Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Course Success Rate Institutional-Set Standards (ISS) Among Department Chairs at Saddleback College

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Purpose

       The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) expects all colleges to regularly evaluate Institution-Set Standards (ISS) and examine performance at a program level that is relevant to the institution *(ACCJC Accreditation Standards - 1.B.3; Eligibility Requirement 11)*. Institution-Set Standards are developed as thresholds for minimum expected performance in key areas and are federally mandated *((USDE CFR 34), subpart B, Chapter VI, part 602.16-602.21)*. The purpose of this report is to capture reflection and dialogue to the institutionally-calculated standards for successful course completion in all instructional departments at Saddleback College.

Method

       This report provides an analysis of department chair perceptions of the ISS for course success rate within their respective departments at Saddleback College. The aim of this analysis was to capture dialogue and reflection of the institutionally-calculated standards for successful course completion in all instructional departments/areas. Course success rate is defined as the percentage of students passing a course with a grade of A, B, C or CR. The generic formula for calculating the course success rate ISS takes a running prior three year average of the department's course success rate minus the standard deviation of the prior three years. As part of the survey, department chairs were provided their course success rates for the last four academic years and their course success rate ISS.

       The survey was administered online to all department chairs in the spring 2017 semester via Survey Monkey. The survey questionnaire consisted of six items (two closed-ended and four open-ended questions) (See Appendix A). One open-ended question asked respondents to provide insight on their course success rate and their thoughts on the trends they were provided. The three other open-ended questions were related to their department's course success rate ISS. These questions asked respondents to assess their ISS and compare it to their most recent year's performance, provide suggestions and action steps for program improvement to ensure increases in their course success rates, and to identify ways in which their ISS can help inform program review.

Findings

       A total of 76 invitations to participate were emailed, yielding a response rate of 75%. This section will provide the results from each question on the survey along with an analysis of the comments from the survey respondents.

Q1. Please review the successful course completion rate trends provided for your department for the last four academic years (2012-2015). Please describe your understanding of these trends.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
My department's successful course completion rates are going up.	50.9%	29
My department's successful course completion rates are going down.	14.0%	8
My department's successful course completion rates are flat/stagnant.	35.1%	20
	Answered Question	**57**

Each department chair was provided with four years of their department's course success rates and they were asked to review and provide their understanding of the trends. Data revealed that roughly 51% of the respondents found their department's successful course completion rate to be trending upwards.

Q2. Why do you believe that the trends are going this direction? (n=53)

Regarding their understanding of the trends and factors that may impact their course success rate, the majority of the respondents spoke about curriculum and faculty. The most prevalent themes raised included the need to change curriculum to better fit student schedules and to keep course content updated/relevant. Some respondents also felt that online classes may be a cause of lower course success rates. The department chairs that spoke about faculty, identified the hiring of more faculty, increasing communication among faculty and increasing communication between students and faculty as criteria for improving course success. The following comments from respondents are some examples that illustrate these points:

Comments regarding curriculum as influencing course success:

> *"Changes to class content to include podcasts, which we believe have increased student participation and retention."*

> *"More focus on the relationship between course syllabus to course content. This provides clarity of student responsibilities and obligations to successfully complete the course."*

> *"…with as many online classes as we have in our department we are going to have lower rates of "student success" as those students who stop "attending" are higher in online classes."*

> *"In light of the significant increase in online courses offered in our division if results were disaggregated by method of instruction this is a very good result as completions are typically lower for online course success."*

Comments regarding faculty as influencing course success:

> *"The department is making a more intentional approach to attract and retain students. Plus, there is a current teacher shortage and more students may be interested in the field."*

"…we are hoping to develop professional development activities that emphasize assessment and grade norming. Overwhelmingly, faculty assess student work in isolation, with little or no communication with their peers on how one goes about this essential academic task."

"We have tried to emphasize with our instructors the need to recognize students who are struggling, and to try and help them early on, either by spending more time on student questions in class, additional contact time during office hours…"

Q3. The college has adopted a generic formula for the creation of minimum standards. These minimum criteria for performance are called the Institution-set standard or "ISS". Using the data provided, when comparing the minimum standard (ISS) of your department's most recent year's performance, please rate the following statements:

Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Weighted Average[1]
Our department performance is <u>below</u> the minimum standard.	27 (53%)	20 (39%)	3 (6%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2%)	1.59
Our department performance is <u>above</u> the minimum standard.	3 (6%)	1 (2%)	7 (13%)	20 (38%)	22 (42%)	4.08
Our department performance is at or about <u>equal</u> to the minimum standard.	6 (12%)	11 (21%)	16 (31%)	13 (25%)	6 (12%)	3.04

When asked to rate statements comparing their course success rate ISS to their department's most recent year's course success rate, roughly 80% of respondents agreed that their department performance was above the minimum set standard that was calculated and provided for them.

