Focusing on the Core Essentials:
A potential Quality Enhancement Plan to promote the success of Brevard Community College students

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"Students' abilities exert the single most powerful influence on the level, quality, type, and standard of curriculum and instruction offered in every program in every school. Other influences- instructors' tendencies, externally administered examinations and licensure requirements, the entry levels imposed by succeeding courses in the same and other institutions- are of lesser importance. Nothing that is too distant from the students' comprehension can be taught successfully. All questions of academic standards, college-level and remedial courses, textbook readability and coverage, and course pacing and sequence come to that."

(Cohen & Brawer, 2008)

Basic Skills as the BCC Quality Enhancement Plan:
The Core Essentials

Very often, the idea of basic skills in college students is equated with remedial studies. The Research &

Planning Group of California Community Colleges team defined basic skills as "those foundation skills… which

are necessary for students to succeed in college level work" (Success, 2007). Others have defined remediation as

activities for "students who initially do not have the skills, experience, or orientation necessary to perform at a

level that the institutions or instructors recognize as 'regular' for those students" (Grubb, 1999). The definitions

and terms are often used interchangeably in practice. For the purposes of this paper, a student's basic skills are

considered to encompass the foundational academic subjects of math, reading, and writing, as well as the basic

supporting factors that lead to success in college. These include not only study skills but the ability to access,

assess, and use college resources (like the library, learning labs, tutors, computers, etc.) and information (like

internet sources, journals, textbooks, etc.) to facilitate learning and support coursework. The difficulty is that

students with diverse needs- those with rusty or poor study skills, those with language barriers, those with time

or access difficulties, those with learning disabilities, those with overall academic difficulties, or those with

difficulty in just one subject- get combined into one group: students who lack basic skills. While addressing the

complex topic of college students lacking basic skills might appear to be a daunting task to take on as a college-

wide initiative, it also provides for an exciting opportunity to make a real change in the way Brevard Community

College delivers our core abilities and produces students who are better prepared to enter the job force armed

with confidence in their ability to learn, regardless of their program of study at BCC. A focus on the basic skills of

our students will encompass many of the other white paper subject areas, reach all of our students, and

increase the possibilities for teaching and learning in all of our academic disciplines.

<u>**The Need for a Focus on Basic Skills at BCC**</u>

The need for improvement in the basic skills of community college students is not unique to Brevard County. One national longitudinal study that found that 61% of new entrants to community colleges of traditional age enrolled in at least one remedial course in reading, writing, or math (Adelman, 2005). Based on data from the Fall of 2000, it was calculated that 42% of all new community college students, including all age groups, enrolled in at least one remedial course (NCES, 2003). In another national study, 44% of first time community college students enrolled in between one and three developmental courses, 14% in more than three, and only 42% take no remediation at all (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006). This suggests that more than half of community college students in the nation are considered to be below accepted academic levels in at least one subject area. Considering statewide data, in California, 70% of entering community college students were placed in remedial math courses and 42% were placed in remedial English courses (Success, 2007).

