MESA Culture of Success: A Move Towards Praxis
A Model for the Inner Core of a Learning Culture of Success

Foundation for Learning (Learning Styles, Personal Strengths, Learning Strategies, Interaction w/Faculty, Learning Resources, Education Planning, Emotional Intelligence)

Academic Support & Social Integration (MESA Program Center)
Professional Development Activities
Internships & Research
Summer Bridge Program
Mentoring

Culture of Effective Leadership (Leading Change, Culture of Collaboration, Crucial Conversations)

Secret to Success (African Village Story)
Capstone (Skills, Knowledge, Wisdom, Freedom)

Learning Culture of Success with a Language of Success
Victim/Creator

Validation of Students
Increased Sense of Belonging
Internal Locus of Control

Self-Efficacy
Learned Optimism (Empowerment)

Student Engagement & High Expectations
(Proven Interventions for STEM Student Success)

Resiliency (Competence in the face of significant challenges to achievement)
Emotional Intelligence

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Praxis - Definition: the practical application of a theory (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)
City College MESA Program motto: engage, educate, empower

Overview

This is a summary for the model for the inner core of a learning culture of success - the praxis in the City College MESA Program. Along with a detailed background, key program practices and associated learning theories are highlighted. Resulting from a literature review, a reference list is included to disseminate the theory behind the model. Also available online: the reference list is provided with links to online sources. Links are also provided to MESA videos and associated MESA resources. Visit the San Diego City College website at www.sdcity.edu (search “praxis for learning model”).

The City College MESA Program was established in Fall 2000, and it implements the comprehensive components of the successful statewide MESA model for academic support in math, engineering and science. Since 2000, the implementation of the City College MESA Program has evolved into a learning culture approach for increasing student success. This evolution has been student-centered and influenced by many in and out of the City College community, especially by successful MESA students. Thanks to all who have contributed to the evolution of the MESA Program culture, including Dr. Patrick Velasquez - UCSD, Dr. Kristin Cole - City College, Dr. Larry Alfred - UCSD, Dr. Luis Perez - City College and Dr. Shannon Godwin - York Technical College.

- Background
- MESA Practices
- Theory - Reference List

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Background

Student success requires more than simply student engagement and high expectations.

The City College MESA Program is the best academic support and transfer program for students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) majors. The secret is "culture"! The MESA program has an explicit learning culture of success, with a language of success, which is critical for our students, who are typically first generation college students and lack the social and cultural capital that is necessary for success in college. More than a program or community, MESA is family, with shared cultural beliefs, practices, and behaviors designed for student success.

The "learning culture" approach produces a powerful, transformational, life-changing experience for students. This result is supported by a large...
body of research on learning and student success. As illustrated above in the model for the inner core of a learning culture of success, the praxis in the MESA culture is connected to many key learning theory constructs related to student achievement and success. Furthermore, “culture” provides a dynamic, fluid, organic vehicle for capturing the MESA praxis. The concept of culture is universal: everyone appreciates culture, either as an ethnic or group culture. Moreover, culture generally defines each of us and is characterized by a shared set of beliefs, practices and behaviors, e.g. when something is cultural, it is accepted without question. Yet, students, especially first-generation college students, attempt to succeed academically, without thorough knowledge and understanding of the learning culture.

Validation of Students, Increased Sense of Belonging & Internal Locus of Control

All MESA students are first trained in the MESA culture and are advised on how best to adapt the culture. The training begins with validation of the students. They bring prior skills, knowledge, abilities, wisdom, experience and culture. They also have gaps in their preparation for college. However, they learn that the MESA culture has high expectations for students and that student potential is not questioned in the MESA culture: all students have great potential! By approaching the MESA culture with an open mind, students learn the culture and use it to fill their gaps and strengthen their foundation – contributing to an increased sense of belonging to a culture of success!

Entry into the MESA culture is through the Victim/Creator doorway and requires student commitment for achieving goals. Victims blame, complain and make excuses – leading to failure. Creators accept responsibility, take action and seek solutions – leading to success. The MESA culture is a Creator culture: Victims are not accepted into the MESA Program. Instead, students are required to commit to choosing the Creator role. This requirement promotes accountability and establishes an internal locus of control as an expectation for all students.