Q4. What kinds of insights do you have about your most recent year's performance relative to the minimum standard? Why do you think you are falling above or below this standard? (n=47)

Feedback was gathered on respondents' perceptions on factors that might impact their course success rates falling above or below the set standard; roughly half of the respondents identified faculty as having the greatest impact. Identified themes regarding faculty were split by positive and negative impacts to better understand the respondents' perceptions:

Positive factors that impact course success rates:

- faculty commitment and effort
- high quality of instruction
- more engagement between faculty and students (i.e. use of Progress Report in MySite to nudge students)
- students meeting with counselors

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[1] Scale Values: Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4, Strongly Disagree = 5

Negative factors that impact course success rates:

- not enough full-time faculty
- lack of professional development opportunities for faculty (i.e. grade norming and teaching pedagogies)

Curriculum was another common theme that was identified by department chairs as a factor in course success rates fluctuating above or below the set standard. Respondents suggested that offering a variety of courses and maintaining the relevancy of course content are critical in student success. The following comments from respondents highlight the aforementioned themes:

Comments about faculty in regards to performance versus the standard:

"The Faculty have made a concerted effort to ensure better student performance."

"The division ISS exceeds the minimum standard due to efforts of the faculty and staff to promote student success."

"We fall above recent minimum standard, in part, due to quality, student-centered instruction and professors."

"We give enough individual attention to students, so they feel nurtured and less likely to drop out. We advise them prior to registering to their courses, so they understand what to expect and what level they should register for. The level of teaching in our department is high."

"While we discuss and provide some training in successful pedagogy, it is hard to ascertain if there are causal relationships. There is also the concern that grade inflation accounts for the improved success rate."

Comments about curriculum in regards to performance versus the standard:

"Our department works diligently to put forth courses that are of current interest to students."

"Curriculum is kept current and supplemental support helps students succeed."

Q5. When thinking about these data, what kinds of program improvements would you like to make to help ensure that successful course completion rates continue to improve? Specifically, what action steps would you take? (n=54)

Respondents were asked to suggest action steps and program improvements that would increase their course success rates; 57% stated that faculty are a critical factor in success. Their responses were categorized into five overarching sub-themes displayed below:

Proposed Action Steps Related to Faculty for Programmatic Course Success Rate Improvement
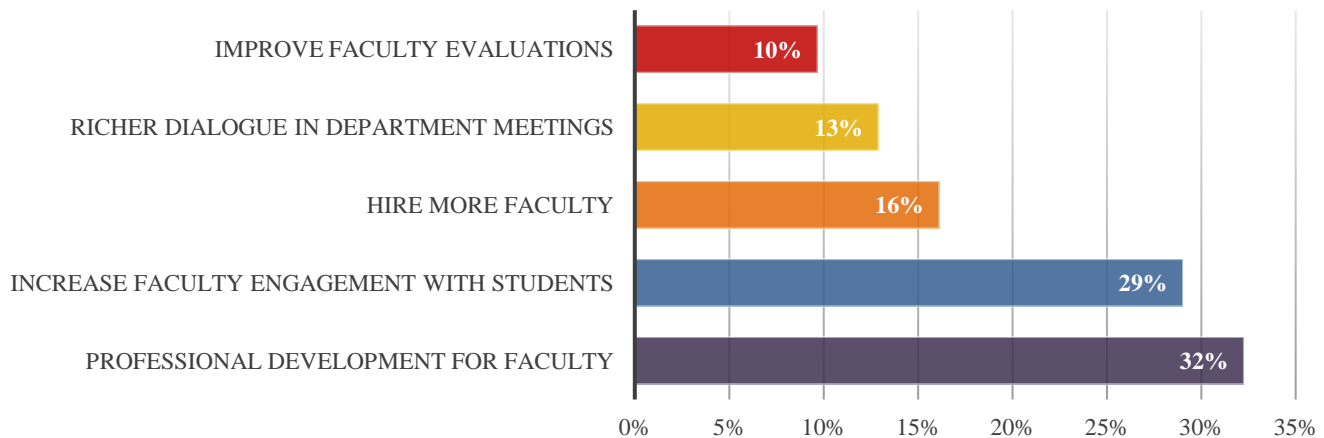
Increasing faculty engagement with students and offering more professional development for faculty were the two top categories that were identified as possibly having a positive impact on courses success rate. Respondents suggested offering professional development activities related to grade norming, sharing effective teaching strategies, training for associate faculty, and academic assessment of student work. Regarding faculty engagement with students, responses suggested that having more communication with students may help in identifying potential issues in academic performance, educate students on dropping their classes prior to census date, and keep the students engaged.