Using statistics from the Florida Department of Education, Cohen and associates state that 23% of the class sections offered in Florida community colleges were in remedial courses (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). This highlights the huge amount of resources already allocated to what is often overlooked as a critical part of the community college mission. Looking closer to home, we can look at data within Brevard Community College itself by considering BCC's first time in college (FTIC) students (Figure 1). In the fall of 2010, out of 1940 FTIC students, 1085 or 55.93% needed prep courses over all of the BCC campuses. Broken down by campus, the range of FTIC students requiring prep course work was 50%-65%. In the spring of 2011, there were a total of 813 FTIC students enrolled at BCC, out of which 509 or 62.61% required prep level course work. Broken down by campus, the range was between 56% and 75% of FTIC students requiring prep courses. Although there may be different reasons for the need for remedial courses, and different skill sets lacking in the students who tested at these levels, it is clear that many of our students are not prepared to handle the coursework at BCC on a level consistent with our defined course objectives without remedial support.
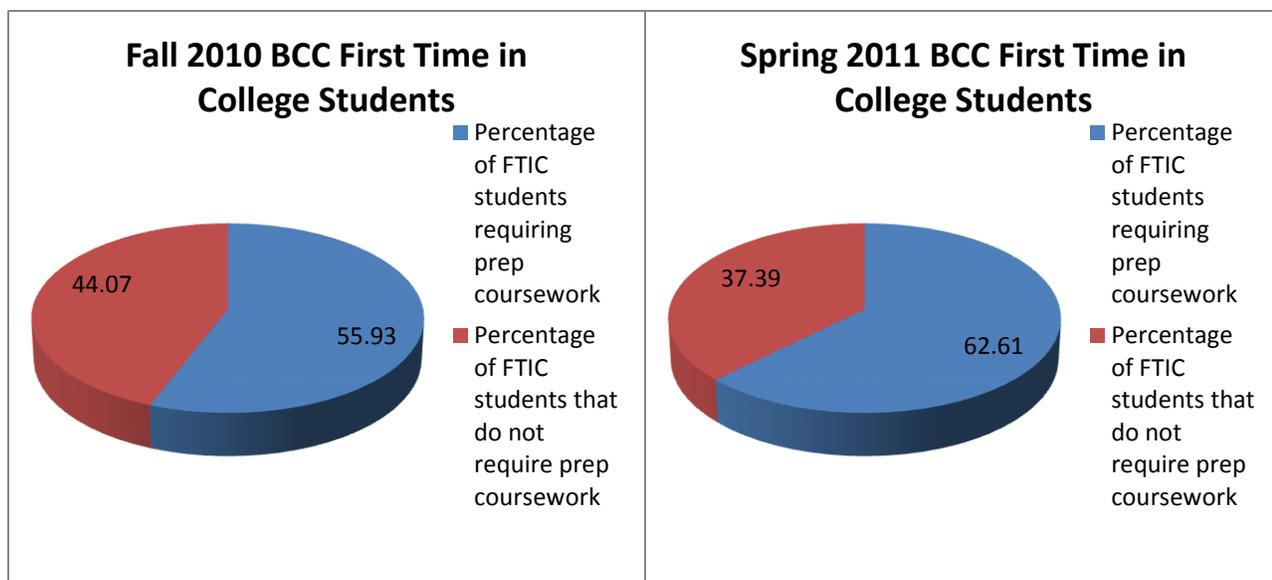
Figure 1. Percentage of Brevard Community College first time in college students requiring prep coursework.

Besides these convincing statistics, we can look at the thoughts of the students, faculty, staff, and community stake holders themselves by examining the QEP survey results. In the spring of 2011, the QEP focus group of the SACS subcommittee under the Academic Affairs Committee released a three question, open ended survey to students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community partners. The survey was marketed within the college and community and distributed via paper copies and online. Of the 649 student surveys, approximately 40% of the completed surveys (all three questions answered) mentioned the Student Life Skills (SLS) course, the tutoring available at BCC, the availability and scope of the learning, math and writing labs, or prep classes in some way. Given the open ended nature of the survey, this common theme is a strong indication that these subjects relating to basic skills are in the forefront of the student consciousness and strongly impact the student experience here at BCC. Out of 182 completed responses (answered all three questions) by faculty, staff, and community stakeholders, approximately 44% of the completed surveys addressed the topics of basic skills, the SLS course, tutoring, and the availability of resources like the learning labs, math labs, writing labs, and the library. Again, because basic skills were so frequently mentioned by faculty of different departments, staff, and

members of the community, it is obvious that this topic is relevant to all disciplines. If we select a project that supports the acquisition of basic skills by BCC students we will be able to greatly and positively impact their educational experience. A good QEP topic must have a major and important impact on student learning and enhance student success. A QEP supporting the acquisition of basic skills by our students to prepare them for all other academic endeavors at BCC seems like the ideal project.

Ways to Implement Basic Skills at BCC

Because "Basic Skills" is such a broad topic, enhancing such skills in students has been tackled elsewhere with a variety of techniques, including the SLS course, remedial or prep courses, and focused interventions. It is important to note that because of the enormity of the topic, it is likely that a more comprehensive, multi-faceted approach will be necessary to attempt to improve student success.

Specialized Courses:

One such technique might include an augmentation of the Student Life Skills Course (SLS course). Besides academic deficiencies, students often come to the community college with other deficits, like poorly formed goals for their education and careers, lack of good study habits, and little awareness of how to succeed within the college setting (Boylan, 2002) (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). A study of 36,123 FTIC students entering community colleges in 1999 showed that after five years, those that had completed a SLS course were considerably more likely to have earned an award or still be enrolled (Education, 2006). Students who might need more preparation to be at the expected academic level in college benefit as well. Studies have shown that in Florida, completion of an SLS course is associated with later academic success in students needing at least one developmental education course (Ewell, 2007). Even rigorous statistical testing of the Florida Department of Education results showed that despite the fact that not all SLS courses teach the same set of topics or same groups of students, there is a positive difference in students' outcomes related to participation in an SLS course in Florida (Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007).

