

*Give Students a Compass:  
A Tri-State LEAP Partnership for  
College Learning, General Education, and Underserved Student Success*

Final Report– San José State University  
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The Compass Grant project at San Jose State University, “Give Transfer Students a Compass” has come to an end after two years. It has been a fruitful learning experience for students, faculty, and administrators alike. This report summarizes the main goals and accomplishments.

Overarching goal: To develop, implement, and assess a model project to create a more coherent learning experience for transfer students. The “Transfer Year Experience” – was designed to begin a semester prior to a community college student’s transfer to SJSU and continue through the first semester after enrollment at SJSU. The pilot was conducted in partnership with Evergreen Valley College (EVC).

Primary activities and accomplishments:

1. The curriculum for a special section of English 1B for prospective transfer students was jointly developed by Cathy Gabor, Composition Coordinator at SJSU, and Alexandria White, English Instructor at EVC. The class was taught twice: once in Spring 2010 and again in Spring 2011. The key elements of both classes were:
  - Special activities and workshops were incorporated in the class to help orient the students to SJSU, including campus and library tours, a workshop on taking timed essay tests, an advising session, a career planning session, and a welcome pizza party.
  - A service-learning project was designed and implemented. The “Writing Partners” project matched 6<sup>th</sup> grade students from a high-need elementary school with the college students. They exchanged 3 letters during the semester and met at a culminating celebration and pizza party at SJSU.
  - Peer mentors supported the class and acted as liaisons between the students and SJSU. They also helped students with their writing drafts.

**Spring 2010:** The first group of EVC students was recruited and enrolled in the English 1B section for Spring, 2010. There were 36 students who registered; 35 students completed the course. The course was held on the SJSU campus one day a week after the initial 3 weeks at EVC.

**Spring 2011:** The second group of EVC students was recruited and enrolled in the English 1B section for Spring 2011. There were 36 students who registered; 29 students completed the course. The course was held two days a week on the SJSU campus after the initial 3 weeks at EVC.

As we noted in the June 2010 year-end report, we had hoped most of the students enrolled in the sections were intending to transfer to SJSU (or to another 4-year school) as soon as they passed English 1B. What we found was that many students were a year or more away from being ready to transfer. While the original intent was to facilitate already-planned transfers by reaching students in their last semester at EVC, the grant served an unexpected purpose: inspiring students to consider transferring, students who were “on the fence.” The significance of this outcome is that the grant helped instill confidence in capable students who were holding themselves back with their own doubts. Although most of the students in the special sections of English 1B are still at EVC, we expect many of them to transfer to four-year schools over the next few years.

2. Team members in AY 2010-2011: Debra David, Project Director, had been overseeing the project, but she took a Project Director position in the CSU Chancellor’s Office in the summer of 2010, and turned things over to Cathy Gabor, Savander Parker, Director of Extended Opportunity Program and Services at EVC, no longer served as the lead EVC contact person – Dean Keith Aytch took on this role. Other core members include: 1) Alexandria White, who became an integral member once she was identified as the class instructor; 2) Veronica Mendoza, Vice President for Student Affairs/Counseling Services, who conducted a study of the impact of the Compass project on Latino/a students (results forthcoming); 3) Cindy Kato, Director of Academic Advising and Retention Services at SJSU; and 5) Dennis Jaehne, Associate Vice President of Undergraduate Studies at SJSU. Returning SJSU peer mentor Robert Corpus worked closely with the project. Stephen Branz, also an Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies at SJSU and Director of General Education, John Engell, Chair of the Department of English and Comparative Literature at SJSU, and Maureen Scharberg, Associate Vice President of Student Academic Success Services, also contributed to and supported the project.
3. Organization of project events and activities: Cathy and Alex worked closely on organizing events and activities related to the class, with support from Debra and Robert. The Writing Partners program received a significant boost from “CommUniverCity San José” (see [www.communiversitysanjose.org](http://www.communiversitysanjose.org)), a service-learning collaborative, which had an established relationship with McKinley Elementary. The staff helped to facilitate the connection and to arrange the culminating celebration between the elementary school children and the English 1B students, and took all of the photos at those events. Keith re-hired Alex (with input from Cathy and Debra) and scheduled the class. Many of us (Debra, Cathy, Veronica, and Alex) tried to recruit and hire a second peer mentor, but none of the prospective hires worked out. In the end, Robert was able to cover all of the peer mentor duties by himself.
4. Communication processes: *Internal communication* among Cathy, Alex, Keith, and Debra has been reasonably effective through e-mail and occasional meetings. Cathy, Alex, and Robert met more regularly on the SJSU campus for “check in meetings.” *In the region*, Cathy planned a regional conference in June 2011 to disseminate the findings thus far about the “transfer compass” project and to gain input from faculty and administrators in the Bay Area. Over thirty deans, vice presidents, teachers, and students attended, representing ten institutions. Many of the attendees stated that they will try to implement some of the compass grant ideas in the near future. Cathy will consider arranging a November meeting

for those interested in Writing Partners. *Nationally*, a large cohort of SJSU-EVC “Compass” folks made presentations at the annual AAC&U conference in January 2011; the sessions were all well-attended. Particularly notable was a dinner panel featuring Robert Corpus moderating a discussion among EVC and SJSU students about the transfer experience.

