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EVALUATION OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY PROGRAM FOR
DEVELOPMENTAL READING STUDENTS AT A TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

By

Tonya Scott Lanphier
B.A., Western Kentucky University 2006
M.A., Western Kentucky University 2011

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
In Applied Sociology

Department of Sociology
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY

May 2019

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A Dissertation Approved on

April 8, 2019

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the loving memory of my parents,

Ronnie Dale Scott

and

Joyce Ann Scott.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my Dissertation Committee Chair, Dr. Robert Carini. Dr. Carini was not only instrumental in the completion of this dissertation, but he guided me throughout my PhD program. From teaching my favorite course to advising me through my comprehensive exams, Dr. Carini was a source of help and support throughout my graduate career at the University of Louisville. I also thank my committee members: Drs. Melanie Gast, Amy Hirschy, Cynthia Negrey, and Deborah Potter; their feedback tremendously enhanced the quality of this dissertation. A special thanks to Dr. Patricia Gagné for her unwavering encouragement. The Department of Sociology at the University of Louisville is fantastic! Go Cards!

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Most importantly, I recognize my little brother, Christopher Dale Scott, and my spouse, Dominic Andrew Lanphier. Chris' carefree spirit and his ability to make me laugh was desperately needed through this stage of my life. Finally, Dominic was there for me from start to finish. I could not have done it without him. I especially appreciate him for his love and emotional support.

ABSTRACT

EVALUATION OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY PROGRAM FOR DEVELOPMENTAL READING STUDENTS AT A TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

Tonya Scott Lanphier

April 8, 2019

Learning communities have become an integral part of higher education. Numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of learning communities at colleges and universities. This study, extended over two years, is an in-depth analysis of a learning community program serving developmental reading students at a public, two-year college. A primary aim of the program was to improve students' reading skills to increase student persistence.

In this dissertation, mixed methods were used and data came from six sources: in-depth interviews with students, instructors, and administrators, focus groups with students, a content review of internal and external program documents, pre-post reading test, a student survey, and secondary data that were received from the college. Qualitative data indicated that students and instructors believed that many of the goals of the program were achieved, such as increasing student persistence, improving transition to college-level courses, heightening students' sense of community, increasing students' academic and social confidence, and improving students' attitudes toward reading. Qualitative data also revealed obstacles that the developmental reading students faced: a lack of academic and social self-confidence, family responsibilities, work demands, problems with technology, and difficulty with choosing a career. The learning community program

helped students to manage their obstacles in three vital ways: 1) learning to seek help from peers, instructors, and campus staff, 2) acquiring time management skills, and 3) receiving career guidance. There was less quantitative evidence of improvements of student achievement over time. The duration of the program may have been too short to allow for robust quantitative findings. However, quantitative analyses indicated that there were higher levels of involvement, persistence, and class preparedness for learning community students as compared to non-learning community students.

Several strengths and weaknesses of the program were identified, and recommendations were made for the program and learning communities at two-year institutions. These recommendations included the following: 1) fully implement team teaching, 2) create and implement an integrative curriculum between courses 3) expand services available to students and require students to partake in some of these services 4) more thorough instructor training for learning communities, and 5) better assessment of the learning community program by faculty and administrators. If properly implemented, these recommendations would likely increase the effectiveness of such learning community programs. A novel combination of theoretical frameworks from the sociology of education literature was applied in this study to better understand learning communities: student departure theory, student involvement theory, forms of capital, and the concepts of “warming up” and “cooling out” from the education literature. The interplay of these ideas is crucial to understanding how learning communities work.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Learning communities “intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll a common cohort of students” (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick 2004:20). Learning communities have been implemented in higher education since the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in the 1920s (Meiklejohn 1932). Over the years, learning communities have been put into practice at other universities and colleges. In recent years, learning communities have dramatically evolved to reach more students and institutions (Ashley 2012; Huot and Palm 2014; Tinto 2003). Today, learning communities are increasingly common and learning community programs have been implemented at numerous four-year and two-year institutions.

A program has a few features that would identify it as a learning community. Stemming from Zhao and Kuh (2004), these features include an interdisciplinary curriculum, a sense of community (usually via a common cohort), and collaboration among students and faculty. These same attributes, particularly a sense of community and collaboration, may be found at many small, liberal arts colleges and universities. These communities could be considered informal learning communities. The main difference is the way in which the learning communities are formed and implemented. In a formal learning community, the cohort is heavily structured, and the students are aware of their participation in the program. Further, the integrated curriculum is likely not as prevalent

among informal learning communities. Taken together, these features of an integrated curriculum, community, and collaboration foster a welcoming environment that promotes learning and academic success (Zhao and Kuh 2004).

Learning communities play an important role in increasing student persistence. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) performed a longitudinal study involving 19 two- and four-year institutions. They “found that students in the learning community programs were more apt to persist to the following academic year than their institutional peers” (Engstrom and Tinto 2008:47). The success of learning communities in promoting student achievement has been shown in numerous other studies. According to Tinto (2008), the reasons are threefold: 1) students receive support from the activities of the learning community, 2) students spend more time learning together, and 3) students alter their sense of self. That is, students enrolled in learning communities begin to see themselves as learners (Tinto 2008).

