



# Becoming an ACE Teacher

A descriptive study

Based on interviews and discussions with community college faculty who are currently teaching in Academy for College Excellence (ACE) programs at different colleges, this paper describes the satisfactions and challenges of teaching in ACE. Three particular aspects of teaching are explored in detail: working in explicitly affective ways with high risk students, using the ACE curriculum, and working collaboratively with colleagues. This is one of several evaluation studies that reflect ACE's commitment to examine and improve their work.

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## Becoming an ACE Teacher:

### A descriptive study

*Every teacher, every semester feels bad; there are students who fall through the cracks.  
ACE brings together people and resources so that doesn't happen.*

### ACE Background

The Academy for College Excellence (ACE, formerly known as Digital Bridge Academy) is an intensive accelerated program designed to teach—and reach—students at community college, including those who are designated as ‘high risk’ and ‘ultra high risk.’ Community colleges are implementing ACE in order to reach the large numbers of students that current programs are not reaching and to give those students explicit skills to succeed in college and more broadly in life.

As other reports have noted (for example, the CCRC report, 2009), the ACE design differs from the typical initial developmental sequence for students who start college below college level. In contrast to the usual academic content in developmental (or remedial) mathematics, English and reading—which students have seen, possibly numerous times before—ACE starts with an intensive, immersive full-time two-week Foundation Course. The content of the Foundation Course covers communication skills and individual learning strengths. Instead of defining students by their deficits as is typical of developmental education, ACE students encounter approaches that help them define their own strengths and to see the strengths of others. In addition, the experience of the Foundation Course is designed to foster a community of students.

Following the Foundation Course, the ACE semester has up to six interconnected courses. The original Cabrillo Digital Bridge Academy semester, in the spirit of progressive education, integrated content from other co-enrolled courses—literacy, computer skills, and physical movement—through the content of a social justice project. The Social Justice Research Course gives teams of students the opportunity to choose an issue in their own community and study it from a primary research perspective. Along with the signature ACE Social Justice Research Course (SJRC) students also enroll in the Team Self-Management course (TSM), which extends the content of the Foundation Course. This semester configuration was initially shaped at Cabrillo College to serve a population of ultra-high risk students. Some other early adopter colleges have designed semesters that involve other courses and shape ACE materials to be responsive to their students.

The ACE design itself challenges many typical developmental education practices. It is this very difference that opens new possibilities and also presents challenges for faculty. The differences in ACE content, teaching responsibilities, and the nature of relationships among faculty and

students are both the powerful draw and the challenge of implementing ACE. This exploratory study interviewed fourteen participating ACE faculty at six colleges in order to understand the trajectory of professional learning and in turn, gain insight into how to more effectively support faculty before and during ACE courses.

This is one of a constellation of evaluative studies of ACE--quantitative and qualitative-- that reflect the ACE commitment to a culture of inquiry and improvement. The lessons learned and insights about teaching in this study may reach beyond ACE to other programs looking to expand the teaching role and support that expanded role.

## Becoming an ACE teacher

Because the ACE program design extends the teaching role, ACE professional development needs to be different from typical workshops and conferences. In order to teach in ACE, faculty go through the Faculty Experiential Learning Institute (FELI). In the five-day FELI workshop, teachers directly experience a subset of activities that are part of the student Foundation Course.

As professional development, the FELI serves varied purposes. Individuals may choose to participate in a FELI either to explicitly prepare to teach the Foundation Course or for their own professional growth.

*The FELI was a life changing experience, the most powerful professional development I've ever had. The personal stories are so amazing... so powerful they affect your whole life. You put yourself out there and expose yourself in terms of humanity, so they show more of themselves. It makes the classroom richer.*

While preparing to implement ACE, a campus may organize a FELI and have a wide range of faculty and administrators participate so that they have a common language and perspective on change across campus. Because the FELI is immersive and experiential, it serves as a gateway for those individuals to decide that they do want to teach the Foundation Course or to realize that it is not the path for them. Over time, there have been individuals who have made decisions either to teach or not to teach a Foundation Course that were unanticipated even to themselves.

