorite memories was when an instructor brought the story of a “disruptive student” to the community. “We spent 4-5 weeks talking about students and sharing our own experiences,” Nichols recalls. The teacher stopped focusing on what her students can’t, won’t, or don’t do and, says Nichols, “realized she has a role in how the student is interacting in the classroom. It is our responsibility to bring the student back into the classroom community.”

One important aspect of the program is treating part-time and full-time faculty the same. There is an understanding among both full- and part-time faculty that if you teach a corequisite course, you will be required, and paid, to participate in the community of practice. “Part-time teachers feel valued,” says Nichols. “We know this because they are prioritizing assignments at Cuyamaca each semester over other colleges, even though pay per unit is lower at Cuyamaca than at other colleges in the area.”

As a result of this work, 57% of students entering Cuyamaca in fall 2016 completed transfer-level math within one year, a 19 point increase over the previous year and the second-highest rate in the California community college system.

“We are a team together, supporting each other to help our students,” says Ruderman. “We are sharing and open. No one is hiding. We talk about our successes and the failures in class. We collaborate, letting everyone have a say, because our goal is to improve our materials and our teaching practice.”

Starting a Community of Practice on Your Campus
1. Secure funding to pay instructors. Consider using Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) funds and other sources of special funding.

2. Find a time to meet that works for everyone. Set the expectation early that faculty teaching corequisite courses will participate in weekly/biweekly meetings. Pick a time that works for everyone’s schedule, even if that means 4-6pm on Fridays.

3. Identify a facilitator. The facilitator should be teaching in the corequisite class. They are the go-to person to create agendas, guide discussions, and complete necessary paperwork. Consider providing an additional stipend to the facilitator.

4. Meet a few times before the semester starts. Get together over the summer and/or during professional development week before school starts. Plan out the first few lessons. Come up with activities to establish norms in the classroom during the first few weeks. Make sure syllabi and grading are comparable among professors. Give a pep talk. Everyone’s nervous, but we are in this together!

5. Meet every week for the first few weeks. Chat about the lessons, student issues, and faculty morale. What worked? What hasn’t worked? What do you need to change? You might taper down to biweekly meetings once everyone feels more comfortable in the classroom.

6. Create a supportive community. Teaching in these new corequisite classes can be challenging. Provide a safe space for all faculty to share their successes and failures. This may mean that full-time tenured faculty seek advice for something that didn’t go well to open the door for part-time faculty to feel comfortable doing the same.
Remedial Math Classes Eliminated

By Hal Huntsman

Reedley College

This year, in between the fall and spring semesters, the main campus of Reedley College did something that no other California community college had done: they eliminated all remedial math courses.

In fall 2018, remedial courses constituted the majority of the math offered at this Central Valley college southeast of Fresno. There were 33 sections of traditional remedial courses on the schedule, and students were assigned to these classes based on a standardized placement test. Only about 20% of students were allowed to enroll directly in “transfer-level courses” -- that is, courses that count toward a bachelor’s degree.

This spring, there were 0 sections of remedial math on the main campus, and all students began directly in a transfer-level math course required for their intended major. Students pursuing business or STEM fields took college algebra or trigonometry. Future educators took math for elementary school teachers, and just about everyone else took statistics or the liberal arts math course, contemporary mathematics. The college also jettisoned the placement test and began using students’ high school grades to determine whether they should receive additional concurrent support.

The changes were sparked by AB 705, a new law requiring the use of high school grades for placement and restricting colleges from requiring students to take remedial classes. It was also motivated by a recognition among Reedley faculty that students weren’t faring well under the old system. Among students taking math for the first time in 2016-17, the Public Policy Institute of California found that just 21% of Reedley students completed a transferable course within a year, a rate far lower than at colleges that had already removed barriers to transfer-level courses.

“Even though I had my doubts about what the legislature was asking us to do,” says math chair Ron Reimer, “it was clear that more students would complete transfer-level math if allowed to enroll directly into transfer-level courses. We decided to move forward as fast as we could.”

Reedley more than doubled the number of sections offered in statistics, college algebra, trigonometry, and math for elementary school teachers. They also offered four full sections of contemporary math, which in the past did not enroll enough students to fill a single section.

The college has also developed tailored support for several of these classes. In statistics, for example, the standard course is four units, but students with a high school GPA below 2.3 take a five-unit version with extra time for collaborative activities and just-in-time review of foundational math concepts and skills. For college algebra, trigonometry, and math for elementary school teachers, students are required to receive two hours of math center tutoring per week if they had a GPA below 2.6 and did not take precalculus in high school. The college has expanded its tutoring resources, with drop-in and scheduled sessions in the math center, peer tutors embedded within certain classes, and supplemental instruction groups led by part-time faculty and advanced students.

