

Summary of Pass the Torch Evaluation

Pass the Torch was established at Foothill College to support the academic success and retention of community college students considered at-risk,¹ particularly African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students. Jean Thomas, a professor and student counselor at this College, founded the project in 1996, and since then the project has served more than 1,000 students. The key function of the project has been to form study teams by pairing at-risk student enrolled in core courses (known as team members) with academically successful students (team leaders) and provide both with the necessary support to accomplish the project's main objectives: retention and academic success of the team member.

Since its beginnings, *Pass the Torch* has been perceived as a very successful project. However, previous evaluation efforts and data analyses suggesting the success of the project have been quite limited and have not addressed other factors, such as previous academic achievement and motivation of the members, which could explain the project's perceived success.

This evaluation assessed the impact of *Pass the Torch* on student academic success in mathematics and English core courses, as well as student retention at Foothill College. Of particular interest was to assess the impact of the project on at-risk students. Basically, this evaluation addressed the following three major questions. (1) To what extent were *Pass the Torch* members more likely to succeed than non-members of similar at-risk status (ethnic background)? (2) Are *Pass the Torch* members less likely to withdraw from mathematics and English core courses or from the College than non-members? (3) To what extent were differences in academic success and retention rates between *Pass the Torch* members and non-members explained by differences in students' previous knowledge and motivation? Descriptive and hierarchical regression analyses were conducted for each course, taking into account students' previous knowledge (performance in previous courses) and at-risk status (students of African-American, American Indian, or Hispanic background).

This evaluation had four main conclusions. First, *Pass the Torch* members were more likely to succeed than non-members of similar at-risk status. *Pass the Torch* showed to have a unique and significant contribution on student success particularly in the higher-level courses. For example, at-risk students who enrolled in MATH 10 (Elementary Statistics) and were *Pass the Torch* members had a 76% success rate and average GPA of 2.22, compared to a success rate of 48% and a GPA of 1.92 for at risk-students who took the same course but were not *Pass the Torch* members. (See figures 1 and 2, which compare figures across core courses). Analysis comparing grade distributions, success rates, and GPA for *Pass the Torch* members and non-members indicated that for a significant number of students participation in *Pass the Torch* may have made the difference between succeeding or failing the course.

¹ Education statistics have shown that African American, Mexican, and American Indian students are less likely to succeed academically than students from other ethnic groups, such as Whites and Asian students.

Second, *Pass the Torch* members were less likely to withdraw from the College than non-members of similar at-risk status. For example, results for a 1997 cohort of students (students whose first term at Foothill was summer or fall of 1997) indicated that 11% of at-risk students who were *Pass the Torch* members left Foothill within a year, compared to a 63% for at-risk students who were not *Pass the Torch* members (See figures 3, 4, and 5, which show findings for three cohorts). With respect to student class retention, the analysis showed that at-risk students who were *Pass the Torch* members were less likely to withdraw from core courses. However, this finding was not replicated with students not considered at-risk, who showed no significant group differences with respect to class retention rates in core courses.

Third, the contribution of *Pass the Torch* in student academic success and retention rates is significant and independent of student previous knowledge. Results for all regression analyses, however, indicated that previous knowledge is the most important predictor of student success.

Four, motivation has a significant role in student success, particularly student motivation to actively participate in the project (i.e., this is a self-selective program). However, this should not be interpreted as “*Pass the Torch* members are bound to succeed because they were initially more motivated than non-members.” *Pass the Torch* members had shown to have lower academic achievement in previous related courses than non-members.² Thus, there is not reason to believe that *Pass the Torch* members were more likely to have higher academic motivation than non-members, at least not before they joined *Pass the Torch*. It seems more reasonable to conclude that *Pass the Torch* members might have been more inclined to join the project because they realized they had a higher likelihood of failing the course and needed to get some kind of help.