The professional preparation to teach in ACE continues to be experiential, reflecting the pedagogy of the program. After the FELI, faculty members who are interested in teaching the Foundation Course participate in a practicum, where they observe and teach in a campus Foundation Course. For faculty preparing to teach the Team Self Management Course and the Social Justice Research Course there are half-day workshops that overview the course and the curriculum kit. In addition, there is an in-depth workshop on the Behavior System that is required for all instructors teaching any course that is part of ACE.

In response to an expressed need from the field, ACE Center has recently begun to establish twice monthly mentoring calls, coordinated by experienced lead faculty, for others currently teaching SJRC and TSM. And Communities of Practice (CoP) are being organized on both coasts, with support from ACE Center. Participating faculty meet regionally once a semester and use the time for formal focused discussions as well to connect informally with other teachers.

## **Who are the ACE students?**

The Watsonville Cabrillo Digital Bridge Academy was initially designed for and actively recruited students who are most often labeled “high risk” or “ultra high risk.” These are students who have not typically been well served by the educational system, are not viewed by the system or by themselves as academically strong, and do not in general view schooling as a familiar or supportive environment. The overall community college student population and particularly those who come and place into developmental education, regularly includes students who are considered “at risk” because they are first generation college goers, have extended family responsibilities, are working full time, or have a history of academic difficulty. Beyond those common characteristics, many of the Cabrillo ACE students have been in foster care, incarcerated, homeless, or have a history of substance abuse and rehabilitation.

However, participating faculty struggle against the limits and limitations of labels such as “high risk” and “ultra high risk.” They feel that such labels don’t capture the complexity of students’ lives nor of their potential. Such labeling does not recognize the strengths that students bring. This does not mean that students don’t have particular educational needs. Mike Rose has noted the ways that growing up in poverty can hurt students: while recognizing their strengths, it is also necessary to do additional things—to strengthen and expand—education for these students.

ACE programs at other colleges have begun to focus recruitment on different student populations. One campus, for example, serves a large number of students with learning disabilities. Another program is recruiting the wide range of students who place into developmental mathematics, English or reading, and have not necessarily had more stressful life conditions. Over time, these decisions may shape local ACE content and delivery.

## **Aspects of teaching**

ACE relies on the experience and expertise that community college faculty bring and also expands the teaching role. The ACE focus on affective dimensions means that teachers have more active engagement with, and knowledge of their students. Starting in the Foundation

Course, ACE explicitly raises emotional issues and shares personal stories from students and faculty.

This is the tension at the heart of ACE: faculty work closely with and get to know students with complex lives. This is the source of both the exhilaration of seeing students succeed as well as the risk of personal and professional exhaustion.

There are a number of ways that the ACE design extends and challenges the typical community college teaching role. This paper explores three dimensions of teaching that are distinct in ACE.

- *Getting to know students well, with explicit attention to affective dimensions of teaching and learning.* In typical community college classes, teachers may choose to get to know their students or not, in ACE, it is expected and necessary.
- *Using a scripted curriculum for the ACE signature courses.* In typical community college classes, faculty are responsible for designing their own curriculum; this is often an area of faculty creativity. ACE has a very specific script for the Foundation Course and common curriculum kits for the signature SJRC and TSM courses.
- *Working collaboratively with faculty colleagues.* In typical community college teaching, faculty tend to be isolated. ACE is designed for collaboration with colleagues across disciplines who are teaching the same students.

The final section of the paper will address these teaching issues in the context of implementation and institutionalization of ACE on different campuses.

**Feelings in the classroom:** By far the greatest satisfaction for faculty is seeing students—particularly students who have typically not succeeded in the education system as it is—open up, grow, and succeed.

The Foundation class has 29 students. The size is determined by campus size requirements for English classes. Although English classes typically lose students over the semester and end with a smaller class, the Foundation Course typically loses only one or two students. This example— from a campus' first Foundation Course—is typical of the way that teachers describe students coming out of their cocoons.

*There was a one student, he came to class and he sat there hood up and covering his mouth with his hand. He avoided eye contact. By the end of the two weeks he made eye contact during concentric circles and he started contributing in class. He realized he had something to say and other people were interested.*

This opening and maturing of students continues and becomes more visible in TSM and SJRC. However the process is not smooth or even. Changing beliefs and behavior are likely to take an

uneven trajectory, moving ahead, moving back, with struggles along the way. Students' lives continue to be complex. Other forces—family, work, friends—are likely to keep pulling the students away from school. Being in ACE does not stop students' crises or conflicts and these come with the students into the classroom.

