

**Study of the Fall 2015 evening students in credit ESL courses
in order to identify ways to improve the ESL program
and increase evening course enrollment**

FINAL REPORT

The purpose of this project is stated in its title above. Four types of data were gathered for this study: College of Marin's evening enrollment data for from Spring 2012 through Fall 2015; College of Marin's student data, including placement testing and a history of course enrollments, for all students registered in evening courses in the Fall 2015 semester; a survey of student preferences gathered in Survey Monkey; and students' points of view gathered in 4 focus groups conducted in 2 evenings on campus.

A summary and analysis of each type of data collected is given below. Finally, a description of actions indicated by the data and that might be taken by the ESL department and/or the College is offered at the end.

Evening Enrollment Summary and Analysis

See attached file "Evening Enrollment Data"

Overall enrollment

Looking back 8 semesters to FA12, enrollments took a dip in SP14. Totals for the four semesters before SP14 were 111, 108, 116, and 110. Forward from SP14, they were 89, 74, 86, but then in FA15 rose to 121. (Although the SP16 semester is not part of this study, it should be noted that total enrollment is up to 145 with credit numbers mostly gaining slightly and non-credit gaining significantly.)

The cause for the dip and then rise in enrollment can only be surmised. ESL classes were moved to the Austin Center in June 2103 and, after one semester, enrollment dropped. When classes were moved in Fall 2015 to the new Academic Center they rose. After one semester in the Academic Center, enrollment numbers are higher than they have been in the last 9 semesters. It would seem that the poor conditions in Austin Center suppressed enrollment and the greatly enhanced environment in the Academic Center has boosted it.

Two other factors may also account for the changes in enrollment. First, the move to Austin Center coincided with the obligatory online application. Prior to this change,

students filled out a paper application and brought it to Enrollment Services, a procedure that is much easier for ESL students to complete. Second, in SP15, a concerted effort was made by the ESL department to help students with the application and a non-credit option for ESL 50-level courses was introduced. At the end of the SP15 semester, the non-credit option was expanded to the 60- and 70-level ESL courses and, at this end of the FA15 semester, non-credit students were allowed to wait-list themselves for these classes in the spring.

Non-credit students account for 34 of SP15's enrollment total of 86. The FA15 enrollment of 121 includes 69 non-credit students. Without the non-credit enrollment option (but not accounting for the fact that, without the non-credit option, some of the students enrolling as non-credit would have take the same courses for credit), the enrollments for the 4 low-enrollment semesters would have been, 89, 74, 52 (no non-credit option yet), and 52. (Without non-credit, SP16's enrollment of 145 would be 35.)

Individual Course Enrollments

The numbers in the individual credit course enrollments reflect those in the overall enrollment detailed above. All credit enrollments take a dip in SP14 except for ESL83 and ESL86 in FA15. These courses have no non-credit enrollment option and have 24 (the highest since SP10) and 16 (second highest since SP13) credit students enrolled respectively.

The non-credit option has been a boon to most of the other courses. Taken individually:

ESL/ESLN 53 No more than 16 enrolled before F13, and then single digits until non-credit enrollment raised it to 17 in SP15 and 23 in FA15.

ESL/ESLN 56 No more than 13 enrolled before F13, and then single digits until non-credit enrollment raised it to 22 in SP15 and 16 in FA15.

ESL/ESLN 63 A high of 22 enrolled before F13, and then lowered to double digits. Inexplicably, credit enrollment dropped from 12 in SP15 to 3 in FA15 with the non-credit option raising it only to 11.

ESL/ESLN 66 No more than 12 enrolled since F13, and then no more than 10, including only 3 in SP15. Non-credit enrollment raised it to 9 in FA15.

ESL/ESLN 73 A high of 23 before F13, and then single digits in FA14 and SP15. Non-credit enrollment raised it to 22 in FA15.

ESL/ESLN 76 Enrollment in this course has been the most uneven. Credit enrollment was in the high teens from SP12 to SP14 with the exception of 3 enrolled in FA13. It dropped to low single digits through FA15.

Up until the current (SP16) semester, the Reading/Vocabulary courses have drawn, overall, fewer students than the grammar writing classes. The enrollment numbers in 56, until the non-credit option was available, had been much weaker than the higher-level reading courses. ESL76 and 86 have had some strong and some very weak enrollment numbers. In the SP16 semester, most Writing/Grammar and Reading/Vocabulary courses at all levels have near or over 20 students enrolled. The exceptions are ESL 73, with 16 students, and 86, which was cancelled for low enrollment.

Student Data (Placement Tests, Course Selections and Patterns) Summary and Analysis

See attached files "Evening F15 Student Data" and "Profile Evening Students FA15"

Quite a few interesting facts came to light from compiling student placement test and course enrollment history.