Remedial Coursework:

Another approach might be to emphasize developmental or remedial coursework and finely tune the placement test scores requiring developmental work. North Carolina Community Colleges used ACT and ETS data along with course grades of over 150,000 students to "re-cut" placement test scores based on skills such as sentence skills, reading comprehension, arithmetic and algebra in order to more accurately meet their student's needs (Ewell, 2007). With our transition to the PERT from the CPT, we are in a unique position to focus on our student's basic skills needs as the cut scores are determined. The developmental coursework itself could also be more focused. One approach might be to better determine the types of developmental coursework, and extent of this work, that a student is required to complete. For example, there is a difference between skills that haven't been used in some time in some returning students versus some students that are simply lacking skills. In a study of 30,000 first time traditional students and 5700 older students, the Community College Research Center found older students were more likely to need remediation as a refresher: "It is likely that older students, having been out of school longer, were more likely to need some remediation (but not a lot) because their basic skills were merely 'rusty' rather than grossly deficient" (Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2006).

In general, it is accepted that prep courses help students. One meta-analysis found academic interventions like remedial programs "at least modestly effective in helping students overcome deficiencies in their pre-collegiate academic preparation and associated disadvantages" (Pascarella & Terenzini, How college affects students: Vol. 2. A third decade of research, 2005). In the Florida Community College System, 38% of students who completed remedial math, compared with 47% of those who did not require remediation, passed college algebra (Colleges, 2005). In addition, the Florida Community College System showed that 56% of students who completed remedial writing, and 64% of those who did not require remediation, passed English composition (Colleges, 2005). These modest gains show that remedial programs can work, but could possibly provide greater success rates for students. Considering that a recent study found that less than one quarter of

community college students who enroll in developmental education actually complete a degree or certificate within eight years of enrollment in college, while almost 40 percent of community college students who do not enroll in any developmental education course complete a degree or certificate in the same time period, it does seem that providing remedial coursework alone is certainly not a perfect way to improve basic skills in students (Bailey & Cho, 2010). This is compounded when one examines the cost of remedial programs; in a report from the Florida Legislature, remediation at Florida community colleges in 2004-2005 was determined to cost $118.3 million, 53% of which was paid by the state, representing 4.5% of the 2004-2005 Florida Community College operating budget of $1.39 billion (Accountability, 2006).

Comprehensive Programs

Linked Courses:

Finally, isolated courses, even those like SLS courses, and "skill and drill" developmental or remediation courses are considered less effective than comprehensive programs that link SLS courses with redesigned developmental coursework in a supported environment that fosters a learner's sense of community. The really exciting work that is being done in this arena focuses on more thorough, inclusive programs. These programs might restructure the curriculum, develop new institutional structures, or employ specific instructional strategies; linking basic skills courses with credit-bearing courses, implementing supplemental instruction, and establishing learning communities are key (Levin & Calcagno, 2007). Successes attained through learning assistance centers- including career counseling, tutoring, and other enhancements- are also considered as components of a well designed remediation program (Levin & Calcagno, 2007). For example, Massachusetts Bay Community College has stopped offering a stand-alone reading curriculum or any computer-assisted instruction for remedial reading. Instead, they have integrated developmental coursework into the sequence of writing courses, including a portfolio-assessment process that allows students to progress based on their skill mastery and competencies rather than in some defined sequence of courses. This program is linked to the availability of

professional learning specialists in writing, math, and science, who also teach college-skills courses, as well as peer tutors in an Academic Achievement Center (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006).

College Readiness Work:

Normandale Community College in Minnesota has developed increasing levels of "attention and intervention" for students placing into increasing amounts of college readiness work; in this way, those students with the most need are also given the most support (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). Schoolcraft College in Michigan has developed a very interesting Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) program, where successful students identified by faculty are paid to retake the class, serve as a faculty assistant, and assist with study groups (Roueche & Roueche, 1999). A related Writing Fellows Program (based on one at Brown University) identifies students who are excellent writers and hires them to serve as peer reviewers in any course requesting a Writing Fellow. They are also using Paired Reading Courses, which are learning communities where reading and study skills are linked to content courses, allowing students to learn how to read specific textbooks and how to take lecture notes in the linked courses (Roueche & Roueche, 1999).