Because the ACE program pays attention to students' lives, family and history, teachers hear students' stories and as one teacher said, "you get to see the pain behind their faces." Students' feelings are not solely a psychological phenomenon or profile, they are the hopes, fears, and expectations that have been shaped by their social experiences and cultural settings.

For a large number of teachers interviewed, the ACE philosophy with explicit attention to emotions, reflection, and personal exploration "fit" their personal sense of teaching. For some—particularly English teachers, who have incorporated personal reflection in their classrooms and writing assignments—ACE builds on and extends the way they teach.

*"I looked at the Foundation Course, the content is not new, but the way it is put together, the way it's packaged, is new. That's the reason I got involved, to identify students who struggle, and let them know that they have the intelligence and wisdom to succeed in college. They just don't have the technical and cultural skills"*

For other teachers, ACE gives them new tools and perspectives for things they want to do in the classroom. And for a few, it was a revelation that feelings could be a presence and a resource in the classroom.

As noted above, the emotional work can also be exhausting for faculty who are teaching other classes and trying to maintain a balance in their lives. One very experienced teacher noted that the currency and cost of feelings in the classroom may take its toll in one's own feelings.

*"When I've been teaching the intensive Foundation Course, after eight days, when the class is finished, I find myself a little more on edge, more vulnerable, a bit more likely to go into bioreaction. When I finish the course, I feel a need to reconnect with my family."*

When teachers discuss the weekly meeting with colleagues, they note that there is often one person who is down in the dumps. And the emotional content can be tiring.

*"This uses every part of me, but there are times I don't want every part used. I want some parts back."*

*"You can't pour from an empty cup."*

Participating teachers appreciate the stronger connection with students that ACE fosters. Yet those very relationships can also make it harder to consistently enforce the guidelines that have become part of the ACE behavioral system. Because the ACE semester links four to six courses, the behavioral system does not rest on a single faculty member, but to be effective, needs to be consistent across the entire faculty learning community. Knowing the students well, teachers may be inclined to be looser about boundaries and deadlines; as one faculty member wryly noted, “no one wants to be the bad guy.” But teachers are navigating the line between cutting students some slack and holding students responsible.

Especially when a teacher is emotionally invested in the program and knows the students well, it can be hard to have the distance and understand that “you need to not take a student’s behavior personally.”

The longer term outcome—and the great source of ACE faculty satisfaction and pride—is to see students’ beliefs about themselves and about the world change and behave in ways that demonstrate that they know that they can be successful in college and in life.

*“The students can see a bigger picture than high school. They understand that college is different; they can make a place without parents.”*

*“You can see the students changing, healing. They’re on fire, more motivated. Some get it in the first two weeks, some in the middle, and some at the end. There was one cohort that lifted up in the last week.”*

*“Students become more accountable, more motivated, and they put in effort that they did not know they could before participating in ACE.”*

The range of faculty responses about ACE went from deeply enthusiastic to a qualified enthusiasm. Teachers acknowledge that students are needy and there will be issues. Working with and supporting the students takes time, patience, and compassion on the part of the teachers.

The demands in the teaching role and the intense emotional involvement can subtly challenge teachers’ sense of themselves as good teachers. Accomplished faculty may be accustomed to a particular rhythm and control in the classroom. The intimacy of the ACE classroom and deeper involvement with students’ lives may contradict that. Teachers may find they are not as patient as they think of themselves; and with the trust that has been established, students may let them know.

In order to use the power of the students’ personal stories in the classroom, teachers themselves have to go through the experience of sharing their own stories and come through with a sense of balance. The current professional teaching role does not inherently reward self-disclosure, particularly of problems or weaknesses. Teachers have to be comfortable sharing their own story, but stay centered, not go into the overwhelming emotion of the experience, but keep one foot in

the emotional story, and one foot firmly in the structure of the classroom. The boundaries need to be clear and safe enough to hold the feelings of both teachers and students. This is a form of professional growth and development that is not a common part of teaching in higher education but it is an essential ingredient of teaching in ACE.