“It was clear that more students would complete transfer-level math if allowed to enroll directly into transfer-level courses. We decided to move forward as fast as we could.”
Jim Gilmore, long-time Reedley math faculty, was initially skeptical of accelerating students’ progress into transfer-level courses. “There’s no way that’s going to work,” he recalls thinking. But after attending a California Acceleration Project event in 2014, and seeing results from colleges offering accelerated statistics pathways, he thought, “There might be something to this.” Gilmore helped develop one of these pathways for Reedley and has supported the college’s further reforms under AB 705. “Students’ lives and education are at stake,” he says.

The rapid pace of change has created some challenges. Despite a big communications push, including sending counselors into the old remedial courses in the fall, many students were confused. “Our enrollment is down some, and scheduling has been a big guessing game, because we didn’t know how students would respond to the changes,” says Reimer. “We had to do some last-minute cancelling of some sections and adding others as we saw where the demand was.”

There were also problems getting the registration system to work with the new concurrent support classes. “How do you link the corequisites to the parent course? What happens when a student tries to register for the support course without the parent course? Lots of small details that we never expected,” Reimer says. “We are dealing with each issue as it arises.”

Another challenge is that faculty are teaching classes they haven’t taught before. Not a trained statistician, Gilmore describes his knowledge of statistics as “6 or 7 out of 10,” but he says he’s learning fast while teaching the course this semester. “As faculty we have to be willing to learn to teach new classes.”

Gilmore notes that the math department will continue to refine their work going forward. “We didn’t have enough time to fully develop the corequisite support for students taking statistics. We need to include things like affective domain and study skills activities. What do you do when your students aren’t doing their homework? How do you help them become better students? What do you do when it looks like your course success rate may decline? In the future, we will have a packet of activities for instructors.”

Data from the first semester won’t be available until summer 2019. “In the meantime,” Gilmore says, “we’re working with as many stakeholders as possible, including students, to make sure everyone understands what we’re doing and why.”

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Student Spotlight:
Schelitha Tyler

Foothill College

Before coming back to school in her late 30s, Schelitha Tyler had worked as a paralegal and done other office jobs, but her math skills were rusty. When she took the placement test at Foothill College, she was told she needed to begin in pre-algebra, a remedial class three levels below transferable, college-level math. Just 15% of Foothill students who start at this level go on to complete math transfer requirements in two years.

Fortunately, the college was a year ahead of schedule in complying with AB 705, a new law that gives students a right to enroll directly in transfer-level courses. In the fall, Tyler took and passed college statistics, the class she needed to transfer to a four-year university.

Though she began the course thinking “Math and I don’t get along,” Tyler credits the collaborative group work, in-class tutoring, and Friday review sessions as key to her success, along with her teacher’s attitude.

“He never made us feel stupid. He made us think about a question first, and then it was okay to ask questions,” Tyler recalls. “He really did everything he could to help us succeed, including letting us sit in on his other sections of the same class if we wanted more class time.”

A single mother of four, Tyler will transfer to San Jose State University in the fall to study social work and social change. “I want to do something to help teenagers in my community,” she says. “I want to give them hope and to help them find resources for college.”
Mount San Antonio College

School has never been easy for Mount San Antonio College student Christina Garza, who was diagnosed with depression and anxiety in 2019. Math and English are particularly “big triggers,” she says, “because those are the main courses you have to pass to get your degree.”

Taking English at another college, Garza says her teacher docked her essay “terribly” for grammar errors. It made her think “I must be a total idiot” and wonder whether speaking both English and Spanish growing up had made her “not great in either one.” Garza’s anxiety would often lead her to self-sabotage. She says she’d get overwhelmed and miss the final exam, even if she was earning a passing grade. She’d think, “I’m not going to pass anyway, so why show up?”

“*When you actually talk to your classmates you realize you don’t want to miss out on making those memories and having an interesting time with your classmates*”

But things were different when she enrolled in Mt. SAC’s college English with corequisite support. On the first day, teacher Ned Weidner and embedded tutor Kristen Pringle shared their own struggles with college. “It encouraged me to know that the professor would be understanding if I needed to let him know about something,” says Garza. “If the professor just goes over the syllabus you think they have it all together, so if you mess up there’s a lot of self-doubt, like, they’re going to hate me if I can’t turn something in.”