Below are a few comments that highlight their thoughts:

Comments related to professional development for faculty for program improvements:

"More professional development is needed, including academic assessment of student work and grade norming activities that elicit conversations among faculty to produce greater self-awareness of how each faculty person assesses as compared to other colleagues."

"…ongoing professional development and in-service trainings for faculty will continue to be encouraged and implemented to assure the delivery of relevant and current industry-related curriculum."

"…professional development within the department that focuses on curriculum, pedagogy, etc."

"Faculty will be attending workshops conducted by peers to help standardize the courses."

Comments related to increased faculty engagement with students for program improvements:

"Encourage faculty to contact students who start missing classes."

"I think if we improve communication between the students and instructors, this will improve our course completion and success rates."

"I would advise students who are not planning to complete the course to drop before the census date. I also think our instructors try to give students as long as possible to stay in the course before dropping them, and then this is after the census date."

"Earlier contact with students who may demonstrate a need for help/assistance."

"Find the time to constantly be following up and contacting students regarding their progress or lack of progress in the class..."

Comments related to richer dialogue in department meetings for program improvements:

"...discussing in department meetings and what instructors can do (such as emails to students about participation)"
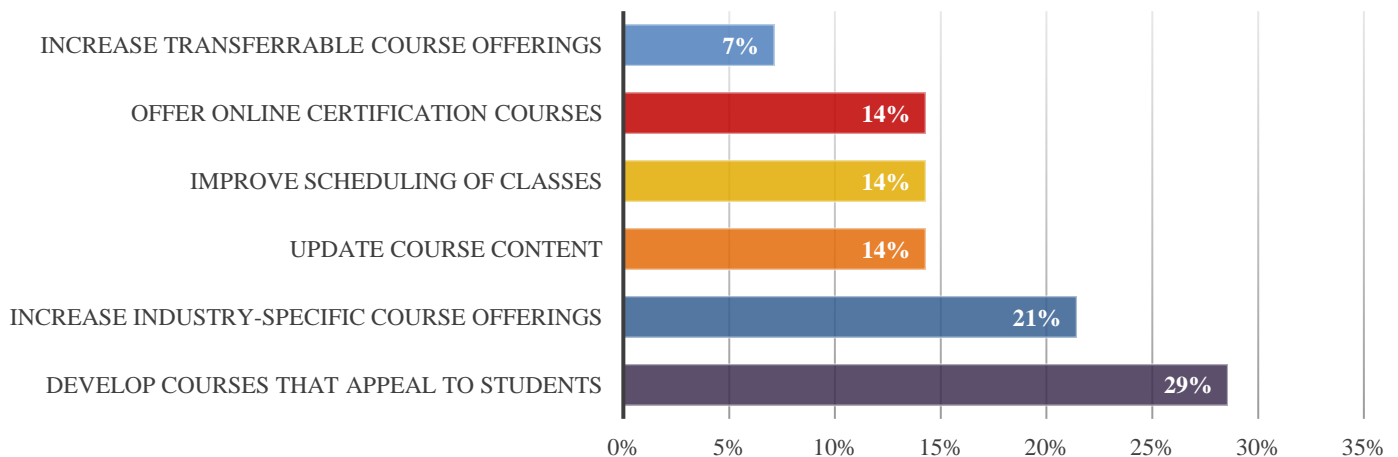
"Share effective strategies used by faculty who report high or improved success and completion."

"Setting department-wide criteria for dropping students prior to the no penalty drop date in online classes. This can include something simple such as having an assignment due the first week and dropping all students who fail to complete the assignment and/or log in. Chair sending out reminder emails to faculty prior to the no penalty drop dates. Department-wide discussions about failure/drop rates in all classes to develop strategies to increase student success."

"We should discuss as a department our standards and expectations. We should engage in grade norming exercises as a prompt for these discussion and in order to check the consistency of our standards."

Curricular changes was another common theme that was identified as an area that may lead to improvement in course success rate (30%). Department chairs proposed action steps for curricular changes which are categorized in the chart below:

Proposed Action Steps Related to Curricular Changes for Programmatic Course Success Rate Improvement

Category	Percent
INCREASE TRANSFERRABLE COURSE OFFERINGS	7%
OFFER ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSES	14%
IMPROVE SCHEDULING OF CLASSES	14%
UPDATE COURSE CONTENT	14%
INCREASE INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC COURSE OFFERINGS	21%
DEVELOP COURSES THAT APPEAL TO STUDENTS	29%

Of those who identified curriculum changes, roughly 30% of them felt that developing courses that appeal to students and 21% thought increasing industry-specific course offerings would increase course success rates.