Writing Center – Library Partnership:

University of Central Florida has developed a joint use library and writing center as a part of their QEP on Information Fluency that promotes the gathering, evaluation and use of information through environment, enhancement and engagement (Florida, What if: A Foundation for Information Fluency. QEP Detailed Task & Assessment Plan, 2006). In this writing center, located in the joint-use library on the BCC Cocoa campus, UCF has focused several of their enhancement initiatives, including the training of student scholar and peer mentors and the development of supported online learning objects, modules and tutorials focusing on technology literacy and information literacy (Florida, What if: A Foundation for Information Fluency. QEP Detailed Task & Assessment Plan, 2006). In this way, they have managed to increase the resources available to their satellite campus students and the students at BCC, many of whom plan to transfer to UCF after graduation.

Freshman Experience:

Santa Ana College has developed the Freshman Experience Program (FEP) that focuses on learning communities that are based on courses linked through thematic content or skill development. There are 14 pairs of linked classes available to students, such as counseling (focusing on career/life planning and personal exploration), math (elementary algebra to statistics), and English (from one level below freshman English to literature and composition) (Success, 2007). The FEP teachers and counselors work as a committed team, relating classroom assignments, activities and tests, and paired teachers are present in both classes to ensure continuity. The level of student engagement is high; within a single semester, students are involved in at least one pair of linked classes, participate in workshops (like study skills, financial aid, career exploration, and leadership), a counseling session and additional instruction if it is deemed necessary (Success, 2007). On average, students spend approximately 8 hours per week in classes, workshops, and counseling sessions. The program targets 300-500 incoming freshmen each year and operates at a cost of about $180,000 per year (Success, 2007).

These case studies illustrate clearly that there are exciting, holistic ways to address the issue of students lacking basic skills while benefiting the college as a whole. In researching these larger scale ideas to address basic skills, California Community Colleges Basic Skills Initiative defined a total of 26 practices within four major categories as a result of their extensive literature search, including more than 250 sources cited, on basic skills programs offered at the community college level. The four major categories they identified as "manageable areas of emphasis" were organizational and administrative practices (including choices regarding structure, management, and organization); program components (including a number of specific services and policies); staff development (outlining importance of strong training and support components); and instructional practices (exploring highly effective pedagogical techniques) (Success, 2007). The complete breakdown of their identified best practices is listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of Best Practices Identified by California Community Colleges Basic Skills Initiative (Success, 2007)

A. Organizational and Administrative Practices

 A.1. Developmental education is a clearly stated institutional priority.
 A.2. A clearly articulated mission based on a shared, overarching philosophy drives the developmental education program. Clearly specified goals and objectives are established for developmental courses and programs.
 A.3. The developmental education program is centralized or is highly coordinated.
 A.4. Institutional policies facilitate student completion of necessary developmental coursework as early as possible in the educational sequence.
 A.5. A comprehensive system of support services exists, and is characterized by a high degree of integration among academic and student support services.
 A.6. Faculty who are both knowledgeable and enthusiastic about developmental education are recruited and hired to teach in the program.
 A.7. Institutions manage faculty and student expectations regarding developmental education.

B. Program Components

 B.1. Orientation, assessment, and placement are mandatory for all new students.
 B.2. Regular program evaluations are conducted, results are disseminated widely, and data are used to improve practice.
 B.3. Counseling support provided is substantial, accessible, and integrated with academic courses/programs.
 B.4. Financial aid is disseminated to support developmental students. Mechanisms exist to ensure that developmental students are aware of such opportunities, and are provided with assistance to apply for and acquire financial aid.

C. Staff Development

 C.1. Administrators support and encourage faculty development in basic skills, and the improvement of teaching and learning is connected to the institutional mission.
 C.2. The faculty play a primary role in needs assessment, planning, and implementation of staff development programs and activities in support of basic skills programs.
 C.3. Staff development programs are structured and appropriately supported to sustain them as ongoing efforts related to institutional goals for the improvement of teaching and learning.
 C.4. Staff development opportunities are flexible, varied, and responsive to developmental needs of individual faculty, diverse student populations, and coordinated programs/services.
 C.5. Faculty development is clearly connected to intrinsic and extrinsic faculty reward structures.