Participating teachers and staff of ACE Center are aware of the stresses and are articulate about the need to find ways to renew emotionally as well as intellectually. This is a common topic among the Communities of Practice, which was created as a way for people to draw support from others.

**The ACE curriculum—fidelity & localization:** The intent of the ACE program—to support students opening emotionally and intellectually—is embodied in the ACE program design and curriculum. In many ways the curriculum is as much choreographed as it is scripted. However, the idea of a common—even scripted—curriculum goes against the culture of higher education where faculty autonomy is the norm.

Diego Navarro, designer and director of ACE, explained that the curriculum is scripted to support both the students and the teachers. A common script insures that students across different settings have a predictable experience in the Foundation Course. This makes it possible for effects to be predictable across settings.

The curriculum is crafted at a level of detail and granularity that embodies the hands-on experiential approach. The curriculum paces the rhythm and content so that teachers can guide students through the experiences. Each day of the Foundation Course has exercises designed to build the student cohort and support students' energetic opening.

*“I’m reluctant to change anything in the curriculum. The material is so closely interwoven and put together with such mastery that I wouldn’t mess with it.”*

Teachers, particularly when they start teaching the Foundation Course, appreciate having the detailed curriculum. The content is interdisciplinary—drawn from resources as far ranging and diverse as political analysis, neuroscience, dance, and business—and outside of the typical academic content areas. And the experiential approach to teaching is also outside of their common teaching experiences. Community college faculty are experts in their academic disciplines and may or may not have formal preparation in pedagogy or in experiential education.

The role of an ACE teacher is to be a facilitator. For teachers to use the ACE experiential model effectively, they need to experience it personally, first in the FELI, then for those who teach the

Foundation Course, in a practicum. But it is not a linear relationship from experiencing the curriculum to being able to teach it.

Participating faculty recognize that the curriculum is part and parcel of the ACE program. In some ways the fact of a detailed curriculum can be deceptive: having a script is not a substitute for deeply knowing the material.

*“I thought it would be easy, since it was already written out, but it didn’t work. Some of the language and examples were from fields I didn’t know... I feel confident as a teacher in my discipline, but this is different. I didn’t feel confident.”*

*“The corporate language didn’t work. It was business speak, and I didn’t understand it.”*

*“The curriculum is scripted, but you can’t speak authentically from a script.”*

*“It can be hard working from a script, and staying with the principles. Especially for TSM, it’s a semester, and there’s too much repetition. It’s hard to stay on script for a whole semester.”*

In fact, there is some confusion about what fidelity to the curriculum means. One new teacher was surprised in a mentoring call about TSM to hear the mentor talk about leaving out a section.

The Foundation Course is tightly scripted, while TSM and SJRC have curriculum kits and are somewhat adaptable. Like a score of a symphony or a script of a play, the performers’ creativity is in interpretation and delivery. To effectively use the materials, teachers need to understand the intent and know it well enough to anticipate student responses. This can mean using the material exactly or varying it slightly. While many teachers understand that it is better to ‘riff’ on the material, than to read it, it takes a level of familiarity and sophistication to be able to riff. After teaching the course a few times, teachers see effects on students, appreciate the script, and get more comfortable with the curriculum.

Teachers feel a tension between the sense of fidelity to the curriculum and the need to personalize and localize the content. There are two strong interrelated reasons for teachers to edit given curriculum. The first reason is to make it more accessible and relevant to their students.

*“I changed the movie in the Foundation Course from Stand and Deliver, which has Latino characters, to one that has more African-American characters, who my students could relate to.”*

The second reason is a pedagogical imperative: teachers have to climb inside the curriculum, take it apart and rebuild it in order to make it their own.

The Foundations Course is the most developed and the best received. People trust it, since faculty who teach it have gone through the FELI and practicum and have a sense of the feel and flow of the activities. In the FELI they find their own stories and that starts to personalize the Foundation Course.

