

# Enlace: Empowering Latina/o Students

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## Introduction

Evergreen Valley College, located in San José, California, has a diverse student enrollment of approximately 11,000 students comprised of Latina/o 30%, Vietnamese American 15%, Other Asian/Pacific Islander 20%, Anglo 15%, African American 4%, Native American 1%, and Other/Unknown 15%. The *2005 EVC Student Equity Plan* identifies the Latina/o course success rate (grade of C or better) at 62%, 6% below the overall college success rate of 68%. Therefore, one goal stated in the *2005 EVC Student Equity Plan* is to increase the success and persistence rates of Latina/o students. The Enlace Program represents one college effort to achieve this goal.

One criterion established by the San José /Evergreen Community College District to evaluate Enlace program effectiveness is student success rates in Enlace courses. As documented by the District Office of Research and Institutional Effectiveness, for 24 years, Enlace course success rates for Latina/o students have been consistently greater than the success rates for other Latina/o students enrolled in similar courses. For example, for Fall 2001, Fall 2002, Fall 2003, and Fall 2004, 893 Latina/o students enrolled in Enlace courses had a 76% course success rate. During the same period, 2,321 Latina/o students enrolled in non-Enlace courses had a success rate of 55%. Furthermore, for Spring 2006, the overall Enlace Program success rate was 82%, while the success rate for all other students enrolled in similar courses was 55%.

In addition to accelerating course success rates, Enlace develops strategies to increase the number of Latino/a graduates and transfers. Most recently, Enlace has provided the leadership for an innovative partnership between Evergreen Valley College and San José State University. The Enlace program coordinator and Dr. George Castro, a founding member of the Enlace Mentor Advisory Council, were coprincipal investigators for a Title V HSI cooperative grant application. One goal of the project funded in 2005, titled “Strengthening Support for Hispanic Student Transfer,” is to increase the number of Latinas/os from Evergreen Valley College (EVC) who transfer to and graduate from San José State University. Enlace staff have contributed to the project by providing project management, counseling support, curriculum innovation, and staff development. The project's first annual performance report noted that, during the first year of the project, a 30% increase from the baseline occurred in the number of EVC students who completed guaranteed transfer agreements with San José State University, and a 20% increase from the baseline occurred in the number of EVC Latina/o students who enrolled at San José State University.

The effectiveness of Enlace to increase Latina/o student success and transfer rates has been recognized at local and national levels. For instance, Enlace has received the Noel Levitz Retention Award, the California State Academic Senate Exemplary Program Award, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors Student Success Award, the Hispanic Foundation of Silicon Valley Award, and the *Excelexencia* in Education Associates Award for 2007.

## **Background**

The Enlace Program, which began in 1983, represents an alternative approach to meeting the educational needs of Latino/a students. The name Enlace comes from the Spanish word *enlazar*, which means to unite, to connect, to link. Enlace is a network of students, staff, and community members united by a shared vision of Latina/o student success.

Three faculty members at EVC, each with more than 10 years of experience in the San José/Evergreen Community College District, acknowledged the relative lack of academic success of Latina/o students; however, at EVC there were no institutional strategies in place to address this problem. Therefore, the three

faculty members developed Enlace as a nontraditional approach to Latina/o student success, a holistic approach sensitive to the experiences, needs, and strengths of Latina/o students. The approach combines a culturally and linguistically relevant teaching, counseling, and mentoring pedagogy with structured community participation to enhance Latino/a students' navigation between their homes, community, and Evergreen Valley College.

At the start, Enlace staff offered one English course each semester with Latina/o students as the target population. A counselor and 30 community mentors supported the course. After six years, Enlace staff added two new academic components—math and science—increasing the Enlace section offerings to four each semester. Subsequently, additional sections of English, math, science, and guidance were offered, supported by increased counseling services, supplemental instruction, and extracurricular activities. English, math, and science were selected as the instructional focus because these disciplines are at the heart of students' academic success in college and because they are disciplines in which Latina/o students traditionally have not been successful.

### **How the Initiative Works**

The Enlace Program is composed of a team of college staff and community mentors. The current Enlace college staff consists of two English professors, a math professor, a science professor, a program counselor, a program coordinator, an outreach/recruitment specialist, a program specialist, two instructional assistants, and several peer student tutors.