D. Instructional Practices

 D.1. Sound principles of learning theory are applied in the design and delivery of courses in the developmental program.
 D.2. Curricula and practices that have proven to be effective within specific disciplines are employed.
 D.3. The developmental education program addresses holistic development of all aspects of the student. Attention is paid to the social and emotional development of the students as well as to their cognitive growth.
 D.4. Culturally Responsive Teaching theory and practices are applied to all aspects of the developmental instructional programs and services.
 D.5. A high degree of structure is provided in developmental education courses.
 D.6. Developmental education faculty employ a variety of instructional methods to accommodate student diversity.
 D.7. Programs align entry/exit skills among levels and link course content to college-level performance requirements.
 D.8. Developmental education faculty routinely share instructional strategies.
 D.9. Faculty and advisors closely monitor student performance.
 D.10.   Programs provide comprehensive academic support mechanisms, including the use of trained tutors.

Success: Proof Improvement in Basic Skills Can Work

There are many ways to assess whether programs to improve student basic skills are working. The actual parameters to be measured need to be determined by the same committee of people who determine which basic skills, exactly would be focused on as a result of the Basic Skills QEP process at BCC. But this is all data that is already collected, so the process of assessment at BCC would be a matter of organization, and should not need to be a new program or require new collection methods. The California Community College Basic Skills Initiative showed increases, albeit modest increases, in student progress and achievement, students who completed 30 or more units, basic skills course completion, basic skills course improvement, and ESL course improvement within only three years of the implementation of the Basic Skills Initiative (Colleges A. S., 2009).

Chaffey College developed a very intensive effort to collect and analyze their data. Before implementing its Basic Skills Transformation program, researchers at Chaffey College created a research methodology that includes "data collection and tracking mechanisms, operational definitions, identification of experimental and control groups and baseline periods, and tangible measurable outcomes. From this assessment data, faculty, staff, and administrators could evaluate the effectiveness of parts of the program" (Success, 2007). In a more qualitative manner, Copper Mountain College has initiated a "Student Success Hour" to bring faculty and administrators together to review data, discuss program effectiveness, and plan for improvement (Success, 2007).

Cabrillo College has found good results with their Watsonville Digital Bridge Academy, which is focused on young, underprepared students who are traditionally at high risk for college attrition. The approach included a sequenced program of academic and career-oriented classes paired with the appropriate support services aimed at encouraging learner motivation, self-knowledge, and self-discipline (Success, 2007). This leads to a "bridge semester," which is an accelerated term that concludes with in-depth study projects that require students to define a problem, collect and analyze data, draw conclusions and present their recommendations.

Pilot projects serving approximately 125 students have shown that all of the students, including those considered "high risk," completed the foundation program and 83% successfully completed the 19.5 unit bridge semester; the subsequent semester yielded a 79% completion rate (Success, 2007). This type of success, even in a small scale has been examined for replication at other Bay Area colleges.

Fullerton College in California has a Transfer Achievement Program (TAP) that is based on the goals of increasing success in basic skills courses in English and math as well as encouraging student persistence, degree completion, and transfer. Now an established program at the college, it has been called a learning community that has cohorts of students moving through a series of courses facilitated by participating faculty from a variety of disciplines (including humanities, social sciences and natural sciences), peer tutors, and full time embedded counselors. TAP students commit to one additional hour per week for each TAP class and sign a learning contract as part of the program, and they are also expected to attend a mandatory meeting with a TAP counselor each semester to review progress; other supporting activities are available and encouraged but not mandatory. The college takes this initiative seriously, with awards ceremonies, faculty participation and college-wide recognition. The success of the program has been gauged by the fact that participants in TAP exceed college benchmarks in all areas: high student satisfaction, high faculty evaluations, and high faculty satisfaction. TAP students have higher course retention and success rates (higher than college average, higher than average in comparable courses), higher term to term persistence, and higher graduation and transfer rates (Success, 2007). This program illustrates the types of success that can be achieved when energy is spent preparing students for their college career and fostering a learning community.

Many other examples can be found in the literature of colleges who found increases in concrete, measureable benchmarks when initiatives were adopted that focused on increasing the basic skills of the students: reading, writing, math, and college support services like study skills assistance, tutoring, and fostering a sense of community. It is not a fluke. These programs work.