*“I trust the curriculum . It would open a turnip.”*

*“I’ve seen it and see how it worked. I’ve had moments of joy and elation seeing what the students get. But it can be hard to teach all day.”*

*“Something happens in the intensity of the Foundations Course, something happens in the 8:00-5:00 day, that doesn’t happen in twice a week classes.”*

In TSM and SJRC, the question of localization and personalization is more acute. The curriculum kits have collected various versions of the materials. Teachers have altered the content in ways that they feel makes it better for their students and for themselves as teachers. After use for a few years of used, the SJRC and TSM curricula have received major reworks by teacher from the field that also incorporated some of the local changes.

*“In the Social Justice class, two of us worked on it and we beefed up the research. We defined what social science research is, and what social justice is. We defined a good research question. We shifted from vague solutions to community needs and an action plan. I think this is the material others are now using.”*

*“I peppered in nature and spirituality. I edited the Power Point and added pictures. I can’t stand bland and ugly.”*

*“I redid the slides, I can’t have typos in anything I put out to students.”*

*“I changed the examples in TSM to the housing crisis rather than a corporate takeover.”*

**Collaborating with other faculty:** The chance to work closely with colleagues is itself an incentive for many faculty. All across the education system, teachers tend to be isolated. Among the interviews there was a strongly expressed appreciation for colleagues and collaboration. ACE teachers appreciate the chance to work with colleagues who also care about students. When the team works well, the weekly meeting time not only focuses on student concerns, but also is mutually supportive for the teachers. The weekly meeting is a chance to get different perspectives from colleagues and see, for example, if a student is acting one way in a particular class or if this an issue across all classes. Overwhelmingly, people spoke positively about the team meetings.

*“We’ve had some difficult moments, but we’re lucky. Everyone is devoted. We can disagree, but know that other teachers are as dedicated as you are.”*

*“We are a powerful listening and learning community.”*

*We’re learning together, the things we stress: Inquire. Do not judge. State the facts. We say that at every meeting.*

There was, however, one cautionary example when the group of faculty were themselves new to the ACE program and felt overwhelmed with the demands of working with high risk students.

*“Sometimes people would bitch about the students. The whole hour and a half felt gossipy and negative. These other teachers didn’t know what behaviors to expect from high risk students. They were working really hard and not seeing the results. They needed the support themselves. They wanted to be reassured that they were doing their jobs well.”*

While all the ACE campus teams bring in students when there is a concern about a particular student’s behavior, a few teams have varied the way they interacted with students, bringing them in for good news as well as concerns. This practice was discussed at a Community of Practice (COP) meeting and had been picked up by other sites, illustrating the way that ideas can move.

The Community of Practice is eager to extend the collaboration to a greater level of curriculum integration. One example is an English class, designed to support the content of the Social Justice Research Course.

*“The earlier semester program didn’t have English; it had literacy, so we did topical readings. I’d gone to the Social Justice presentations and students didn’t have the larger scholarly background to uphold their research. I thought the English class could give them the secondary research skills—including background reading on the topic, a mini-research paper, and a literature review connected to their social justice topic. That way they really could have the support and background when they write up their primary findings. And that semester it did seem like their presentations were more informed.”*

## **Implementation and Institutionalization**

Although the interviews focused on teacher experiences, it is not possible to isolate the classroom experience without looking at the campus context. Thus, issues of implementation—including administrative support and student recruitment—arose because of the ways that they impact the faculty experience.

**Administrative support:** Administrative support is an issue with ACE, as it is with any program on campus. While any program may be initiated by faculty, if it is going to be maintained on campus, it requires allies across campus and administrative support. Administrative leadership not only allocates fiscal resources but administrative wherewithal is necessary to coordinate the complexities of interdisciplinary scheduling and organize the participation of counseling in student recruitment. Campus leadership can also give a program visibility and highlight the successes. ACE teachers' experiences with campus administration varied at different campuses and at different stages of program development. One college found a local FELI to be the strongest tool to advocate for their campus program.

*“Things changed with a FELI on campus. Before we had a good program, but it was very small. Counselors didn't know to refer students. More faculty and the Vice President attended the FELI, so more people on campus are aware and supportive.”*

ACE Center staff is cognizant of the challenges of campus implementation. They are being attentive to and intentional about identifying stages of institutional preparation that precede initiation of the first Foundation Course. At this time, ACE dissemination requires a campus commitment, including administrative presence.