Enlace offers courses in developmental and college level English, reading, math, and science. In addition, Enlace offers a guidance course for first semester students and one for transfer students. Enlace offers 24–26 classes during the fall, spring, and summer sessions, with an annual enrollment of over 700 students; approximately 90% are Latina/o students.

The full-time Enlace counselor supports the academic component. The main responsibility of the Enlace counselor is to provide academic, career, and personal counseling for Enlace students, many of whom are generation 1.5

and first-generation college students. The Enlace counselor also provides services for students previously enrolled in Enlace courses. In addition, the Enlace counselor meets with Enlace professors to increase program retention and success rates by devising nontraditional intervention strategies. The Enlace counselor collaborates with Enlace professors in early alert activities and regularly visits the Enlace classes to make presentations and to schedule individual conferences. The Enlace counselor helps plan and conduct Enlace Program student orientations, college transfer workshops, and on-campus student conferences. The Enlace counselor also participates in program activities that strengthen relationships with local high schools and community based organizations.

To foster academic success, community involvement, and student leadership, Enlace staff members serve as advisors for three student organizations: the Enlace Student Association (ESA), the Enlace Honors Society (EHS), and the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in the Sciences (SACNAS). One example of a student coordinated cocurricular activity is the annual Enlace Honors Society Conference held on campus each spring for Enlace students. The conference theme for 2007 was “Academic Success and Student Activism as a Means to Latina/o Community Empowerment.” On Saturday, March 10, 2007, approximately 250 Enlace students and 15 high school students participated in the conference. Dr. David Lopez, President of the National Hispanic University, served as the keynote speaker. One workshop presenter was Dr. Susie Reyes, a former Enlace student and a recent graduate of the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine.

Two bodies contribute to strategic planning and program evaluation: the Enlace Coordinating Committee, a college coordinating committee, and the Enlace Mentor Advisory Council, a community advisory group. The Mentor Advisory Council (MAC) represents 70 community mentors, providing continuous community input for program evaluation and strategic planning. The MAC advocates for Enlace at the administrative and governing board levels. Two members of the MAC are Enlace/EVC alumni.

During the past 24 years, a profile of effective Enlace staff members has developed. They are culturally competent and aware and appreciative of the cultural and social experiences of Latina/o students. They are proficient in Spanish, able to communicate with students and parents. They are active in the community and committed to social justice, serving as role models of leadership, civic engagement, and community service. They reject the “deficit” theory of education. Instead, they accept a strength-based model of student empowerment, utilizing an innovative, culturally responsive approach to maximize student success.

While Enlace staff has modified Enlace over time to improve program effectiveness and to reflect changing resources, the original program goals have remained constant.

- To successfully retain Latina/o students;
- To enable Latina/o students to successfully complete the Enlace English, math, science, and guidance courses;
- To mainstream Latina/o students into the general education and transfer curricula;
- To increase the number of Latina/o students who graduate with an Associate of Arts or Associate of Sciences degree;
- To increase the number of Latina/o students who transfer to four-year colleges and universities; and
- To create a cadre of student leaders

## **Work Processes and Resources**

Three central organizing principles describe the Enlace approach and inform all program decisions. Enlace staff operate with the principle that the existing college instructional and counseling models are not effective for a significant number of Latina/o students, as indicated by low retention and success rates, low graduation rates, and low transfer rates for Latina/o students at EVC and other postsecondary institutions. The second organizing principle is that a culturally responsive instructional, counseling, and mentoring approach significantly accelerates the academic success of many Latina/o students. The

third program principle is that student success ultimately is not the sole responsibility of an individual instructor but is the shared responsibility of program and college staff, family, and the community—an “enlace” of key stakeholders.

Initially, Enlace staff did not receive college funds for counseling and program management activities. Program staff volunteered for the first years to perform Enlace-related activities. Gradually, after Enlace demonstrated program success, the college began to direct funds to support Enlace activities. Currently, in addition to supporting the Enlace courses, the college funds a full-time Enlace counselor, a full-time Enlace program specialist, and a part-time program coordinator. Additional funds derived from local contributions and federal grants are used primarily for cocurricular and extracurricular program activities.

### **Attributes and Challenges in Development and Implementation**

One issue faced by program staff at the start of the project was the resistance of several persons on campus to accepting and supporting Enlace. For some, Enlace represented a radical change from the status quo, a change implicitly critical of the mainstream approach to the education of Latina/o students. Contributing to the resistance was the program's emphasis on a culture-centered approach to Latina/o academic success—in contrast to the dominant generalist approach. Others resisted Enlace because they saw Enlace as a counter narrative to the “deficit” theory believed to explain the relative lack of success of Latina/o students.

