Reality Check: Early Intervention in Gateway Courses

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In my own classes and in those of the other professors in San Jacinto College Central's English classes, I noticed an issue—a significant number of our students, particularly those in our gateway course, English 1301 (Composition I,) were disappearing during the first month of the course when the first major essay was due. What's going on? I wondered. Do they lack skills? Are they just lazy? Do they lack stamina? Are our professors not supporting them? I brought this issue up at Central Campus' next English Department meeting. Many professors offered the same reasons I'd thought of, but none of us knew the answer for sure.

A 2007 article "Counting and Recounting: Assessment and the Quest for Accountability," by educational psychologist Lee Shulman, emphasizes that assessment, both qualitative and quantitative, is necessary if we want a true account of what's happening in education.   I decided to see if I could create a project that would give us such an assessment to explain why so many of our students were failing early in the semester. I asked both our fulltime and our part-time faculty—approximately 50 professors—to report to me which students were doing poorly in the first 5 weeks of class. I asked for other things too—what the reasons for poor performance were, what the professor had done to intervene, and then what the students' standings were at 10 weeks. I called this our "Student Status Report."

The Student Status Report has provided a basis for English Department discussions, changes in practice, and even individual faculty projects. Our professors gained information about not only their students but also themselves and their teaching. I plan to repeat the project every fall semester when enrollment in our English 1301 sections is greatest. Such reports will provide year-to-year comparative data.

While the report deals with an English course, it can be adapted easily to any discipline. I presented it to all the department chairs across our district at last summer's SJC Dean and Department Chair Academy, and similar reports are now being generated in other departments.

My presentation will include actual copies of our report for participants to review and discuss in small groups. I was asked after my Academy presentation, "How did you get faculty to do this extra work willingly?" so, we will also discuss the do's and don'ts for creating a report mechanism that isn't too onerous for already overworked faculty to handle. Finally, participants will share their ideas for creating generating similar reports to answer questions about their own disciplines and departments.