Looking at placement test data revealed that 15% of the Fall '15 evening students had taken a non-credit placement test only, 54% had taken the credit placement test, 3% had taken the English test, and 5%, no test at all. 21% had a teacher recommendation only. Only a little more than half the students, then, had placed in a credit course with a credit placement test.

Comparing the last test placement achieved by students with the course they selected after the test, most students (51%) took a course at the level indicated by the test. 7% took a higher level course, 20%, a lower level. 96% of the students who enrolled with a teacher recommendation took the course level recommended (mostly in 50-level courses).

Nearly 40% of students in the evening credit program come from non-credit and mostly from level 40.

Only 38% of the students enrolled in the Fall '15 semester have taken more than one credit ESL course at COM (for credit or non-credit). Of the students who have taken more than one course, only 46% are following the course sequence. Interestingly, the students skip only slightly more reading courses than grammar/writing courses. Also, only 22% skip one or more semesters; most student do not come and go.

A greater percentage than we thought, almost 20% of total students enrolled, are taking 2 courses this semester. Most students are taking both courses in the evening but a third are taking daytime classes as well. 18% of the semester's evening students have taken or are taking daytime classes.

71% of the evening students this term are taking their first ESL credit course (or courses) at COM. That is a huge number of first-timers in our program.

There were clear preferences among these students. ESL/N 53 had the most first-time students (all courses followed the pattern of only 1-3 students taking the course for credit). ESL/N 56 was the next most populous course. As these are entry-level courses, these statistics are no surprise. The third and fourth most selected courses for first-timers were ESL/N 73 and ESL 83 respectively. Grammar and writing courses were overwhelmingly the chosen ones.

Survey Summary of Results

See attached file "Survey Summary Results"

The purpose of the survey was to discover

- students' work situations and how they impact attendance and preferences for class/lab times and locations
- how students know about COM ESL classes
- reasons for enrollment and course preferences
- why students choose to take classes for non-credit instead of credit
- whether or not students met with a counselor and received an educational plan
- if students plan to take a course in the spring semester and, if so, which one(s)

71 students completed the survey although all students did not answer all questions.

The percentages stated below are rounded up or down for simplicity.

Work and preferences for class and lab times and locations

As we expected, most of our evening ESL students work during the day. The majority of them (65%) work full time and 22%, part-time. 6% are au pairs. Only 10% do not work.

Most students work 31–40 hours a week (43%). 20% of students work more than 40 hours a week and almost as many work 21-30 hours. These hours are fixed for most students (54%), although 30% of students have schedule changes either weekly or daily.

For obvious reasons, students prefer evening classes—89% preferring the time current classes are held (6:40–8:30 p.m.). Some preference (about 24%) was noted for both 5–7 p.m. and 8:30–10:30 p.m. Likewise, the days current classes are offered were preferred: 73% for Monday and Wednesday and 57% for Tuesday and Thursday. Only 25% said the best time for them to take classes is Friday, and 16% selected Saturday.

When asked directly, however, if they would be interested in classes offered on Friday or Saturday, 42% chose Friday and 38%, Saturday. Only 26% would be interested in classes held at Indian Valley.

Approximately the same percentage of students (45–48%) said they would use the lab in the afternoon from 2 to 5 p.m., on Fridays, and on Saturdays.

Learning of COM, reasons for enrollment and course preferences

Overwhelmingly (67%), students hear about COM from friends or family members. 20% learn about COM from the catalog or a mailing.

They take ESL classes, first, to improve their English skills for their daily life or for a job they currently have (70%). Next, they take classes to prepare for other college classes (33%) and/or to get a better job (31%).

Students mostly choose a particular course for one or more of three reasons: the course is good for the student's schedule (48%); the student is following the ESL sequence of courses (42%); and/or the student tested into the level of the course (36%).

Students prefer all kinds of courses equally with grammar classes having a slight edge over writing, reading and vocabulary, listening and speaking, and pronunciation.

58% of students expressed interest in a new kind of course using content-based instruction (described as one in which they “learn English by studying a topic such as ‘American Culture’ or ‘Current Topics in Society’”). Only 5% of students said they were not interested, and 30% might be interested.

Choice of credit vs. non-credit

64% of students taking their course for non-credit considered taking it for credit. Of the reasons they didn’t take it for credit, the one most often chosen is that they did not know the difference between taking it for credit or non-credit (31%). The next most common reason (26%) was that they could not or did not want to pay the fee for credit. The third reason chosen (20%) was similar to the first: they did not know why they should take the course for credit. 17% thought that taking the course for credit would be more difficult.

Apropos of the financial reason for selecting the non-credit option was the fact that almost twice as many students (63%) didn’t know about the credit fee waiver than did know (37%). Additionally, 75% of students have not visited the Office of Enrollment Services to find out about financial aid that might be available to them.