The students also got to talk to each other right from the beginning. “*When you actually talk to your classmates you realize you don’t want to miss out on making those memories and having an interesting time with your classmates*,” Garza says. And when she did have to miss class due to her illness, her teacher was understanding and responded to her emails. “I feel like the difference between my success or dropping and failing a class is whether the professors really include you and if they really want to know how you’re doing,” she says. “Just calling roll and not even looking up, you don’t really get that connection.”

Garza also appreciated that assignments were graded pass or no-pass. She says, “If you got a no-pass, you just had to fix what was wrong.” She shares, “Every single assignment I felt like it wasn’t good enough, but then I’d turn it in and get, ‘This is great work, just fix this a little bit.’” That response encouraged her to keep trying, and she earned an A in the course.

Garza, who comes from a low-income family, says she wants to be “useful for her community.” Ultimately, she wants to get a master’s degree in sociology or psychology, become a practicing counselor, and found a non-profit group to help connect low-income families with resources, including mental health support.
Streamlining the Path for English Language Learners

Cosumnes River College

Cosumnes River ESL faculty knew they had to do something. Data from the college research office showed that too few ESL students were completing transferable English requirements. ESL students did well in college-level writing if they got there, but most of them never even enrolled in the course.

“Students would finish the ESL sequence and say, ‘I just need to take a break from English,’” says faculty member Rhonda Farley, “which makes sense in a program that takes up to three years to finish.”

In 2017, the ESL department redesigned the curriculum with one goal in mind: making sure ESL students transitioned from English language classes into the larger college. They streamlined the course sequence, made the classes more challenging, and began thinking of ESL differently. “It’s a program,” says Farley, “not just a set of courses.”

Early data show the promise of this redesign. As of spring 2019, 92% of the students who completed the accelerated ESL pathway enrolled in college English. This was more than double the rate for students coming out of the ESL sequence previously (40%). Data on completion of college English will be available this summer.

The new pathway integrates reading and writing and condenses what had been three upper levels of ESL courses into two. Each semester, students are required to take a 6-unit, integrated reading and writing class. Separate courses in grammar and academic listening and note-taking are recommended but not required. Students beginning at this level now take a maximum of 12 required units instead of 24.

The new accelerated ESL courses feature longer readings, more challenging writing, and more independent critical thinking. Instead of writing about personal experience or short readings, students use extensive readings to provide content for their essays, “just like what they’d be doing in transfer English,” says faculty member Jennifer Francisco.

“We tell students from the very beginning that the goal is to prepare them for college-level work, to expose them to a variety of academic subjects, and to have them go directly into English writing as soon as they finish ESL,” says Francisco. ESL teachers also invite faculty from other disciplines -- particularly multilingual and nonnative English speakers -- to guest lecture on language expectations for their courses. They even take students on field trips to classes their students have expressed interest in, including biology and architecture.

Three ESL faculty members have partial teaching reassignment to coordinate the program, develop curriculum, and compile comprehensive packets of resources for teachers. To support students’ overall academic development, a faculty go-to person for each course helps students with time management and educational planning. Trained student assistants -- including some who are former ESL pathway students -- attend classes and are available to help ESL students from 9-4 Monday through Friday.

Faculty say the changes can carry a heightened sense of pressure for them: “There’s the feeling that there’s no time to waste and we have to be constantly on top of things,” says Francisco. But, she adds, “The students have been really up for it. They appreciate that we’re looking out for their best interests and their futures.”

The department originally planned to keep their traditional sequence running alongside their new accelerated pathway, but, says Farley, “We started looking at the results of the accelerated pathway and realized, we can’t wait.” Beginning in Fall 2019, the department will phase out the traditional track. The reading and writing courses in the lower half of the curriculum will also be integrated, and the department will be offering the accelerated pathway in both the morning and afternoon.

Longer term, Farley says the department is considering creating ESL certificates that align with the meta-majors in the college’s guided pathways. “Ultimately,” says Farley, “we have to change the narrative that students need to learn English first and then they can figure out what they want to do.” Instead, she says, “ESL students need to be thinking about their end goal, even in the lowest levels.”
Mount San Antonio College

In fall 2018, Mt. San Antonio College almost tripled the number of students completing college English -- from 1,155 students in fall 2017 to 3,151 students in fall 2018.