5. Activities/campus work plan: Most activities were consistent with the work plan and timeline. As noted above, the recruiting of students did not work as originally intended, but the situation resulted in unintended positive outcomes. We had budgeted for two peer mentors for the class, but we could not find anyone who met all of the criteria. Our ideal candidate could not be hired because of his immigration status.
6. Major factors/conditions affecting work: Serious budget problems in both the CSU and community college systems have complicated our work. (Fortunately, they did not prevent us from offering the English 1B course twice). When the project was initially proposed, we did not anticipate major restrictions on the ability of SJSU to accept transfer students in Spring terms or “impaction” of many of the most popular majors for transfer students. The campus is obligated to accept community college transfer students in our local service area who complete basic requirements – completion of 60 lower division units with a minimum GPA of 2.0, including GE courses in written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking. In impacted majors, higher standards can be established, including a higher GPA and completion of prerequisite courses. It has become more important for us to work closely with our feeder community college students to assure appropriate advising and preparation, particularly if we want to maintain access and success for underrepresented student populations. Budget cuts, furloughs, workload pressures, larger class sizes, and layoffs have made it more difficult to arrange meetings and to ask various offices for extra support. Transfer students facing increased tuition and fewer employment and financial aid options are less able to consider going to more distant and/or more expensive 4-year institutions.

There have also been some administrative personnel changes on both campuses, though the impact on our work to date has not been too great. Debra assumed the position of Compass Project Director at the CSU Chancellor’s Office, and Savander’s role at EVC was changed, removing him from the project. Cathy and Keith filled in.

We decided to schedule the Spring 2011 English 1B class on a two-day per week basis, hoping that more frequent contact with the writing classroom environment would increase writing ability and help facilitate more essays draft workshops and Writing Partner assignments. However, the two-day schedule proved to be an impediment to some students: the persistence rate was lower than in Spring 2010 class (though still higher than the EVC average), and more students had attendance problems. Another condition affecting work also had to do with schedules: the timing of the Writing Partners Culminating Event. McKinley Elementary School had STAR testing during the days Alex’s class met, so we had to schedule the Culminating Event on a day that Alex’s students usually do not come to SJSU. Although they had advance notice, many of them could not miss other classes, work, or family obligations to attend the Culminating Event. The sixth graders still had a valuable experience, but the low attendance of EVC students was noted.

7. Lessons learned from successes and set-backs/impact on future work: Alex and Cathy reviewed reflective essays written by their students (Cathy also taught English 1B in Spring 2011 to native SJSU students with a Writing Partners component; they gave their students one common assignment) to 1) gain a sense of what the students thought they learned from English 1B, and 2) to compare the writing level of the SJSU and EVC students.

Overall, students from both classes were strong on providing specific examples; the weakest area was organization. The SJSU students demonstrated average or above average control of grammar and mechanics, and the EVC students struggled more in this area. This result was not a surprise, given the high percentage of ESL students in the EVC in the student body.

What impressed us the most in the essays was the self-awareness students exhibited about their writing. For example, some students explained that they have trouble organizing their ideas, and that was evident in these reflective essays. However, we coded this as a positive outcome because the students were able to discuss writing at the meta-cognitive level.

We looked specifically for evidence that students gained confidence as college-level writers, and we did find some students explicitly claiming that they gained confidence. In most of the SJSU students' portfolios, they either expressed confidence or demonstrated it implicitly. The fact that fewer EVC students displayed such confidence was not a surprise, given the demographics; however, the following excerpts from EVC students cause us to believe that some of them have the confidence to transfer to a four-year university:

“An honest evaluation of my writing leads me to believe that I have the potential to write a noteworthy dissertation if I work hard enough. I believe that I do well in providing action packed introductions that capture the attention of my audience.”

“As a writer or learner in order to get succeed, I believe I have to put a lot of efforts, spend more time to read on what I don't understand, and don't give up, learn from my past mistakes, and make a change of what was wrong.”

“I find when I write, I sometimes allude to what I mean to convey without explicitly stating my point of view. To effectively argue a point, I need to be more aware of when I am vague and strive to be more specific in those scenarios.”

“My Strength was having an interesting opening and closing part which makes the entire essay looks complete. Also, I did not have any trouble with organizing my essay. I was also pretty good at making a valid point. Furthermore, I didn't afraid of asking questions and opinions from instructor, classmate, friends, co-workers.”