Counselor meeting and educational plan

61% of students have met with a counselor and, of these, 49% have gotten a personal educational plan. Therefore, 51% of students who met with a counselor did not get a plan.

Enrolling next semester

81% of our evening students say they will enroll in an ESL course in the spring semester; 18% are not sure. The course that most students (31%) plan to enroll in is ESLN 56. The next most selected course was ESL 86 (24%) and the next, ESLN 63 (19%). The numbers for the other 60 and 70 level courses are similar close (7-10%) with the credit option chosen slightly more than non-credit for 53, 66, and 73. ESL 76 and ESLN 76 were equally chosen.

Additional comments

Two themes are evident in the additional comments: praise for the teachers and the desire for lab hours in the evening. The only evening time specified is after classes although some comments seem to indicate opening lab during all evenings, This would

mean that students who can come only in the evening could use the lab on those evenings they do not have class. The survey itself indicated student interest in an afternoon open lab.

Focus Groups: Description, Summary, and Analysis

See 4 attached files of focus group transcripts

Format

Focus groups were held on two evenings during class periods, 2 classes participating each evening. An attempt was made for the four groups to represent the four levels of courses—50, 60, 70, and 80— as well as grammar/writing and reading/vocabulary courses equally. However, because one 70-level class had been cancelled and the other conflicted with the schedule, only courses 53, 63, 66, and 86 participated.

The groups met for approximately ½ hour each and ranged from 7 to 23 students. Naturally, some students were more vocal than others, but many visibly signaled agreement or disagreement with other students' comments.

Two questions were asked in each session:

1. *Introduction:* Survey results are showing that many of the students who are taking their evening class as non-credit did think about taking it for credit but decided not to. The difference in cost was not always the reason.

Question: Please tell me how or why you decided whether to take this course for credit or non-credit.

Possible follow-up:

What do you think might be an advantage of taking a course for credit?

What advantage might make you want to take it for credit?

If credit were also free, would you choose to take it for credit? Why?

Change for 86, only available as credit:

If you could have taken 86 as non-credit, would you have and if so, why?

What do you think might be an advantage of taking 86 or other ESL courses for credit?

2. How might the ESL program be improved to serve you better?

Summary of Responses

Question #1: Credit vs. Non-Credit

The most obvious reason why students might elect non-credit, that it is free, is not the most important one. The more important reason involves a lack of understanding about the difference between credit and non-credit mixed with a good deal of misinformation.

The students in 53 were particularly clueless about the advantages of credit. Only one student mentioned that non-credit was just “for improving your English,” whereas you take credit if you want to get a job. The idea that you get an official record of taking a credit course was also mentioned and seemed to become more common knowledge in the higher-level courses. These students thought credit was “more serious,” that it “prepares you for a career” like medical assistant or nurse, and that the “teacher grades by tests, showing what level the student is [really] in.” The 86 students were more serious, focused on records for transfer.

Misinformation affected 53, 63, and 66 students. One student, looking only at 58A (pronunciation) thought that the course was too short to finish and book and didn’t want to pay for credit. Others didn’t know about the possibility of a fee waiver. One student, who didn’t know why she should take a course for credit, asked a friend who told her non-credit was “better.” (Now she wishes she had gone to the ESL office to ask.) Others thought that non-credit provided a more flexible schedule.

Some students wanted to take their course for credit but didn’t qualify for the fee waiver or have the correct documents.

Question #2: Suggestions for improvement

The suggestions/complaints are best listed by category.

Registration/Enrollment/Counseling

- difficult for student not to know until the last minute if he/she is in the class (non-credit issue)
- orientation confusion
 - student confused about the difference between 53 and 56 didn’t know how to find out
 - student was told orientation was for residents only

- student with counselor appointment was turned away because she was a non-resident
- a number of students who did see a counselor did not get an educational plan
- no student services for evening students, including counselors
- enrollment office told student that there were no free classes (helped only at ESL office)
- need better outreach to provide information about the ESL program

A student talked about friends who hadn't reenrolled and had never been called: "To be honest as a Latina, we like to be given attention...We like when the students are continuously harassed and told about starting and give them attention. Like from the school, 'What's going on with you?...Are you coming back?' If you do that, you'll get more students."