Below are a few comments related to curricular changes for program improvements:

*"Revise the ****** program to better meet the needs of the students; specifically, give them more choices to tailor their education and experiences to meet their interests & needs."*

"We plan to continue development of our podcasts to enhance the quality of our classes. The more dynamic these classes are, the better students do in the courses."

"We hope to provide more transferable classes and introduce an AAT to ensure transfer."

"CQI program curriculum to reflect state of the industry training standards."

Other, less prominent themes that were identified in impacting course success rates included increasing efforts in the areas of counseling, outreach, tutoring and marketing.

Q6. When thinking about your department's program review, what about these data could help inform your program review? (n=39)

Department chairs had varying responses for this question with over 50% not responding or stating they had no suggestions. Of those that responded, almost half of them felt that trend data on course success rate provided context for the general direction of particular courses. Specifically, respondents stated monitoring these trends would be helpful in program review to ensure areas of instruction that need improvement, course offerings and course content evaluation and identifying necessary resources. A smaller proportion of respondents stated that reviewing success rate trend data would be useful in facilitating discussions in department meetings to stress the need to improve student success.

Below are a few comments related to using success rate trend data to inform curricular changes:

"Use data to assist Department Chairs in writing Program Review and thereby identify areas of instruction that need to be changed."

"These data will help inform the program review in the area of identifying ongoing needed resources to support and assure continued growth in the ISS and student success (completion rates & successful achievement of SLOs)."

"Trending data is valuable because it shows a general direction. Having the data broken down by course is helpful for zeroing in on a specific course that may need additional focus and attention."

"This data would be the great confirmation for our direction and efforts improving the courses and program."

*"We include this information to try and obtain additional funding to grow the ***** program."*

Conclusion

       To date, the evaluation of course success rates has been an important factor in assessing the success of a program and now it has become a requirement by our accrediting body. The majority of respondents reported that their course success rates are moving in an upward pattern and measuring above the minimum ISS for their department. The two most common themes that were identified by 57 department chairs, across all responses, as having the greatest impact on course success rates were **<u>faculty</u>** and **<u>curriculum</u>**. Specific recommendations that were related to the faculty included:

1. Increase faculty to faculty engagement
    a. Provide more professional development activities (i.e. grade norming and successful teaching strategies)
    b. Richer dialogue in department meetings
2. Increase faculty to student engagement.
    a. Increase use of MySite's Progress Report
    b. Increase communication to address potential academic problems (i.e. dropping after census)
3. The need to hire more faculty

In regards to curriculum changes, respondents recommended the following:

1. Better scheduling to accommodate students
2. Updating course content so that it is relevant
3. Increasing course offerings so that it is more appealing to students (i.e. industry specific and transferrable courses).

These results lead to the conclusion that shifting focus to the recommended solutions provided by department chairs regarding faculty and curriculum changes could potentially increase course success rates thus increasing the minimum ISS, which ultimately leads to the success of our students. In order to gauge improvement over time, this study should be conducted annually after specific activities/measures have been instituted.

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Appendix A

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Survey Questionnaire:

1. [Name], Please review the data below. The [Department Name] Department's successful course completion rate trends are as follows:

Successful Course Completion Rate for the 2012/2013 year
Successful Course Completion Rate for the 2013/2014 year.
Successful Course Completion Rate for the 2014/2015 year.
Successful Course Completion Rate for the 2015/2016 year.

Please describe your understanding of these trends.

○ My department's successful course completion rates are going up.

○ My department's successful course completion rates are going down.

○ My department's successful course completion rates are flat/stagnant.

2. Why do you believe that the trends are going this direction?

3. When comparing the **minimum standard (ISS) of** [department ISS] to your most **recent year's performance** [recent course success rate], please address the following questions:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Our department performance is below this minimum standard.	○	○	○	○	○
Our department performance is above this minimum standard.	○	○	○	○	○
Our department performance is at or equal to this minimum standard.	○	○	○	○	○

4. What kinds of insights on the [Department Name] department do you have about your most recent year's performance relative to the minimum standard? Why do you think you are falling above or below this standard?

5. When thinking about these data, what kinds of **program improvements** would you like to make to help ensure that successful course completion rates continue to improve? Specifically, what **action steps** would you take?

6. When thinking about your department's program review, what about these data could help inform your program review?