Self-Efficacy and Learned Optimism (Empowerment)

Storytelling is important in all cultures. Stories convey cultural values, beliefs and customs. The MESA culture uses the Secret to Success (a.k.a. African village story) to emphasize what it takes to succeed, especially in STEM majors! The message in the African village story is: when you find something in life that you want as much as you want to breathe, then you will find the secret to success. MESA Creators know that they must and can “breathe” to be successful – contributing to self-efficacy. Also, MESA Creators learn the MESA Capstone, which identifies the purpose for the learning. Academic degrees - Bachelors, Masters and Ph.D’s, are not the purpose for the learning: the purpose must be greater! The Capstone is similar to a star guiding MESA Creators on their journey in life. It identifies four qualities for MESA Creators to aspire to achieve: Skills, Knowledge, Wisdom and Freedom. Skills are important, but the purpose for the learning must be more than just skills. Knowledge must be broader than simply knowledge in STEM – it must extend to many areas, including art, history, philosophy, psychology, etc. Wisdom is achieved with Skills, Knowledge and experience. MESA Creators are taught to seek a worldly wisdom to know what is right and what is wrong. Finally, Skills, Knowledge and Wisdom lead to Freedom – a quality that gives MESA Creators the
ability to define themselves, rather than to be defined by others. Freedom gives MESA Creators the ability to live a life they choose – a life that is fulfilling to them! MESA Creators know that Freedom is not achievable, without Skills, Knowledge and Wisdom. Moreover, with Freedom as the ultimate goal, MESA Creators know that nothing can stop them – contributing to their sense of empowerment!

**Student Engagement and High Expectations**

Impactful student engagement and high expectations for student achievement are accomplished through proven interventions for student success in STEM, as outlined by the National Academies in their 2010 report on Expanding Underrepresented Minority Participation: America's Science and Technology Talent at the Crossroads. As a comprehensive academic support program in STEM with over forty years of success in California, the MESA Program model facilitates academic support and social integration. Additionally, the MESA Program promotes professional development activities, internships and research. Mentoring is accomplished in the MESA learning community through peers, tutors, a MESA Counselor and a MESA Director.

Furthermore, the City College MESA program is a founding member of the San Diego MESA Alliance. Established in 2001, the Alliance is a statewide model for intersegmental regional collaboration in mathematics, engineering and science education for economically disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations. The Alliance serves over 2,200 students in San Diego and Imperial Counties annually through a MESA educational "pipeline" that includes MESA pre-college, community college and university partners. The Alliance mission is to have a collaborative effort in enhancing the MESA pipeline. The Alliance goals are to establish best practices, strategic partnerships, effective coordination of services and development of core curriculum for MESA programs. Through collaboration, each Alliance member is able to provide students with extended opportunities for professional development, internships and research across an intersegmental educational pipeline. Signature Alliance events include training academies, industry shadow day, leadership summit and MESA olympics and robotics competition. The Alliance has also been successful in receiving grant awards for enrichment activities from the National Science Foundation STEM Talent Expansion Program (STEP), California Space Grant Consortium funded by NASA, and San Diego Gas & Electric - Green Academy and Civic Leadership Mentoring. Alliance members include:

**Pre College - MESA Schools Programs (MSPs)**

- Imperial Valley
- San Diego - based at San Diego State University

**Community Colleges - MESA Community College Programs (MCCPs)**

- San Diego City College
- Southwestern College

**University - MESA Engineering Program (MEP)**

- San Diego State University
The Alliance also relies on the support of industry partners on the MESA Industry Advisory Board to provide industry exposure and professional development opportunities for MESA students. Industry partners contribute to the development of a diverse pipeline of future engineers and scientists. With input from industry partners, the Alliance developed a guide (a.k.a. MESAAdvantage Report Card) for the development of MESA Creators, with activities in five key areas, including Academics, Counseling, University Bridging, Industry Exposure and Community Service. MESA Creators use the Report Card to guide and track their progress. Other examples of industry support include:

- Training academies
- Scholarships
- Job shadows
- Internships
- Mentors
- Company tours
- Workshops
- Event volunteers
- Speakers
- Donations of prizes for competitions
- Use of facilities
- Guidance to MESA Directors on program development

Beyond developing scholars, the MESA culture develops leaders. Key in this effort is the Culture of Effective Leadership, which is a collection of three books that are essential as the foundation for leadership development:

1. Leading Change
2. The Culture of Collaboration
3. Crucial Conversations

Change is certain in life. Leaders must know how to handle and lead change. **Leading Change** identifies eight steps for leading change, beginning with establishing a sense of urgency. Beyond leading change, leaders must be able to collaborate with others. **The Culture of Collaboration** identifies the ten cultural elements that are necessary for effective collaboration, beginning with trust. Finally, in addition to leading change and collaborating, leaders must have the ability to communicate. **Crucial Conversations** provides necessary tools for mastering crucial conversations. MESA Creators are trained and are familiar with the three books in the Culture of Effective Leadership. Moreover, MESA Creators serve as leaders in various organizations, including the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, Society of Women Engineers, National Society of Black Engineers, American Medical Student Association, and Phi Theta Kappa.