Learning communities are important because they impact how students experience college, and meaningful experiences, either via people, places, or programs, are important for student success in college (Ewert 2012; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whit 2010; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Furthermore, social integration on college campuses leads to greater student persistence (Braxton 2008; Kuh et al. 2010; Pascarella and Ternzini 2005; Sax 2008). Nancy Shapiro and Jodi Levine (1999:192) stated that learning community students “indicate higher levels of involvement with peers and the campus, and express greater overall satisfaction with the college experience.” Higher levels of educational satisfaction may indirectly encourage student persistence toward a degree.

Learning communities also seek to socially integrate students into college life (primarily through increased contact with peers and faculty). Interaction with peers and faculty, especially outside of the classroom, is associated with student success (Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling 1996; Tinto 2003). University offices, services, and activities (including leisure) also help students feel empowered due to greater connectivity with campus, as well as familiarity with the college campus. Learning communities usually provide supportive and academic services (such as tutoring) to students (Levin and Calcagno 2008).

The nature of learning communities can vary between two- and four- institutions. Students enrolled at two-year institutions generally have different backgrounds than students enrolled in a four-year college or university. Typically, students at two-year colleges are working-class (National Center for Education Statistics 2013) and nearly half are first-generation students (National Center for Education Statistics 2005). These students may enter college underprepared, requiring them to enroll in developmental education before beginning their college-level courses. Developmental education is “designed to strengthen skills so students can successfully complete college-level courses” (Bailey 2009:11). (See the appendix for definitions of key terms.) Further, these students are often encumbered with a number of responsibilities, like work and family obligations that make attending college very challenging. These issues contribute to less student success and help explain how “the achievement gap between high-income and low-income students has increased over time” (Tinto 2008:9).

Learning communities at two-year colleges that are intended for developmental students are extremely important. A developmental student is a student who is enrolled in

a non-degree-credit course (such as math, reading, or English) in preparation for college-level courses. Learning communities can be adapted to address the needs of developmental students, such as placing an emphasis on study skills (Tinto 2003).

Similar to such programs at four-year institutions, it has been demonstrated that learning communities at two-year colleges positively affect student success (although not to the same degree as at four-year institutions) (Engstrom and Tinto 2008). As a result, evaluations of learning communities at two-year institutions are critical to enhance their effectiveness. In addition, there is a lack of evaluations of learning communities involving developmental education at community colleges. The U.S. Department of Education (ED), Institute of Education Sciences (IES), and What Works Clearing House (WWC) (2014a) identified six such studies. Only one of the studies examined by U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, and What Works Clearinghouse (ED, IES, and WWC) (2014a) involved developmental reading (Weiss, Visher, and Wathington 2010). It is important to better understand what features of learning communities at two-year institutions are effective (and which components are less effective) for developmental reading students.

CASE STUDY

This case study consists of a program evaluation of learning communities over a two-year period at a public, two-year college. The program selected for evaluation includes components of an Institutional Reform Plan (IRP), a reform initiative that occurs periodically at this college. The IRP program at this institution focused on improving student reading in an effort to increase student persistence and student success. In this study, student success refers to students persisting toward their academic or occupational

goals. This program had many components, including learning communities, a book club, and promotional efforts (that include giving away free books and t-shirts and advertising the IRP program). However, this evaluation focuses on the major component of the IRP program—learning communities.

The learning communities at this institution were designed for students in developmental Reading (RDG) and First Year Experience (FYE). Students were enrolled in RDG at the college if they scored a 38-42 on the Computer-adapted Placement Assessment and Support Services (COMPASS) exam. Students who scored below a 38 on this placement exam must start their education in a continuing education program and transfer to the institution once they have scored a 38 or higher on the COMPASS exam.¹

FYE is a course that teaches educational strategies designed to promote success in the college environment, emphasizing academic, intrapersonal (such as positive attitudes and appropriate behavior), and interpersonal skills. The mission of the learning communities is to increase completion rates for students in RDG, improve reading skills, and improve successful transition to college-level courses (in particular, introductory English). English is a significant course because it immediately follows developmental RDG, and research shows that students who complete a developmental course are unlikely to appear for the next class in the sequence (Bailey 2009).² Student persistence is generally lower among developmental students than college-ready students (Hawley and Harris 2005). In addition to the above-mentioned goals, the learning community program

¹ Cutoff points on placement exams are contested and vary among colleges, and these exams often have a weak relationship with academic performance (Bailey 2009).

² Bailey (2009:27) argues to “eliminate any elapsed times between levels” to improve student persistence in developmental education.

had other aims for students: to demonstrate a heightened sense of community, increase self-confidence regarding their academic potential, and to develop more positive attitudes toward reading.