To deal with the resistance, Enlace staff maintained a low campus profile at the onset, not drawing attention to program activities and not comparing program student success rates to those of the general student population. Enlace initially was referred to by project staff as a “pilot” or a “project” that was testing one approach to student success. With increased support within the college, Enlace staff proposed and achieved incremental program growth, adhering to the prescribed college procedures. The growth was justified to college administration and others by means of student need and documented program success. Enlace has created an educational model that values and utilizes community participation.

Enlace has fashioned a community network that provides a means for individuals and organizations in the community to contribute time and financial support to EVC students. To identify and meet the needs of Latino/a students, Enlace has solidified partnerships with educational and community-based organizations. These partnerships include the East Side Union High School District, San José Unified School District, California Community Partners for Youth, Latino College Prep, San José State University, National Hispanic University, NASA Ames Hispanic Advisory Committee, Hispanic Foundation of Silicon Valley, Latino Peace Officers Association, Castellanos Family Foundation, Pan American Roundtable of Los Gatos, and La Raza Roundtable of Santa Clara County.

EVC administration has acknowledged and highlighted the uniqueness and effectiveness of Enlace in student equity reports, accreditation reports, and Title V HSI grant applications. EVC President David Wain Coon and Chancellor Rosa Perez champion the accomplishments of Enlace in the district and community.

## **Applicability**

In their recent efforts to share the Enlace approach, Enlace staff participated in a panel presentation at a national Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) conference and at a joint National Educators Association/American Federation of Teachers (NEA/AFT) conference. In addition, the Enlace Coordinator and the EVC President participated in a briefing of the Hispanic Congressional Caucus that focused on the applicability of three college programs that effectively accelerate the success of Latina/o students.

At Evergreen Valley College, faculty members have modified the Enlace model for African American students (AFFIRM) and for Asian/Pacific Islander students (ASPIRE). The faculty modified the essential elements of Enlace based on their understanding of the particular needs and experiences of their target student populations. The AFFIRM Program (Academic Force for Inspiration, Retention, and Matriculation) was established in 1989; the ASPIRE Program

(Asian/Pacific Islander Resources for Excellence) was established in 2000. According to the *2005 EVC Student Equity Report*, students in all three programs have achieved course success rates greater than the course success rates of students in the general courses. Because of the effectiveness of these programs, EVC has made an institutional commitment to sustain and enhance AFFIRM, ASPIRE, and Enlace.

In order to create and implement a program based on the Enlace model, the following steps should be considered and modified when necessary.

1. Assemble a core group of college staff and community members who will create a working model that responds to students' needs, experiences, and strengths and that reflects available campus and community resources.
2. Realize that traditional instructional and counseling approaches are not effective for many students.
3. Conduct extensive research on "best practices" for the targeted student population.
4. Take risks by being innovative and experimental.
5. Implement a holistic, culturally responsive approach.
6. Use student success as the basis for measured, incremental program growth.
7. Gain support from college and district administration and from the governing board.
8. Establish a community network for input, financial contributions, and advocacy.

As the Enlace Program completes its 25th year, the program staff has identified five short-term goals to increase the scope and effectiveness of Enlace. First, with an augmentation of the EVC Enlace budget supplemented by external funds, Enlace staff will expand the number of English, math, and science sections offered each semester. Second, to maintain support for an increased number of students, Enlace staff will propose a budget increase in counseling hours and supplemental instruction. Third, to provide students a complete college experience, Enlace staff will expand and institutionalize its cocurricular and extracurricular activities, which include orientations, workshops, conferences, and leadership seminars. Fourth, Enlace staff will assume the

leadership in developing a Title V HSI institutional grant proposal to help improve services for Latinas/os and other underrepresented students. Fifth, Enlace staff will strengthen its network with feeder high schools, community-based organizations, and San José State University to help improve the EVC to SJSU pipeline.

## **Lessons Learned**

Enlace has faced several challenges while initiating and expanding its services. However, the Enlace staff has remained resolute and committed to providing a quality program that offers and delivers culturally competent and relevant services. With the guidance and advocacy from the community advisory group and with the support of college and district administrators, the Enlace program has flourished and become an effective program that empowers Latina/o students and the Latina/o community. Above all, Enlace has been the story of student success since 1983.

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