“Over the course of the semester we did a lot of writing and practice writing for the district final. I think because of this practice and heavy learning, I brushed up on much of my skills and became a better writer overall. My portfolio assignment shows examples and explanations of the evolution of my work.”

Obviously, some of these students are still learning control over Standard Edited English, which can be taught through drills and practice. What cannot be taught is the confidence they display in their attitudes – that was accrued through many experiences including this special section of English 1B.

Only two students mentioned Writing Partners outright in their reflective essays: one from EVC and one from SJSU. The EVC student, Susan, used her reflection on writing to the sixth graders as a lens to see what she still needs work on as a writer; in other words, Writing Partners helped her learn more about herself as a writer: *“I got carried away jotting down all my ideas that I did not give myself time to move from one idea to another. In the letter is where I found it the most difficult to move from one topic to another. I was writing the same way the kids were writing.”* Likewise, Jennifer, an SJSU student, notes that Writing Partners helped her engage in school writing: *“English 1B has been an amazing experience and I feel as if my writing style has made a huge improvement from English 1A . . . Having the writing partner experience has also helped me a lot because I feel like I was able to connect with someone while still doing a writing assignment for class.”* These two written comments, combined with the positive oral feedback help us see that Writing Partners is having “high impact” on the English 1B students.

The grades and WST scores for Alex’s Spring 2011 are as follows:

**GRADES**

Grades	Number of students earning this grade
A	9
B	9
C	8
D	0
F	4

**WST SCORES**

Attempted	Passed	Failed	% Pass Rate – Compass 1B Class	EVC Avg Pass Rate
15	4	11	26%	46%

The WST scores appear disappointing once again. However, it is notable that these students are not all ready to transfer this semester; the EVC average pass rate is based on students who have *already transferred* to SJSU from EVC. In other words, the pass rate is fairly good for students not yet (ready to be) at SJSU. Also, we were encouraged that almost half of the students chose to take the test even though it is not absolutely necessary at this point in their academic careers (it becomes necessary once they transfer).

Our successes definitely support our premise that having a “bridge” course for prospective transfer students is valuable. Administrators, faculty, and community partners, have been enthusiastic. Even more important, the students were very pleased with the class. In comments written on the last day of class, almost everyone said that it made them better prepared and more excited about transferring to SJSU or any 4-year institution. (“Not only has this class given me a glimpse of what campus life could be like, it has given me an extra

boost of confidence to proceed. I can't wait! Thanks.") Several mentioned having a clearer understanding of the importance of continuing beyond community college. ("It has motivated me to do better in school now so I can one day transfer to a university like San Jose State." "At first I was unclear about what I wanted, but this class helped me realize I have to set a career goal and not just focus on completing units to be successful.") The students also enjoyed the Writing Partners service-learning experience; several mentioned that it increased their engagement in the class. ("[The Writing Partners] experience was a lot better than I anticipated, and it caused me to take the course, as a whole, more seriously.") The various support activities, like the session to prepare for the Writing Skills Test, the advising session, and the campus tour, were also cited as valuable.

12. Perspective, reflection, and insight: This project has potential importance for both GE redesign and inclusive excellence. For GE redesign, it reinforces the idea that it is crucial for 2- and 4-year institutions to develop a common set of learning outcomes in order for transfer students to be adequately prepared for upper division work in both GE and the major. And, since underrepresented students are disproportionately likely to begin at a 2-year institution, that preparation is necessary in order to make a baccalaureate degree accessible to all. Various conversations have made it very clear that getting agreement on learning outcomes is difficult within a single institution. Across autonomous institutions and multiple systems, it is even more challenging. Efforts by external groups, such as accrediting organizations, legislatures, or systems offices, may gain some traction, but can be resisted at the local level. The most effective way to overcome the hurdles is through developing positive, compelling examples of success that are attractive to key stakeholders and can be adapted to fit a variety of campus cultures. Our example was successfully extended as a model to several other institutions in the region at the June 21 Conference.
13. Design principles: This project is most closely aligned with two of the LEAP "design principles" – sequential progression and high-impact practices. The testimony of the students, their high levels of persistence in the class, and their expressions of increased motivation, underscore the value of making the progression from GE learning goals from the 2-year to the 4-year institution levels explicit to them. The project's service-learning component is a high-impact practice. (An aside: The two sixth-grade teachers and the one fifth grade teacher who participated in the Writing Partners project also thought that their students' writing skills and interest improved.) The "transition" experience of the course is also similar to a first-year experience program for entering freshmen, another high-impact practice.
14. Future: San Jose State learned that we did not receive funding for the next round of the Compass Grant. However, Ken and Debra have encouraged us to put together a proposal for possible upcoming RFPs. Right now, we are brainstorming and putting feelers out to key stakeholders. When/if future grant opportunities are available, we will pursue them.