How did they do it? After a talk by John Hetts from the Multiple Measures Assessment Project, the English department revised their placement policies to allow 96% of students who participated in assessment to enroll directly in college English or college English with an additional unit of corequisite support (not including students with ESL placements). Students with high school GPAs below 2.59 were required to enroll in the corequisite version.

With the new placement parameters, enrollment in college English grew from under 2,000 students in fall 2017, to more than 5,000 in fall 2018. The vast majority of students -- 3,797 -- took the standard course, and 65% passed with a C or better; 1,266 students took the corequisite version, and 54% passed.

The corequisite results were lower than in previous semesters, when student access to the course was more limited and 66-76% of students passed. Faculty believe several factors may have influenced the decline. With AB 705 on the horizon, the English department had expanded to 48 corequisite sections and raised the class size from 25 to 30, the same as in standard sections. They also dropped the requirement for corequisite teachers to participate in professional development.

Before fall 2018, teachers had been required to participate in the California Acceleration Project’s statewide community of practice or in the local community of practice led by English faculty Ned Weidner and Michelle Dougherty. The local program includes day-long workshops in the summer and winter, plus two additional meetings each semester, all focused on creating student-ready classroom environments that support rigorous, college-level work.

While faculty are working on improving success rates, Dougherty notes that a 54% corequisite completion rate is better than students had when they would begin in a remedial course. In fall 2017, just 40% of Mt. SAC students who started one course below college English completed the course in a year, and fewer than 10% of students taking two or three remedial courses.

“Students who would formerly have been required to take one or more developmental courses are completing college English at higher rates and in less time,” says Dougherty, “and overall, so many more students are finishing their college English requirement since we’ve changed the structures that were holding them back.”

Dougherty says the department’s transformation began in 2016. While serving as Basic Skills Coordinator, Dougherty attended a California Acceleration Project event and learned about the power of corequisite remediation. At the time, Mt. SAC’s writing sequence included three levels of remedial English and no accelerated options. With the help of many others at the college -- particularly chair Margie Whalen -- Dougherty and Weidner created a pilot version of college English with corequisite support.
In spring 2017, they offered six sections of the corequisite, open to students then-classified as “one level below transfer.” Students read difficult writers including James Gee, Gloria Anzaldua, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. “If you dumb things down, students know it,” says Weidner. “Students want to be challenged.”

“Overall, so many more students are finishing their college English requirement since we’ve changed the structures that were holding them back.”

Mt. SAC Senior Research Analyst Maria Tsai reports that, as with any course, different corequisite sections have different rates of success. In fall 2018, she notes, individual sections’ success rates ranged from 21% to 100%. Dougherty and Weidner say that moving forward, they plan to create more opportunities for teachers to talk about these differences and to examine the role that grading policies and pedagogy play in student success. They are also seeking funds to continue their local community of practice.

English faculty member Erin Danson has taught the corequisite course every semester since it began. She says the local community of practice helped her to understand the benefits of “looking at students and seeing what they can do, not what they can’t do.”

“As with any class, there are the students who are doing well, the ones in the middle, and the ones who need more help,” says Danson. With the extra hour of class each week, she and the embedded tutor can give students individual feedback on part of an upcoming essay assignment -- for example, their introduction, or their thesis statement -- leading to real improvement in students’ writing.

Even though so many more students are succeeding under the new system, Dougherty says she still hears concerns about whether students are “ready” for college. “It’s not a matter of whether students are ready for us,” she says. “The question is whether we’re ready for them.”

“Students who would formerly have been required to take one or more developmental courses are completing college English at higher rates and in less time,”
Porterville College

Porterville English department chair Ann Marie Wagstaff says that in spring 2018, “there was a lot of frustration” in the department over AB 705. The hardest conversations concerned whether to remove remedial courses from the course schedule.

Last April, they held a two-day retreat facilitated by an outside consultant. Wagstaff says, “I don’t think anyone arrived thinking we would come to agreement.” But the consultant helped them realize that they all cared deeply about students’ success and “would make all kinds of sacrifices to make that happen,” Wagstaff says.

They developed a detailed plan that addressed the concerns of AB 705 skeptics while allowing all students to enroll directly in transferable, college-level English composition. In fall 2018, the college offered 26 sections of college composition, 6 sections of composition with corequisite support, and just three sections of remedial English. Students with high school GPAs below 1.9 were required to take the corequisite courses, and those with GPAs between 1.9 and 2.6 were encouraged to do so. The plan included a timeframe for deciding how to help students who didn’t pass college English, as well as a provision for the department to meet annually to define norms for transfer-level writing.