This evaluation investigates whether the program reached its short-term goals (such as increasing retention in RDG, improving reading skills, increasing self-confidence toward college success, enhancing attitudes about reading, and heightening a sense of community). These short-term goals were measured in a variety of ways. Students' cognitive skills in reading were measured by pre-post standardized tests and end-of-course grades. Students' self-confidence regarding their academic ability, attitudes toward reading, and sense of community were measured by a survey, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. The intermediate goal (increasing student persistence in college-level courses) was assessed via secondary data from the college consisting of grades and course completion rates.

In addition to assessing outcome measures, this study is also a process evaluation in that it determines if the program was being implemented as intended. The qualitative data, including the content review (consisting of internal program documents and external documents on learning communities) and in-depth interviews with administrators, students, and instructors, provide data for the process component of this evaluation. Process evaluations can distinguish between interventions that are fundamentally faulty and interventions that are poorly implemented (Oakley, Strange, Bonell, Allen, Stephenson, and RIPPLE Study Team 2006). Many evaluators advocate combining outcome and process evaluations, and a major benefit of combining process and outcome data is that it enhances the interpretation of data (Oakley et al. 2006).

IMPORTANCE OF THE EVALUATION

Although there is a lot of support for the implementation of learning communities, there are very few pre-test post-test designs with comparison groups that directly evaluate the effectiveness of learning communities on developmental education at two-year institutions. This evaluation is a case study of a learning community program that includes pre-post measures with a comparison group, comprising the pre-post reading test and survey. Therefore, this evaluation contributes to the literature on the effectiveness of learning communities on developmental education, and in particular on developmental reading. Research regarding the impact of learning communities on students' reading skills is very limited; an exception is a study by Weiss, Visher, and Wathington (2010). This evaluation is also significant in that it provides insight from students about their experiences with specific learning communities. Scholars argue that student voice is often missing in reform efforts (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991; Ingersoll 2003; Taines 2012).

This study is further distinctive by its novel application of theoretical frameworks in evaluating learning communities for developmental education. Most evaluations on learning communities lack a theoretical framework (Bloom and Sommo 2005; Scrivener, Bloom, LeBlanc, Paxson, Rouse, and Sommo 2008; Sommo, Mayer, Rudd, and Cullinan 2012; Weiss et al. 2010; Weissman, Cullinan, Cerna, Safran, and Richman 2012; Weissman, Butcher, Schneider, Teres, Collado, and Greenberg 2011). Two primary theories were used as a framework for this study: student departure theory (Tinto 1993) and student involvement theory (Astin 1999). In addition, Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital and the concepts of "warming up" (Deil-Amen 2006) and "cooling out" (Clark 1960) were applied. Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital were used to better understand

the obstacles that students encountered while attending college and how these obstacles impacted their academic achievement. This application of Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital is notable, particularly in this type of setting and with regard to cultural capital. The concepts of "warming up" and "cooling out", which have not been previously applied to learning communities, help to explain the effect that the learning community program may have on students' academic achievements, aspirations, and persistence.

One of the most significant aspects of this evaluation was the process component. Findings from the process evaluation shed light on how to improve the effectiveness of learning communities. Recommendations are given on strategies to employ when developing learning communities. Consequently, policy-makers, administrators, and instructors are likely to find the results of this study useful. Academics may be interested in this study as well. This work promotes and highlights the need for additional research.

This evaluation is an applied sociological study involving developmental reading students at a public, two-year institution. Due to students' developmental status, they were at-risk for dropping out of college. Further, although the social class background of the students was not directly investigated, there is evidence from the in-depth interviews and indications from the surveys that the majority of the students were working-class. In this study, a working-class student is defined as a student from (or a member of) the working class, where "the working class basically consists of those who work in manual or blue-collar occupations" (Scott and Marshall 2005:706). Working-class students often feel a sense of disconnection, which encompasses a feeling of not belonging among their peers and/or faculty, possessing different cultural norms from the institution (Lehmann 2007), and not identifying as a college student. Among other topics, this study examines

obstacles, academic and non-academic, to success in college for developmental reading students. It is important to study these students to identify the challenges that they face while pursuing a college degree. Further, it is important to evaluate programs, like learning communities, that may benefit these students and help them to overcome their unique challenges.

An overarching question in this study is whether learning communities are effective for enhancing reading skills, student persistence, and student success among developmental students at two-year institutions. Below are this study's research questions investigated by the quantitative and qualitative analyses:

Quantitative

1. How do students' reading skills, academic self-confidence, attitudes toward reading, and sense of community (both in the classroom and on campus) compare between learning community students and non-learning community students?
2. How does student persistence in developmental reading and future coursework compare between learning community students and non-learning community students?
3. Do outcomes (e.g. academic self-confidence, grades, attitudes toward reading, and sense of community) for learning community students differ based on social background (e.g. race/ethnicity, gender identification(s), parental education attainment, etc.)?