Sustainability

Another benefit of adopting the Basic Skills topic as our QEP is the ability of such a project to become institutionalized as a long-term initiative to benefit our student population, rather than an expensive but temporary project designed to satisfy SACS. The broad nature of this type of project makes it very manageable because it can be done in stages or phases with pilot projects, rather than in total, immediate adoption. For example, the largest schedule projects under this QEP might include changes to the learning labs as well as enhancements or links to the prep coursework in math, writing, and reading. But there are countless other smaller schedule projects that can be done under this QEP as well.

As an example, the University of Central Florida developed a QEP focusing on Information Literacy (Florida, 2006). Their largest scale projects lasted four years, and included salaries and equipment in the University Libraries and Center for Distributed Learning for the development of specialized digital Information Fluency modules for use by students. But they also had six large-level projects that were funded and lasted approximately three years, including the development of the joint use writing center in Cocoa. Lastly, they opened up grant money for 66 smaller projects to be funded for $1000 (1 year projects) or $3000 (2 year projects) each for academic or library faculty, student support professionals, students and staff to design projects that will enhance student learning in the area of Information Fluency (Florida, Enhancement Grant Recipients). Because the plans were permitted to be curricular or co-curricular, many topics could be covered under the one single title of "Information Fluency." Also, because each plan is required to show how and where student learning will be enhanced, assessment for the overall QEP is being done along the way for SACS. And the grants were awarded to an amazing variety of academic disciplines, including biology, physics, philosophy, hospitality management, political science, marketing, history, sociology, English, psychology, education, and health professions, among others, as well as college services, such as the UCF libraries, career services, office of

student financial assistance, and student development and enrollment services (Florida, Enhancement Grant Recipients).

With Basic Skills being a broad type of QEP topic, much like Information Fluency, there is the potential to truly change the learning atmosphere at our college by including all disciplines and support programs impacting our students, as long as there is some tie-in to basic skills. Most of the other potential QEP topics chosen for white paper development could actually be included as important phases to be developed under the title of the Basic Skills QEP, as well as allowing for funding of projects that address student challenges like study skills, time management, conducting research, job searching, resume writing, etc. that would be difficult to achieve with any other more specific QEP topic. Add to that the ability to include faculty and staff professional development, academic and student support programs like financial aid and registration, and smaller project grants that allow pinpointing of specific needs within any curricular or co-curricular college area, and BCC has developed an all-encompassing program designed to elevate all student learning at the college. The inclusiveness and scope of this Basic Skills Initiative makes this the type of project that is perfectly suited to be Brevard Community College's Quality Enhancement Plan for SACS.

Imagine This

A comprehensive, focused project could be undertaken in strategic areas and in manageable phases at BCC to improve our students' basic skills through the development of a true Teaching and Learning Center paired with refocused preparatory coursework and a re-energized SLS course. These Teaching and Learning Centers on each campus could provide combined tutoring centers with full-time faculty tutors, staff, and part time student/peer consultants (from the honors program, PTK, UCF, or with service learning) that are available to students. The tutors for the most commonly repeated courses could be paid and embedded, meaning they

actually attend classes so that they understand any specific challenges students might have in a course, and would be responsible for organizing study groups on the course material.

The Center could provide meaningful connections to students between entry level courses, SLS courses and prep classes. This could be accomplished through reorganization of current student support programs, requirements in some classes for counseling sessions, tutoring sessions or consultations for particular projects, reliance on the library and Center resources for assignments in all entry level courses, and could even include commercially developed software packages to address specific basic skills training needs as seen fit by BCC faculty. There could be space for students to meet and study in groups with or without an instructor, and there should be ample media technologies available for student use. It could also be a centralized location for students to get information; workshops could be presented on financial aid, registration, ESL programs, Angel, study skill techniques, time management, BCCares, etc.

The Center would actively support faculty development through workshops, in-service opportunities, faculty training, professional development and various faculty projects. Grants could be available for BCC faculty and staff to develop programs or products that increase the basic skills they find lacking within their discipline. Students, staff, and faculty would be working closely together in a concentrated effort to improve student learning in a measurable way that benefits all involved. In short, it could create a sense of community at our college, benefitting all of our students by focusing on the basic skills students need to succeed.

In summary, our students' learning could be enhanced throughout their BCC career by addressing Basic Skills acquisition as the crucial foundation for an effective education experience. This QEP is an exciting way to address what our students have told us they need: tools to help them get the most out of the excellent academic possibilities already provided by BCC.

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