Acceleration
The only thing that can ultimately change the educational environment for students will be instructors, who through a candid examination of their own pedagogy and practices discover the courage and willingness to change how they design their courses and implement pedagogy. Currently we operate under an odd assumption of the Tablas Rasa or empty head in which instructors feel compelled to lecture and fill with knowledge. The end result is that most of education functions much like a manufacturing plant creating identities and right answers. Yet if we take the time to observe young children who demonstrate an insatiable hunger for exploring and learning about the world, we would discover that there is an important aspect of being human beyond the genetics and social/cultural influences, that education largely ignores. Our young preschool children begin asking why, what, how, when, and where long before we have time to teach them the basics of inquiry. So why does this passion and capacity for exploration and discovery go away for so many students once traditional education begins? All of us as parents know that in children do not like to be passive learners, and as teenagers often seem to go deaf during our well-meaned lectures. Children also like to engage and play when they explore and discover, and have the most fun in group activities. So why should a preferred learning style change much as we mature through the K-12 or college system? A key question here would be to ask, is this potential that once existed in children still a viable possibility for instructors to reanimate? If we were to change our assumption to embrace this possibility, it should motivate us also to redesign our educational practices to accommodate it. The traditional educational model for teachers too often results in the need to replicate the process of the lecture and remember model that continues to ignore the potential and desire of the student to interact and participate. The reality is that most teachers really do care and work very hard, but they are too often a hostage of the traditional educational paradigm and the pressures from the established tribal customs that permeate every discipline. Educational practices will change when teachers can reconnect with that critical aspect of themselves that had been once a vibrant property of their life as a child because the interest for exploring new and more effective pedagogical practices will emerge as a consequence of their own transition. And then we can begin the transition from the traditional lecture model to a learning model in which both instructors and students together explore and discover the remarkable properties and nuances to be found in all disciplines. There are no best practices in education, only best people, who by recognizing their own potential, also can recognize the potential and real needs of their students to fully participate in their own education. And this is the elusive paradigm shift we so often talk about. When instruction discovers the courage to change and evolve, so can our students. And that’s what acceleration is all about, a healing and new beginning for instructors, so they can in turn heal our students and create a new beginning for them. If we can change, so can our students.

Best Practices
When we examine the notion of “Best Practices” more carefully, we begin to realize that it is Best People that have made the practice effective. And that is why it is so difficult to take just the framework of a successful academic program and transplant it to a new location. I am witnessing the initial efforts of our own English department to rethink pedagogy and practice, where seasoned instructors are beginning to function like giddy
graduate students as a result of their success in the English sequence over the past five years. At ARC, RAD, WAC, the Science Skills Center, and Beacon are examples of academic support programs where shifts in pedagogy and practice have occurred, because the folks that designed and support the highly successful programs have changed how they view student capacity and potential. These and all the successful boutique support programs around the state are the laboratories that have demonstrated the potential of our underprepared student, and in reality, represent the very same process that can shift the potential of students in the classroom as well. We can’t financially afford to institutionalize our academic support programs, but we can institutionalize what makes them effective. Because we have focused so much on the student in recent years, we have lost sight of the potential and capacity of instructors to create a new learning environment that addresses the reality of our student population. Simply put, if instruction can change, so can students, and a growing body of evidence across the state indicates that shifts in pedagogy and practice not only liberate students, but instructors as well. The work of Katie Hern, Tom DeWitt and Sean McFarland at Chabot College with the Accelerated English, the Faculty Inquiry Network and the Acceleration in Context Initiative have begun to provide us with a process and tools that allow instructors to explore and discover new and innovative strategies that really produce the change we want and need. It is also exciting and empowering for instructors to discover that they can develop their own pedagogical best practices that break from the traditions of their educational history, and even more exciting to imagine that this approach represents the foundation of the needed paradigm shift we so often talk about in education. When instruction discovers how to change, so can students.

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Prerequisites: Response to the New Prerequisite policy

Unfortunately, prerequisites have too often been used as an exclusionary tactic to benefit instruction, rather than a supportive curriculum for students. Statistical validation assumes that there are valid practices in place that perform as they are advertised in the catalog. When a prerequisite cannot be shown to be effective, the focus should be on the instructional processes that put it in place and not the students who failed to progress or the statistical methodology used. As with assessment and course placement, unless courses in a sequence are aligned and instructors have a shared understanding of standards and expectations for student learning, no assessment process, no matter how sophisticated, can effectively place students. In the same vein, no course prerequisite can function effectively either. Instructor grading variation in the basic skills sequences has been well documented, and we are beginning to recognize the lack of articulation through the sequence in both English and math. Try to get English to define what represents effective writing. Too often they will respond with I know it when I see it. Because they struggle with articulating this fundamental factor, why would we expect them to have any shared pedagogical assumptions that result in a valid prerequisite course that prepares students for the next level? In reality, it is still the Wild West in terms of how a course is designed and implemented. Of course a lack of articulation not only harms students, but the next instructor as well. Students, when repeating the same courses with another instructor are often surprised to find that they are taking course that bears little resemblance to the one they were unsuccessful in. I just hope we can mature enough to get past the dysfunctional discussions and practices that have permeated assessment/placement and prerequisites over the years and begin to initiate a new dialog about the underlying causative factors that must be addressed to achieve a level of practice that is effective. Though it has been convenient to focus on the student as the problem, maybe it is time now for us to evaluate how we do business in education. As a researcher, it is difficult not to conclude at the present time, that the greatest beneficiary of the educational process is us. Good salaries, job benefits, travel to conferences, and lifelong learning stands in stark contrast to the carnage and dismemberments of hopes and dreams for far too many students. I hope we can initiate a new direction for this topic and move away from the convenience of the traditions and rhetoric of the past. If the discussions can't move past the symptoms of the problem, there can be no expectation of anything of value emerging.

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