Qualitative

4. How do administrators and instructors view the learning community program?

5. What are implementation strengths and weaknesses of the learning community program?
6. What obstacles do developmental reading students encounter in college and how does the learning community program help students to manage these obstacles?
7. What contextual changes, including those made over the course of the study, were implemented by instructors and administrators in the learning community program and how did changes potentially affect outcomes?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many kinds of learning communities, including formal and informal varieties. Informal learning communities occur on a smaller scale than formal learning communities. For instance, informal learning communities may exist when instructors at colleges and universities strive to create learning communities within their own respective classrooms. In contrast, formal learning communities are implemented by colleges and universities at an institutional level. For instance, a college may require first-year students, developmental, or other at-risk students to participate in a learning community. Formal learning communities may also be localized within a school or department. Formal learning communities may include service learning, linked courses (such as RDG and FYE in the present study), cluster learning communities, and/or coordinated studies (Tinto 2003). The type of learning community, and how it is implemented, can impact outcomes. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the many kinds of learning communities.

Service learning communities combine community service and educational activities, and linked courses usually join students together by two or more courses (Tinto 2003). In cluster learning communities, students often take similar, but separate, courses (Kellogg 1999; Smith 1991; Tinto 2003). Coordinated studies create one large class that meets frequently with an extended meeting time (Smith 1991; Tinto 2003). Living-learning communities are another form of learning communities where “small groups of

students who all live on the same residential hall floor and are enrolled together in four courses” (Purdie and Rosser 2011:97). The effectiveness of living-learning communities (also known as residential learning communities) in developmental education is largely unknown due to a lack of study in this area (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, and What Works Clearinghouse 2014b). However, Ashely’s (2012) results indicate higher grades in English and math courses for learning community students compared to students in the comparison group. Further research on residential learning communities is warranted. Regarding this study, residential learning communities are often inapplicable to community colleges as students do not live on campus.

Learning communities often serve first-year students (Cerna et al. 2008). One purpose of learning communities is to enhance social integration (inside and outside of the classroom). Although students may be socially integrated to college via social support from family members and co-workers (Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano 2011), this study focuses on social integration from students’ peers and college faculty and staff. Another intention of learning communities is to increase collaborative learning and curricular knowledge (Cerna et al. 2008). Learning communities also strive for a more holistic and interdisciplinary learning experience, which contests the increasing specialization of disciplines in higher education (Love 2012).

Because active learning is a key component of learning communities, it is important to distinguish between active, cooperative, and collaborative pedagogies. In essence, students are engaging in the learning process when active pedagogies are utilized. Examples of active learning for students may include the use of flash cards,

writing, or student-lead conferences and/or presentations. Active pedagogies have widespread support in the literature (Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano 2011; Chickering and Gamson 1987; Engstrom 2008; Kuh et al. 2010; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Active pedagogies are associated with more learning for students on specific course material (Ebert-May, Brewer, and Allred 1997; Michel, Cater III, and Varela 2009). Further, active pedagogies increase student motivation (Braxton 2008). Yet, some students may not enjoy working in pairs or groups (Tinto 2003). These students may be more introverted or prefer a less hands-on style of learning. Active pedagogies may or may not be cooperative. Hence, students can still be considered active learners when working independently.

Cooperative learning is group work, usually consisting of three or more students (Paulson and Faust 2015). Therefore, cooperative learning is typically active learning as well (though, again, not all active learning is cooperative). Strategies that stress teamwork among students is considered cooperative learning. Collaborative pedagogies “refers to those classroom strategies which have the instructor and the students placed on an equal footing working together in, for example, designing assignments, choosing texts, and presenting material to the class” (Paulson and Faust 2015). Hence, collaborative learning is much more encompassing than simply using active techniques within the classroom (Paulson and Faust 2015).

Collaborative learning, active learning, student-student interaction, and student-instructor interaction can enhance social integration for students. Further, social integration is linked to student persistence (Cerna et al. 2008; Engstrom 2008). Thus, the experiences offered by learning communities (such as more active and cooperative

learning, collaborative exercises for student learning, and an increase in student-student and student-faculty interaction) enhance a sense of belonging for students, which results in an increase in student effort and student persistence (Cerna et al. 2008).

A primary theme in higher education research is that social integration on college campuses leads to greater student persistence (Braxton 2008; Kuh et al. 2010; Pascarella and Ternzini 2005; Sax 2008). Many scholars particularly emphasize the first year as critical for student persistence (Braxton 2008; Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, and Nordstréom 2009). Also evident in the literature is the need for programs to help students transition from high school to college because there is often a mismatch between students' expectations of college and their experiences in college, primarily regarding feedback and access to instructors (Brinkworth et al. 2009).

Research shows learning communities to be effective in integrating students into campus life (Braxton 2008; Purdie and Rosser 2011; Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon 2002; Tinto 2003). Many learning communities, for instance, encourage or even require students to attend campus events. Further, learning communities have the potential to integrate students' social and academic networks via increased interaction in the classroom. Also, learning communities usually provide supportive and academic services for students (Levin and Calcagno 2008). Such services may include counseling, career advising, and/or tutoring. Three primary factors of student life tend to enhance student learning and persistence: campus involvement, academic engagement, and interaction with peers and faculty (Frost, Strom, Downey, Schultz, and Holland 2010).

FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

Most research on learning communities has been conducted at four-year postsecondary institutions (Cerna et al. 2008). Purdie and Rosser (2011) found that participating in certain learning communities increased students' odds of persisting into their sophomore year by 18 percent. Students in these learning communities earned higher grade point averages in their first year compared to nonparticipants (Purdie and Rosser 2011). In addition, Tinto (2003:5) discovered that learning communities helped students "form their own self-supporting groups which extended beyond the classroom." Further, students in learning communities reported greater intellectual gains and learning quality than students who were not in a learning community (Tinto 2003). Using the National Survey of Student Engagement from 365 four-year institutions, Zhao and Kuh (2004) found positive links between learning communities and student engagement and overall satisfaction with college.

Learning communities can be particularly beneficial for disadvantaged students, as such students are more likely to be placed in developmental coursework (Hagedorn, Siadat, Fogel, Nora, and Pascarella 1999). Disadvantaged students are often unfamiliar with college life and learning communities can provide opportunities for disadvantaged students to learn from other students about how college works (Engstrom 2008). Cury (2004) noted how learning communities benefit English Language Learners. "Learning communities help ELLs to join the culture of the academy, use academic language for oral and written communication, and learn disciplinary content and discourses" (Cury 2004:64). Learning communities also help with emotional aspects of learning that are often a barrier for disadvantaged students. First-generation college students, for example,

may feel anxious or out of place in the college environment. Learning communities can provide students with a safe, supportive, and comfortable environment to learn (Engstrom 2008).

John M. Braxton's (2008) volume includes various studies that examine the role of the classroom on student persistence. With more students working and living off campus (Braxton 2008), the classroom is a critical area for reform (Braxton 2008; Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano 2011). Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano (2011:311) "posit that a blend of academic and social integration influences student success, and the classroom setting provides the most promising site for such integration." It may be one of the only places for many students to get integrated into college life (Braxton 2008; Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano 2011).

Interestingly, it is primarily educational experiences that contribute to the gender gap in college (Ewert 2012; Sax 2008). Ewert (2012) found that women participate in more social and academic clubs in college than men. Meaningful connections, either via people, places, or programs, are important for both men and women (Ewert 2012; Kuh et al. 2010; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). So, learning communities can provide meaningful connections that are critical for the success of men and women in college. Tutoring, counseling, career advising, and seminars are all examples of services provided by learning communities (often in collaboration with the larger institution) that may provide meaningful connections for students.

Referencing Tobias (1992), Eagan and Jaeger (2007:39) defined gatekeeper courses as "classes with high enrollment that generally represent the introductory courses required for matriculation into a major field of study." Gatekeeper courses in students'

initial years are often large and passive, which hinders social integration and student persistence (Braxton 2008). Large classes also make it difficult for instructors to provide timely feedback, and timely feedback is one of the most important factors for student learning (Braxton 2008; Chickering and Gamson 1987; Kuh et al. 2010). Learning communities are often deliberately small; in fact, a cohort is often considered “as a small group of learners” (Lawrence 2002:83). So, a benefit of learning communities may be smaller class sizes. Smaller class sizes may be a potential mechanism for how learning communities wield effects.

Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson (1987) identified seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education; good practice 1) encourages student-faculty interaction; 2) fosters cooperation among students; 3) promotes active learning; 4) gives prompt feedback; 5) emphasizes time on task; 6) communicates high expectations; and 7) respects diverse talents and ways of learning. Learning communities explicitly adhere to five of these principles (good practice communicates high expectations, respects diverse talents and ways of learning, and encourages student-faculty interaction, cooperation among students, and active learning), and some learning communities may adhere to more or all these principles.

TWO-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

Programs at two-year institutions are often different than programs at four-year colleges and, because of the dissimilar student groups, the differences in programs between two-year and four-year colleges are usually necessary and desirable.

Additionally, institutional differences exist between two-year and four-year institutions. For example, differences exist in degree programs, student services, and amenities. The

level of resources, as well as their types, may also distinguish four-year institutions from two-year institutions. Levin and Calcagno (2008) emphasized the need for formal evaluations (particularly for developmental programs) at community colleges. These authors highlighted how departments of institutional research at two-year institutions are often understaffed, thereby increasing the difficulty of conducting formal evaluations at community colleges. Levin and Calcagno (2008) recommended support from the state as well as the partnering of community colleges with universities to enhance the quality of evaluations at two-year institutions.

Studies examining the effectiveness of learning communities at two-year institutions are quite limited, particularly in developmental reading. Current studies primarily focus on student persistence, whereas this study includes other dimensions such as students' cognitive skills and attitudes. Many of the existing studies fail to consider cognitive outcomes associated with learning communities (Cerna et al. 2008). An exception is a study by Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon (2002). They found improvements in cognitive learning strategies and motivation for students participating in learning communities at two-year postsecondary institutions. These learning community students reported an increase in critical thinking, rehearsal and organization strategies, time management, and peer-learning and help-seeking behaviors. However, these outcomes did not include cognitive skills in content areas such as reading, math, etc.