**Recruitment:** The students are at the heart of ACE, so both responsibility for recruitment and the profile of students to be recruited are core issues.

Often the recruitment process is not the responsibility of the ACE teachers; it may be in the hands of counseling or the assessment office. Many of the ACE teachers are or would be willing to be involved in recruitment. The process needs to make a personal contact and inform students about the nature and expectations of the program they are entering. Students need to understand the nature of the commitment they are making.

The profile of the students that a campus program serves shapes that local program. The Cabrillo program started with a particular ultra high risk student profile. Diego Navarro started with the observation that community colleges were not effectively serving high risk students. If these 'outsider' students—those who were homeless, had been in foster care, incarcerated, or in substance abuse recovery—came to college at all, they were likely to fall through the cracks. The first ACE pilots were designed to get to know the potential students, Navarro wanted to be sure that the program could serve the needs of high risk students—that the program could create a setting where high risk students could thrive—as well as being able to serve the broader population of community college students. The Cabrillo ACE program still serves a large percentage of students who could be described as high or ultra high risk.

As the program expands, other colleges are recruiting developmental students who may or may not match the high risk profile. The Foundation Course is designed for all students. In localizing the program, other colleges need to understand the population of students they choose to serve, and over time, working from the original ACE model, modify the program to meet student

needs. Las Positas Community College, for example, serves a population of students with learning disabilities, and working with staff from the program that supports student with disabilities, the faculty have gotten stronger and more confident in addressing learning disabilities in the classroom. Delaware County Community College, in the first stages of implementing ACE has observed that some of the developmental students are better prepared than their placement tests indicated and these students do not seem to need the level of repetition that is built into the TSM.

Established programs note that the nature of recruitment changes over time. As more students successfully go through the program, these students bring in friends and relatives through word-of-mouth recruitment. Successful students are a strong recruitment force.

## CONCLUSION

The success of ACE rests on the complexity of human relationships situated in an institutional setting. The ACE design redefines not only the curriculum, but the roles of teacher and student, and provides opportunities for the administrative creativity.

Teaching in ACE stretches the typical community college teaching role. Teachers serve as facilitators, moving with a cohort of students through experiences that are designed to open students up academically and emotionally. Because the teaching role is different, professional development needs to be different as well. Teachers enter the community through hands-on learning in the FELI, where they experience the same activities that students go through in the Foundation Course.

The ongoing collaboration with colleagues on campus, and the recently established monthly mentoring calls, continue the professional conversations and growth. The Community of Practice, which came about because of a recognized desire of ACE teachers to meet, gets together once a semester and provides an opportunity for ACE teachers to share common challenges and successes. Among other requests that have been raised at the COP, teachers would like a FELI II – a chance to go deeper in their understanding and refresh themselves.

The overall community—including participating campus administrators, staff, and faculty, and ACE Center personnel and students—is organized to continue learning and building on the ACE model. Feedback is an important part of the program at all levels: to students in the classroom, to teachers from students and colleagues, and from the field back to ACE Center. Studies by internal members of the ACE community and by external researchers are conducted to continuously improve the ACE model. This is one qualitative study of teachers in a constellation of evaluation studies that also includes a long term quantitative evaluation of the acceleration model. Collecting teachers' perspectives for this document is part of building the infrastructure to support participating and potential ACE teachers.

**A note on this study:**

With thanks to the individual faculty members who were interviewed, and participants at the March and October 2010 Bay Area Community of Practice. The fourteen individuals who were interviewed for this exploratory study were generous with their time and articulate about their experiences. The group included full and part-time faculty from both established ACE programs and newly-implemented programs. Many of the full-time faculty are teaching a mix of the ACE signature courses and non-ACE classes. Several have some released time for ACE participation or ACE coordination.

The range of academic disciplines represented includes English and mathematics, as well as Political Science, Sociology, Communications, Business, and Nursing. Among adjunct faculty interviewed, there were English content faculty as well as number of individuals who were hired specifically for ACE and brought unique background from research or work in community-based organizations. Nine of the faculty members have extensive experience in ACE and five were in their first semester of ACE teaching. The quotes included were taken from phone interviews, but were included un-attributed because they were chosen for the representative quality rather than the individual perspective.

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