Fees (and Parking)

- too expensive for non-residents
- bus fee (very unpopular with evening students)
 - most evening students, rushing from work, drive and then have to pay parking fee; resent paying for the day students to take the bus
 - were not notified about the fee and held up from registering because they hadn't paid
 - Parking: many complaints about lack of spaces, light and security people in lots may have been improved since last semester; suggestion made to leave the lights on in all campus buildings until classes are over

Hours and Locations

- open on Fridays and/or Saturday and offer classes, especially Saturday morning
- offer credit classes at Indian Valley
- keep library open later for evening students

ESL Lab (very active topic)

- keep lab open: 9–6:30, evenings
- open on Friday and Saturday ("give a little to those people who do not have access to computers . . .to work on homework for the following week")
- let students use an ID of some kind (e.g.,swipe card) to get in the lab after class when no teacher is there

- let students borrow dictionaries to take home

Classes

- longer classes
- have all teachers use moodle and post all homework and handouts so absent students can do their assignments
- place students partly according to their oral abilities so more proficient students do not have to wait while the teacher repeats for students who cannot understand (give placement interviews or listening/speaking test)
- no breaks mid-class; students prefer getting out on time
- request for evening speaking classes; some would come to a later class to attend one
- have a room set aside for students to practice English conversation
- offer GED class
- separate higher level courses (50-70) into credit, academic classes and non-credit classes
- create a place (on website, through mycom) for students to evaluate teachers
- put clocks in the classrooms

Suggestions for Action

Take immediate steps to encourage credit enrollment

This need was made evident in all phases of this study.

Low credit enrollment is clear from enrollment and student data (as well as Spring 2016 registration numbers) and further evidenced by the survey and focus groups.

The survey points to a real lack of information regarding the advantages of taking a course for credit. Students are not choosing the credit option over non-credit because they don't know the difference between the two options or know why they should choose credit. Money is not the main reason that students are defaulting to non-credit. The fact that almost 20% of students thought that the credit option was more difficult also points to lack of information about the two ways they can take a course. This situation is mirrored in the focus group results.

- ✓ To encourage more credit registration, first improve communication with students about the current advantages of credit and the other differences between taking the a 50-70 level course for credit or non-credit (virtually none).

✓ Second, consider providing additional advantages to credit enrollment, such as a Certificate of Completion or Certificate of Advanced English Proficiency to students who complete the credit sequence and perhaps 120 and/or college foreign language or humanities elective credits for advanced credit courses.

Improve communication with students

Informing students about the differences between credit and non-credit is not the only area in which communication needs to be improved. All the data showed that students are uninformed about the need for both writing/grammar and reading/vocabulary courses. Reading/vocabulary courses, especially tend to be subject to low enrollment and are often ignored by first-time students. Beginning lower-level students are confused by the choice between these two types of courses. Counseling and financial aid are another area of confusion. And, since many students attend both day and evening classes, we should make sure that all information is shared with evening and daytime students.

Possible courses of action to improve communication on these issues with students are:

✓ Develop activities or materials that emphasize the content and advantages of both types of ESL courses. Possible vehicles include brochures, flyers, teacher videos, student videos.

✓ Make orientation a prerequisite for registration, with sessions offered at day and evening times in the weeks students are adding classes. Students can get information at orientation about financial and counseling services (including an educational plan) as well.

✓ Provide counseling services during evening hours and require counseling prior to registration.

✓ Fine-tune marketing efforts

The need for better communication with current and prospective students includes marketing, the effort to get students to COM in the first place and then keep them coming back.

✓ Since most students first learn about the ESL program from friends or family, make marketing efforts more intensely community-based and let current students help. For example, give enrolled students materials to give to their friends, distribute items with the COM logo, etc.

✓ Make follow-up phone calls to students who do not reenroll.

Consider expanded ESL Lab hours

In addition to repeated requests for Friday or Saturday morning classes, students overwhelmingly expressed the need for more open ESL lab hours. Many asked that the lab not close between 2 and 5 and be available on Friday or Saturday. They also asked for evening hours after class time (8:30 pm to 9:30 pm) and/or during evening class time (so they could come on the evenings they don't have a class). They did not express the need to have a teacher available in the lab for questions.

✓ Open lab at times convenient for evening students

✓ Consider offering Friday or Saturday classes

Do follow-up analysis of placement test data

It seems logical that the credit placement test would be the best indicator of success in a particular course level and that all efforts should be made to assure that students electing upper-level courses take this test. However, do we know that for certain? I would suggest that we look at student outcomes in the courses they select, to discover:

- Are any or all tests accurate as to the appropriate placement?
- Do credit placement tests assure more success?
- Should the non-credit promotion test or other non-credit test continue to be used as a placement test for level 50?

✓ If the credit placement test best measures readiness for our credit courses, students should be required to take these tests

✓ Place each student in the course he/she has tested into

Lastly, consider a few other good suggestions/requests from the students

✓ Offer a content-based course, such as the one suggested in the survey

- ✓ Waive bus fees for students who purchase a parking permit
- ✓ Offer an evening listening/speaking class such as the one(s) offered in daytime
- ✓ Take a closer look at student suggestions on pp.9–10.