**Resiliency and Emotional Intelligence**

The cornerstone of the MESA culture is the Foundation for Learning. Similar to starting with the foundation in building a house, MESA Creators know that student success begins with a strong foundation for learning. MESA Creators are trained in the elements that form the MESA Foundation for
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Learning, beginning with training on the ten important factors that are necessary for college readiness and success. These factors were identified by researchers through interviews with successful first-generation college students. The factors are mapped into three categories: 1) **College Readiness Skills and Abilities**; 2) **Background Factors**; and 3) **Non-Traditional Student Self-Concept**. In particular, the culture training focuses on two factors in Category 1 (goal focus and self-advocacy) and two factors in Category 3 (identity as a college student and understanding the college system, college standards and the culture of college). MESA Creators know that success requires self-advocacy, which is defined in the MESA culture to mean that they must fight for themselves!

Other elements in the MESA Foundation for Learning include MESA Law, Learning Styles, Learning Strategies, Interaction with Faculty, Learning Resources, Personal Strengths, Educational Planning and Emotional Intelligence. The MESA Law is the glue in the MESA Foundation for Learning. Designed to promote proactive student behavior, the three laws include: 1) if you don’t write it down, it didn’t happen; 2) keep it simple; and 3) work smarter, not harder. The MESA culture promotes some of the most effective learning strategies, including the basic formula for approaching the learning (a.k.a. the MESA Story for Learning), with key strategies for learning before, during and after class. Interaction with faculty is accomplished through 4-, 8- and 12-week progress reports. MESA Creators meet with faculty for feedback on progress and recommendations for improvement. They also complete a self-assessment on their use of the elements in the Foundation for Learning. A MESA Program Counselor also assists MESA Creators with their educational planning and emotional intelligence. In support of the MESA Foundation for Learning, a rich array of learning resources has been developed, including handouts, online materials, videos and bookmarks! The bookmarks are the artifacts of the culture, as requested by students. The set of six bookmarks include four on learning strategies, a culture bookmarker, and an excellence bookmarker, with items of excellence in the MESA culture. Overall, training in the MESA Foundation for Learning contributes to the students' resiliency.

The praxis in the MESA culture is clearly connected to many key learning theory constructs related to student achievement and success. However, the MESA praxis would not be effective without a home: culture needs a home! Fortunately, the MESA Center serves as an on-campus home base for MESA Creators. With an area of 1,700 sq. ft., the MESA center offers computers, two study rooms, open study space, current textbooks on reserve, offices for the MESA Counselor and MESA Director, and an entry reception area with a couch! Given that we are all products of our personal environments, the MESA Center is effectively a training ground where MESA Creators apply the culture and hone their skills. The culture of success, and language of success, lives and breathes within the MESA Center: it connects everyone and everything in MESA. The MESA Center walls and windows are decorated with cultural reminders of success, including pictures of transfer students and interns, posters of the MESA Capstone and Culture of Effective Leadership, and copies of the MESA Story for Learning. Each MESA Creator is responsible for adapting the MESA culture, however, they are supported by an extended
family of expert MESA Creators who have mastered the culture and demonstrate its power through their success.

It is evident from the literature that the issue of student success is complex. Truly, student success involves many “moving parts,” and it requires more than simply student engagement and high expectations. In the City College MESA Program, culture is the thing that gives purpose to the many moving parts. Furthermore, with a student-centered focus, the evolution of the MESA Program has produced an effective praxis that appeals to students through its authenticity, simplicity and power. MESA Creators own and apply the MESA culture; and they take it wherever they go to create their own success. Moreover, MESA Creators learn that success in STEM requires a fight: they must know it’s a fight, they must want to fight, and they must know how to fight! MESA Creators know how to fight, and they understand that there is no crying in MESA, we’re in this fight to win it!
Language and Culture of Success


Validation of Students


Increased Sense of Belonging


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Internal Locus of Control


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Self-Efficacy


Learned Optimism (Empowerment)


Student Engagement and High Expectations


Resiliency


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Emotional Intelligence


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