

Student Support  
**(Re)defined**



Equitable  
Integrated  
Cost Effective

# Practically Speaking

Community College Practices that  
Help (Re)define Student Support

*A Practitioner Primer*

Research and Planning Group for  
California Community Colleges  
Spring 2014



# Theme 4

## Featured Practices

### Metro Academies Initiative

#### City College of San Francisco | Program

#### Background and Purpose

In 2007, City College of San Francisco (CCSF) and San Francisco State University (SFSU) launched the Metro Academies Initiative (Metro) in the Colleges of Health and Human Services in their respective institutions. Their goal was to boost rates of graduation and university transfer among groups with historically low completion rates.

#### Featured Practice At a Glance

**Name:** Metro Academies

**Location:** City College of San Francisco and San Francisco State University

**Theme 4:** Colleges need to provide comprehensive support to historically underserved students to prevent the equity gap from growing

**Level:** Program

**Description:** Redesign of the first two years of college, integrating a general education course pathway, wrap-around student support services aimed to increase retention and persistence and faculty development

**Target population:** Low-income, first-generation, and/or historically underrepresented students new to City College San Francisco

**Start date:** 2007

**Interview Participants:** Vicki Legion, Rama Ali Kased

Metro Academies are schools within schools for up to 140 students who spend two years studying together in a cohort-style learning community of two linked general education classes each semester. Co-executive director of the program, Vicki Legion, described a joint faculty meeting of CCSF and SFSU in 2006 during which faculty reviewed 20 years of collaborative work focused primarily on building career and technical education certificates. The faculty grappled with the fact that these programs had not significantly impacted transfer rates from the community college to university. Furthermore, students' writing skills were still weak. The faculty wanted a way to address the fact that many CCSF and SFSU learners came from "disinvested and segregated high schools" that struggle to provide the foundational academic skills necessary for college success.

Metro aims to not only provide these skills, but also accelerate their mastery. Further, Metro

implements a culturally- responsive approach to teaching and learning; the faculty and staff believe that all students have traditions of resilience and cultural wealth that should have a strong voice in college classrooms.

Metro Academies offer a well-established model for addressing the Student Support (Re)defined finding that colleges need to comprehensively support historically underserved students to prevent the equity gap from growing. As the following summary shows, the approach integrates academic assistance and actively connects students to a range of support and financial services—help underrepresented groups and first-generation learners participating in the study uniquely cited as critical to their persistence. Additionally, a cohort experience allows participants to make meaningful connections to their peers, and Metro’s socially-conscious curriculum and student-centered instruction aims to value and build on the authentic experience of participants both inside and outside the educational setting—both factors Student Support (Re)defined participants from underrepresented groups noted as important to their success.

## Design

According to Metro’s Director of Student Outreach Rama Kased, “completion with equity and excellence” is the initiative’s chief priority. Specifically, “the Metro Academies’ mission is to increase equity in college completion through engaging, supportive, rigorous, and socially relevant education” (Metro Academies Initiative, n.d., para 1).

With this in mind, Metro has six distinct features that help make it a noteworthy practice: (1) a long-duration learning community model, in which students take two linked classes together each semester over four semesters, (2) a prescribed sequence of general education courses, (3) a first-year experience class, (4) linked learning or thematically connected courses with career or topical themes (e.g., Health, STEM, Ethnic Studies) which all share relevant content with a social justice flavor, (5) wrap-around student support services based in core classes and (6) 45 hours of faculty professional development.

Although the initiative began as a health education pathway, the model quickly expanded to become a general education pathway that satisfies graduation requirements for all 289 majors in the California State University (CSU) system, regardless of whether classes are taken at a community college or a CSU. CCSF currently maintains two Metro Academies and SFSU has three. The community college Metros are conduits for transfer in social science and humanities majors such as sociology, child development, psychology and political science.

The Metro program is designed for new high school graduates who first apply for admission to CCSF, and then to the Metro program. The Metro application consists of a short demographic questionnaire, followed by an open-ended question inviting students to explain why they are interested in Metro. To join

Metro, students must place at two to three semesters below college-ready in English and math. Students who place below this level may take “on-ramp” courses and join the pathway as they become ready.

Once admitted to Metro, students are strategically placed into a cohort designed to underpin students’ academic and social-emotional growth. Metro learners are immediately assigned a designated academic counselor and professionally trained faculty members, who work collaboratively over two years to prepare students for associate’s degree completion and transfer to the CSU.

## Staffing

Metro includes dedicated staff and faculty who are committed to culturally responsive and socially just educational practices that ensure Latino and African-American students feel welcomed, valued and encouraged at CCSF. An academic counselor, several core faculty members and a leadership team that consists of the two co-executive directors along with directors for outreach, communications, learning, curriculum, recruitment and student services assume the day-to-day operations.

The leadership team meets every other week to update each other on their respective program areas. For example, the director of diffusion is specifically responsible for “rolling out” additional Metro pathways, which includes working with faculty to develop an academic pathway, identifying a Metro coordinator, and also working with campus administrative units to accomplish tasks like block registration of students in the linked classes. Likewise, a director of curriculum and faculty development facilitates the 45-hour professional development requirement for instructors. In this capacity, the curriculum director hosts workshops and opportunities for instructional faculty to discuss high-impact practices, pedagogy, academic content, student support and curriculum alignment.