Regarding other outcomes at two-year postsecondary institutions, in a qualitative study, differences were discovered in classroom climates and academic support networks for students in learning communities versus students not in learning communities (Wathington, Pretlow III, and Mitchell 2010). Learning community students in

Wathington, Pretlow III, and Mitchell's (2010) study generally reported more positive experiences at school than other students. The authors suggested that these experiences from learning communities were likely to result in increased student persistence.

Developmental education at two-year institutions.

The ED, IES, and WWC (2014a) identified six studies (Bloom and Sommo 2005; Scrivener et al. 2008; Sommo et al 2012; Weiss et al. 2010; Weissman et al. 2012; Weissman et al. 2011) that examined linked learning communities involving developmental education at community colleges. ED, IES and WWC (2014a) requires studies to be randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental designs. An additional twelve studies were excluded due to design standards required by WWC, and four studies were not eligible for review. Studies that were ineligible for review did not meet WWC's criteria, mainly because these studies did not involve developmental education.

ED, IES, and WWC (2014a) examined the effects of linked learning communities on five outcome measures: academic achievement (measured in two of the six studies), degree attainment (only one of the six studies investigated degree attainment), postsecondary enrollment, credit accumulation, and progress in developmental education. Three of the studies (Bloom and Sommo 2005; Scrivener et al. 2008; Sommo et al. 2012) were longitudinal studies from the same institution, Kingsborough Community College in Beaulyn, NY. These studies were randomized controlled trials and consisted, collectively, of 1,534 students. 769 students were in learning communities and 765 students were in the control group. The learning communities consisted of three courses: an English course, a first-year seminar, and a course required for a given student's major. Students in the program also received support services, counseling, and textbook vouchers. Although

learning community students scored higher than students not in a learning community on the five outcomes (academic achievement, degree attainment, postsecondary enrollment, credit accumulation, and progress in developmental education), none of these differences were substantially important (ED, IES, and WWC 2014a). Three outcomes (academic achievement, degree attainment, and progress in developmental education) were marginally statistically significant ($p < .10$). The remaining outcomes (postsecondary enrollment and credit accumulation) were not statistically significant. Another follow up study, not included in the report by ED, IES, and WWC (2014a), was conducted by Weiss, Mayer, Cullinan, Ratledge, Sommo, and Diamond (2015). Seven years later, these authors discovered an increase in credit accumulation for learning community students compared to students not in a learning community. No effects were found between learning community students and students not in the program on employment or earnings seven years after the intervention (Weiss, Mayer, Cullinan, Ratledge, Sommo, and Diamond 2015).

The study by Weissman et al. 2011 occurred at two community colleges: Houston Community College in Houston, Texas and Queensborough Community College in Queens, New York. The sample at Houston Community College included 761 intervention students and 512 students in the control group. The intervention program at Houston Community college linked a developmental math course with a college success course (similar to FYE). This study looked at outcomes immediately following the one-semester intervention. Weissman et al. (2011) did not find substantial registration differences between learning community students and students not in a learning community. However, an interesting gender difference was discovered. Women

registered at a higher rate for classes than men (Weisman et al. 2011). Other outcomes investigated by Weissman et al. (2011), including credit accumulation and progress in developmental education, were not substantially significant.

At Queensborough Community College, the sample consisted of 1,034 students with 608 students in the treatment group and 426 students assigned to the control group. This learning community program linked developmental math with a developmental or college-level English course (depending upon student placement). This study examined outcomes for two semesters after the intervention occurred. Results suggested that postsecondary enrollment, credit accumulation, and progress in developmental education were not substantially different between learning community students and students who did not participate in learning communities.

Similar to the study by Weissman et al. (2011), a study by Weissman, et al. (2012) examined two community colleges. The sample from the Community College of Baltimore County in Maryland consisted of 1,803 students. 650 students participated in the learning community, and 433 students were in the control group. Students enrolled in a developmental English course, a college-level course, and a master learner session. At the other college, Merced College in California, 711 students were assigned to the program and 713 students did not participate in the learning community program. This program linked a developmental writing course to another developmental course, a college success course, or an introductory college-level class. Data were collected and analyzed after the first semester at both institutions. No significant difference existed between learning community students and students not in a learning community

regarding postsecondary enrollment, credit accumulation, or progress in developmental education at either college.

The final study examined by the ED, IES, and WWC (2014a) was Weiss et al. (2010), which was the only study that investigated learning communities that required a developmental reading course. This study consisted of 1,071 students (709 students in learning communities and 362 students in the control group) from Hillsborough Community College located in Tampa Bay, Florida. Students enrolled in a reading course as well as a college success course. Hence, the learning community program in Weiss et al. (2010) is similar in design and implementation to the learning community program in this present study. This study examined four outcome variables: academic achievement (grade point average), postsecondary enrollment, credit accumulation, and progress in developmental education. None of these outcomes were statistically significant for the full sample. Further, Weiss et al. (2010) discovered that learning communities did not help developmental students increase their reading performances.