However, student motivation to acquire new behaviors (e.g., study habits) is likely to decline unless a support system is provided. This support system should address both motivation and content knowledge so that students can acquire the required self-efficacy and academic skills to succeed on their own. Analysis of survey responses suggest that the *Pass the Torch* helped members gain more confidence in their academic skills, which, in turn, may have helped them develop/continue with their motivation to change their behavior and succeed academically.³

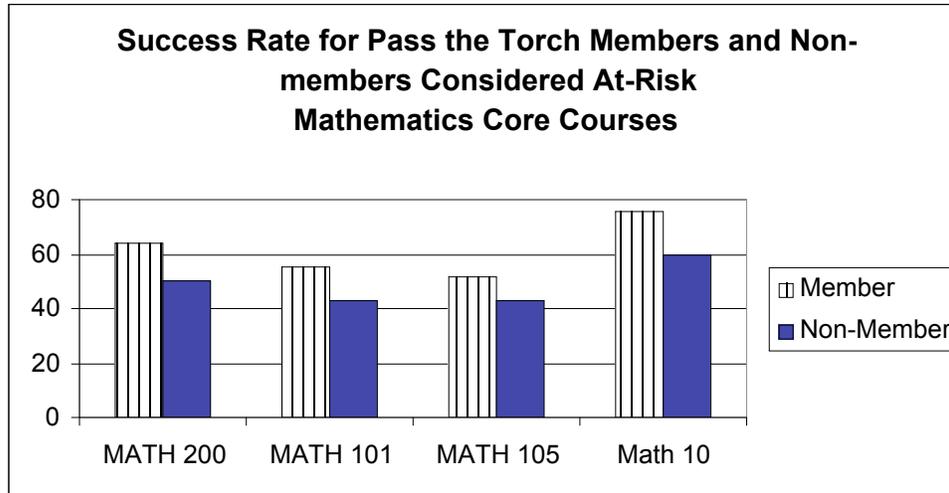
Motivation may have also played a major role on student college retention. It is reasonable to assume that students who decided to stay are the ones who also decided to look for help. However, unless the student experiences success, there is little likelihood that the student will continue attending college. Analyses of survey responses suggest that by helping students experience academic success, *Pass the Torch* is having a positive impact on students’ decision to continue at the college and achieve their academic goals.

² Differences in previous knowledge was only assessed for English courses

³ Researchers who had studied the relationship between motivation and academic achievement (e.g., Albert Bandura) had argued that motivation and academic success have a reciprocal relationship; students’ motivation impacts their academic performance, just like students’ academic performance impacts their motivation.

It is also very likely that *Pass the Torch* members tend to developed a “network” of friends and grow more attached to the college.

Figure 1.



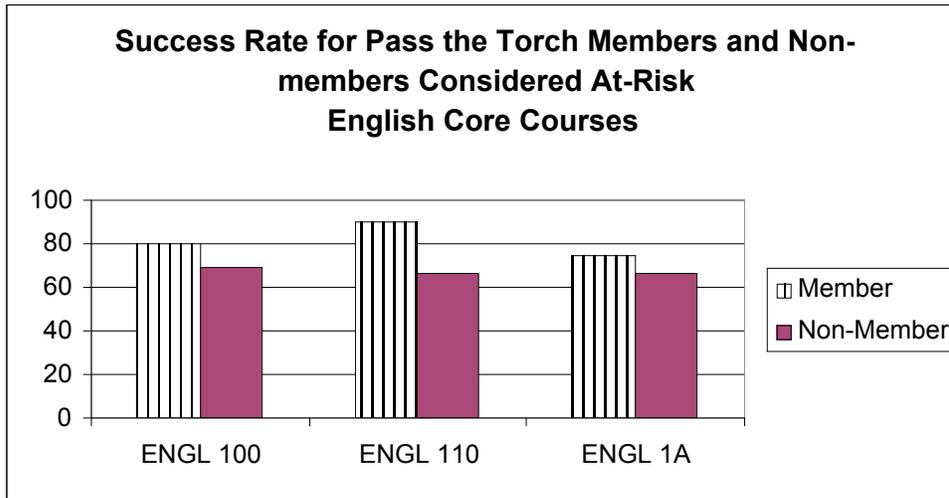
Note:

MATH 200 = Structure of Arithmetic; MATH 101 = Elementary Algebra; MATH 105 = Intermediate Algebra; MATH 10 = Elementary Statistics. ENGL 100 = Introduction to College Reading; ENGL 110 = Introduction to College Writing; ENGL 1A= Composition & Reading

Success is a function of the letter grade for the class. Success rate refers to the percentage of attempts resulting in letter grades A, B, C, or P (a numeric value of 1) in the course. Non-successful attempts were those resulting in the letter grades D, W, NP or F (a numeric value of 0).

At-risk status refers to being a member of any of the following ethnic groups: Hispanics, African-Americans, or Native-Americans. Students in these ethnic groups are identified with a 1; otherwise, 0.

Figure 2.



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Figure 3

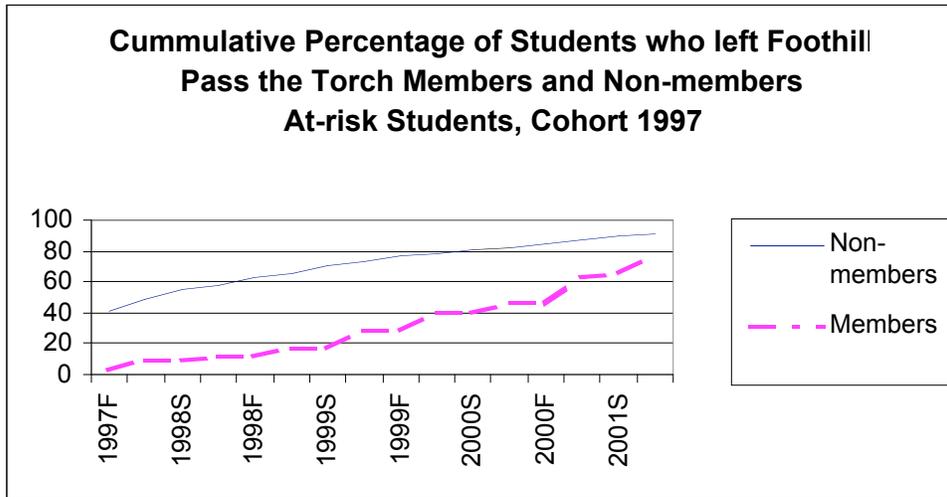


Figure 4

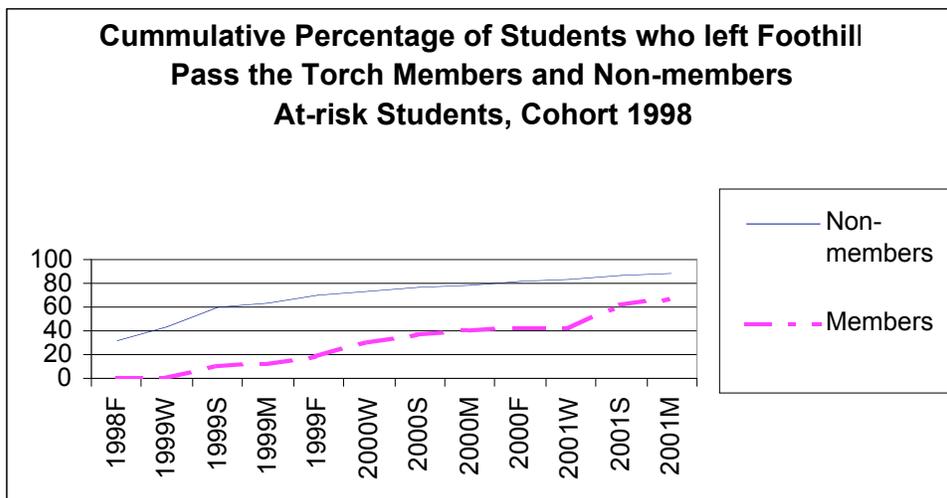


Figure 5