When grades came in for fall, 74% of students had succeeded in college English -- higher than the typical 63-69% course success rates they’d seen over the last five years. And corequisite students passed at rates virtually identical to students in the standard course (73% and 74% respectively).

Wagstaff says that the department has been transforming remediation for six years, spurred by their work with the California Acceleration Project, Achieving the Dream, the Multiple Measures Assessment Project, and the Accelerated Learning Program. They first offered an accelerated English course in 2013, moved to multiple measures placement in 2016, and piloted two sections of college English with corequisite support in 2017. In spring 2019, the department offered 13 corequisite sections and agreed to cut all remedial English sections for the fall.

One unanticipated outcome of the reforms is that the number of English majors has almost tripled, rising from 32 in fall 2013 to 90 in fall 2018. “If we’re placing students three levels below, they’re not thinking, Oh, maybe I’ll be an English major,” says English faculty member and AB 705 coordinator Melissa Long.

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Student Spotlight
Danny Perez

Mount San Antonio College

One of Danny Perez’s first essays got flagged by the online plagiarism detector. “I thought I was going to get kicked out of the class,” he recalls. But then his teacher, Ned Weidner, surprised him. “Ned explained what I did wrong, and then the tutor helped me figure out how to cite correctly. I was able to fix my mistakes, and I got a good grade on the essay.”

Before enrolling in Mt. SAC’s college English with corequisite support, Perez lacked confidence in English. In high school, he had taken English classes for students with learning differences, until he decided to mainstream in senior year. “My teacher believed in me,” he says, which helped him put in the extra work it took to catch up with his peers.

Corequisite teacher Fawn Livesey says that the demanding class “can scare students.” She uses class time to break large tasks into parts, such as “modeling how to look for patterns and rhetorical strategies, then having students do that in low-stake situations prior to drafting.” Livesey says that the daily work “adds up until they have the material they need for bigger assignments.”

Corequisite teachers are required to participate in a four-day training program facilitated by Long. The training covers pedagogical principles from the California Acceleration Project and provides a binder full of teaching materials. During their first semester teaching the course, instructors use a common curriculum and assignment sequence focused on happiness. One assignment is a “happiness project” in which students monitor their progress toward a personal happiness goal. Another is an analysis of which philosophy in Richard Schoch’s The Secrets of Happiness would best solve the unhappiness of a character in “The Death of Ivan Ilych.”

Wagstaff says teachers tell her, “This is the most fun I’ve ever had teaching.”

Moving forward, the department hopes to resume the corequisite community of practice they previously offered during the semester. “Around week five,” says Long, “I need a reminder that even though this is when I really worry, the majority of students always make it through.”

Danny earned a B in college English and is now working on other general education requirements. He hopes to do some modeling and eventually become a veterinarian.
MiraCosta College

Josh Piero was a D minus student in high school. No one in his family had a college degree, and school just didn't seem important. “In my family,” he says, “you finished high school and then you went into one of the trades.”

Piero spent two years building houses and eight years in the Marines before he got tired of being seen as an unintelligent “knuckle-dragger.” He enrolled at MiraCosta College in 2017, a decade after leaving high school. “I wanted to prove to myself that I was smart,” he says.

Piero enrolled in a section of college composition with linked corequisite support. The support course included just twenty students and gave him lots of one-on-one time with his professor. He learned to create arguable thesis statements, link topic sentences back to his thesis, and integrate quotes. “It really taught me about the structure of an academic essay,” Piero says. “And it gave me a community of writers that let me hash out any questions I had.”

“I wanted to prove to myself that I was smart”

The class included texts by heavyweight writers Michel Foucault, John Berger, and David Foster Wallace. At the end of the term, Piero recalls asking his professor, Jake Strona, “How come you never gave us any light readings?” He says Strona responded, “Because I knew you could do it, and I wanted to teach you to never stop reading; even if you’re not getting it, just keep going!”

Piero earned an A in both college English and his next college writing class before transferring as an English major to the University of San Diego in 2018. When he tells his USD classmates some of the other things he’s read, he says they ask, “What, were you trying to get your master’s?” He responds, “No, it was English 100 at a junior college!”

Piero is on track to earn his bachelor’s degree in English by 2021. After that, he plans to go to law school or to pursue a master’s degree in English and teach at a community college. He’d like to make a difference in students’ lives, just like his teachers did for him. “Here I am at the university competing against thoroughbreds after so many years in the barn,” he says. “But thanks to my teachers at MiraCosta, I can carry my weight.”