In explaining their results, Weiss et al. (2010) stated that some of the learning communities in their study used a very basic model of learning communities (consisting of cohorts and linked courses). These authors argue that more comprehensive and robustly implemented learning communities may yield different results. This research by Weiss et al. (2010) demonstrates the importance of implementation for learning communities. When learning communities are not implemented correctly, outcomes may be weakened or nonexistent. Hence, learning communities should be carefully and strategically developed (Smith 1991). Comprehensive learning communities may include faculty collaboration and curriculum integration in addition to the formation of cohorts

and linked classes (Weiss et al. 2010). The learning community program in this study included the above characteristics.

The most intensive form of a learning community is coordinated studies (Smith 1991). This type of learning community is expensive and time consuming. Qualitative research can pinpoint implementation differences across institutions and how these differences may explain varying outcomes (Weiss, Mayer, Cullinan, Ratledge, Sommo, and Diamond 2015). Such research would be advantageous toward having a better understanding of learning communities.

As the study by Weiss et al. (2010) is the only one to focus primarily on the effect of learning communities on developmental reading, further research is warranted in this area. As such, this present study adds to the limited literature on learning communities that involve developmental reading. This evaluation also contributes to the study of developmental education more generally by shedding light on how to improve the effectiveness of learning communities that involve developmental education. In addition, this study examines broader outcomes such as those outcomes that assess students' voices.

Weiss et al. (2010) brought attention to the notion that implementation can affect outcomes. This present research focuses on the implementation aspects of learning communities. To a degree, this study suggests how changes in implementation may shape outcomes. This study also measures additional outcomes that are less evident in the literature. Such outcomes include students' attitudes toward reading, students' self-confidence, social ties, and changes in students' perspectives. This evaluation is also

beneficial because the program was studied for two years. As evident in this literature review, most studies examine a program after one semester.

Overall the report by ED, IES, and WWC (2014a) concluded, based on current evidence from six studies, that linked learning communities have no effect on any of the five outcomes (academic achievement, degree attainment, postsecondary enrollment, credit accumulation, and progress in developmental education) in developmental education at two-year institutions. Weiss, Visher, Weissman, and Wathington (2015) also conducted a similar meta-analysis involving above-mentioned community colleges. These authors concluded that the effect of learning communities on developmental education were “positive, although quite modest” (Weiss, Visher, Weissman, and Wathington 2015:520). Although the authors did not find an effect of learning communities on student persistence, they found an increase in credit accumulation (in the targeted area) for students in learning communities (Weiss, Mayer, Cullinan, Ratledge, Sommo, and Diamond 2015).

SUMMARY

The practice of learning communities is generally supportive for four-year institutions (Braxton 2008; Cerna et al. 2008; Engstrom 2008; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh 2008; Purdie and Rosser 2011; Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon 2002; Tinto 2003). In two-year environments, learning communities seem more challenging and complex. Learning communities at two-year institutions generally have a larger population of students who require developmental education, and it is challenging for students to make progress in developmental education (ED, IES and WWC 2014a). Second, two-year institutions may have less resources than four-year institutions.

Learning community programs can be costly for postsecondary institutions (Visser, Weiss, Weissman, Rudd, and Wathington 2012). Costs of learning communities vary considerably by institution (Visser et al. 2012). A study by Visser et al. (2012) was conducted across the six community colleges (Kingsborough Community College, Queensborough Community College, Merced College, Community College of Baltimore County, Houston Community College, and Hillsborough Community College). Only three of these community colleges had cost data available, and the average expense for student was 566 dollars per student (Visser et al. 2012). Though there are many positive benefits associated with learning communities for both faculty and students, dwindling resources is a serious obstacle to the formation and sustainability of learning communities (Minkler 2002).

There are hardly any studies that evaluate the effectiveness of learning communities on developmental reading at two-year institutions. Such research, as done in this study, can aid in the understanding of developmental students and their needs for college success. This evaluation is also significant in that it provides direct insight from students about their experiences with specific learning communities. Student voice is regularly absent in reform efforts (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991; Ingersoll 2003; Taines 2012). This evaluation examines insights from students on attitudes toward reading, academic self-confidence, and sense of community at college. Other insights include students' opinions about the learning community program and how it impacted their college experience.

Studies that evaluate learning communities rarely provide a theoretical framework. For example, none of the studies (Bloom and Sommo 2005; Scrivener et al.

2008; Sommo et al. 2012; Weiss et al. 2010; Weissman, et al. 2012; Weissman et al. 2011) identified by DE, IES, and WWC (2014a) on learning communities for developmental education provide a theoretical framework in their evaluations. This evaluation aims to identify and apply theories that are helpful in explaining the implementation and impact of learning communities. This study seeks to determine if the theoretical constructs are supported and if any possible modifications of the theories are warranted.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several theories and theoretical constructs are used as a framework for this evaluation: 1) student departure theory, 2) student involvement theory, 3) cultural, social, and economic capital, and 4) “warming up” and “cooling out”. These theoretical approaches play a pivotal role in understanding the learning community program in this evaluation. The concept of social integration, an important aspect of student departure theory, is most commonly associated with learning communities. This study, however, fully employs student departure theory, not just its components of social integration, to understand learning communities that are designed for developmental reading students. Student involvement theory has been used to explain the effectiveness of learning communities, but it has seldom been applied in evaluations. This evaluation investigates what kinds of student involvement the learning community program implements and how these involvements may contribute to student success. Bourdieu’s (1986) forms of capital are essential in this study for understanding the obstacles that developmental students experience in college. These concepts have been utilized in the area of literacy (Albright and Luke 2012; Collins 1993; Grenfell, Bloome, Hardy, Pahl, Rowsell, and Street 2012), which is beneficial to understanding learning communities that were created for developmental reading students. Finally, although “warming up” and “cooling out” at community colleges have been substantially studied, there is not a study that this evaluator is aware of that examines the role of learning communities on whether students

“warm up” or “cool out” in terms of their career aspirations. These concepts are important in understanding some of the effects of learning communities on students’ goals and achievements.