## Participant Experience

To attract participants, specifically those who are low-income, first-generation and historically underrepresented, Metro admission and outreach counselors recruit heavily from public high schools in the southeast quadrant of San Francisco and also in the South San Francisco and Oakland Unified School Districts. Metro develops on-going relationships with high school counselors who learn how to share accurate information with prospective Metro students. The program also reaches out to local community-based organizations that reinforce college-bound skills, habits and practices.

Once placed into a Metro cohort, students move collectively through a structured pathway. The course sequence includes mainly transferable classes that contribute

toward the graduation requirements for the associate's degree and the CSU baccalaureate degree. The first course in the sequence is a first-year experience course that develops study skills, provides an orientation to college, facilitates community building among the cohort members and fosters an in-depth reflection on education equity. Each semester, students take one core class (similar to a "homeroom" class) and another general education class in what Kased cites as the CSU "Golden Four" requirements (e.g., critical thinking, oral communication, writing and quantitative reasoning). Ultimately, students engage with a series of courses including English, math, speech, Metro academic discipline courses and general education electives. As mentioned earlier, many of these courses are linked, creating a learning environment characterized by thematic units and course assignments that intersect and overlap.

*Our curriculum is what we call socially relevant. [It] looks at issues...with the goal of helping students discuss ways to resolve some of those issues that we see in most marginalized communities.*

Although the initiative's instructional faculty and coursework serve to prepare students for broader career pathways and degree attainment, the wrap-around services are equally important to student success and retention in higher education. These support mechanisms include, "academic counseling, tutoring, financial aid advising, early intervention, and personalized connections with other campus services" (Metro Academies Initiative, n.d., para. 2). According to Legion, having a Metro-designated academic counselor working out of the classroom is essential to student success, contrasting with the experience of other students who must get to a remote location and wait to speak with a counselor whom they may never see again.

Together the academic instruction and student support services create a learning environment that fosters students' personal and academic success. Kased underscores the emphasis on social justice that runs through the entire experience and the focus on empowering students to make change. She states, "Our curriculum is what we call socially relevant. [It] looks at issues...with the goal of helping students discuss ways to resolve some of those issues that we see in most marginalized communities."

## Participant Impact

Metro outcomes are well documented and demonstrate significant potential for the initiative's future growth and community impact. Most recently, the Metro Academies' *Cost Efficiency Study* showed "Metro requires an additional investment of \$740 per student per year—an 8% increase—yet reduces overall costs by \$22,714 per completer, leveraging every dollar of investment 15 times"

(Johnstone, 2013, p. 1). Cost reductions come from Metro's sharp drop in student attrition and increased number of students staying on track.

Further, a 2012-2013 study of the CCSF Metro Child Development Academy highlighted Metro's capacity to target historically underrepresented participants and prepare them adequately for transfer. At the time of this research, Metro child development students were largely Black or African-American (28%), Asian (26%) and Latino (23%). Ninety-five percent of these students entered CCSF at the basic skills level. Even still, compared to their non-Metro peers, Metro students "were more than twice as likely to be transfer-prepared after two years as the comparison group" (Metro Academies Initiative, 2013, p. 1).

## Implementation Supports and Challenges

Several factors continue to both challenge and support the implementation of Metro. For example, Metro faces two ongoing intersecting barriers to success including (1) the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior College's (ACCJC) decision to revoke City College's accreditation as of July 2014; and (2) Metro's transition from a small, new program to a fully institutionalized program. In summer 2013, ACCJC decided to terminate CCSF's accreditation, a decision that required college leadership to act swiftly, prioritizing ACCJC's top concerns. As a result, Metro staff have walked a fine line in supporting the college's efforts to address accreditation dilemmas, while pushing the Metro agenda to support low-income, first-generation, and historically underrepresented student success. As Kased further clarified, "We [aim] to talk about...institutionalizing our small program, while our conversation is about saving the college as a whole." So, though impressive efforts have been made to institutionalize Metro, the CCSF leadership has been focused on the accreditation situation. Moreover, many of these leaders are new to the college, and in turn, the Metro initiative.

Yet despite these challenges, executive leadership, a supportive long-term dean and quantitative data have enabled Metro to transition steadily from a small grant-funded start-up to an institution-wide practice. Main funders have included the James Irvine Foundation, the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education – U.S. Department of Education, the Marled Foundation, the Mimi and Peter Haas Fund and in-kind support from CCSF and SFSU. CCSF executive and mid-level leaders support the advancement of Metro and realize its impact on students and the community. This impact was explicitly reported in the aforementioned *Cost Efficiency Study*, which has contributed to the initiative's local and national recognition as a promising practice in higher education.

## Scalability and Replicability

As Metro continues to introduce new academic pathways, its leadership team has gained insight and knowledge related to scalability and replication. In fact, interviewees shared four tips for practitioners who would like to replicate the Metro model. First, for a multi-component system change like Metro, external funding is necessary during the start-up phase. Second, support from administration is essential to the necessary re-deployment of resources required to move from start-up to full institutionalization. Third, evidence is paramount to scaling up, so colleges need to ensure they have rigorous, available and accessible data to demonstrate student outcomes and program achievements. Fourth, the selection of faculty and staff is strategic to the success of the initiative in that there is a special formula to achieving equal parts enthusiasm, commitment, expertise and authenticity.

For more information...

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or contact Vicki Legion at [vlegion@sfsu.edu](mailto:vlegion@sfsu.edu)