THEORY OF STUDENT DEPARTURE

Tinto (1975) established the theory of student departure by building on Spady’s (1970) work. Later, Tinto (1993) updated and extended his theory and this model is used in the current literature (Ishitami and Flood 2018). This revised theory of student departure is the primary focus of this research. Student departure theory describes and explains the factors and processes that impact students’ decisions to leave college. The model is longitudinal in nature. In fact, Tinto (1993:114) labels it as “A longitudinal model of institutional departure.” The model begins with students entering college and it concludes with them making a “departure decision”, choosing to stay in college or leave college. Student departure theory consists of six main components: pre-entry attributes, goals/commitments, institutional experiences, integration, and outcome (Tinto 1993).

Students enter college with pre-entry attributes. Tinto (1993) listed three kinds of these attributes: family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling. Tinto (1993) argued that these attributes, when beginning college, will impact students’ goals and commitments. For goals and commitments, Tinto (1993) identified three components: intentions, goals and institutional commitments, and external commitments (like work and family). Students’ intentions and external commitments were not included in Tinto’s (1975) original model. Both of these concepts are important additions, as student intentions and external commitments are expected to be highly influential in students’ departure decisions. Subsequently, Tinto (1993) maintained that students’ intentions,

goals, and institutional commitments will impact their institutional experiences. Institutional experiences involve an academic and social system. In Tinto's (1993) revised model, he emphasized the role of informal and formal aspects in these academic and social systems. Academic performance and faculty/staff interactions are features of the academic system. The social system includes extracurricular activities and peer group interactions. Within these institutional experiences of academic and social systems, it is clear that involvement is a key aspect of Tinto's (1993) student departure theory. Next, institutional experiences directly affect students' levels of academic and social integration. At this point, Tinto (1993) revisited goals/commitments, asserting that academic and social integration will transform students' earlier intentions, goals, and institutional commitments. Although academic and social integration impacts intents, goals, and institutional commitment, Tinto (1993) acknowledged the role of external commitments in influencing students' intents, goals, and institutional commitment throughout students' time at the institution. Last, the new goals/commitments that have formed over time also affect students' departure decisions. That is, whether they are to persist or depart.

To summarize, student departure theory claims that integrative experiences, both social and academic, that are positive will enhance students' intentions, goals, and institutional commitments (Tinto 1993). Therefore, in these situations, students are likely to persist. Alternatively, when students have integrative experiences that are negative, students' intentions, goals, and institutional commitments are weakened (Tinto 1993). In this case, students may choose to depart from college. Although student departure theory can certainly contribute to understanding why students are forced to leave college, Tinto

(1993) revealed that his model is chiefly designed to explain and describe students' voluntary decisions to dropout.

Tinto has also done extensive work on learning communities. Learning communities are an educational practice that is theoretically supported by student departure theory. The theory identifies key components that impact students' departure decisions. As such, colleges and universities can better understand what resources and programs are needed to increase student persistence and decrease dropout rates. Most of the literature and findings pinpoint how learning communities help students socially integrate into college life. It is crucial, especially for developmental students, to feel that they are socially integrated (and belong) in college. However, it is important to not neglect the academic system in Tinto's (1993) model. Learning communities must also include services to help students academically integrate into college life (like tutors, writing centers, advisers, etc.). As this study focuses on developmental students, social integration, as well as academic integration, is important. Developmental students often enter college lacking the skills and abilities (a pre-entry attribute identified in Tinto's (1993) theory) that are needed to academically integrate. In addition, another important aspect of student departure theory—institutional commitment—may be more challenging for the students in this study. For example, Tinto (1993) acknowledged that it may be more difficult to enhance institutional commitment for those students who commute. Students in this study are affected by many factors that are associated with dropout. Learning communities may be able to help alleviate some of these issues so that these students become more likely to persist and less likely to dropout.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT THEORY

Student involvement theory was constructed by Astin (1984). This theory explains the link between student involvement and student persistence. Student involvement theory contains five postulates:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects...
2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features...
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (Astin 1999:519)

The key to student persistence and learning, for Astin (1999), was student involvement. By involvement, Astin (1999) largely meant students' actions and behaviors as opposed to their thoughts, feelings, etc. Students who are significantly involved in college are more likely to persist, whereas students who lack involvement are more likely to dropout. In fact, Astin (1999:524) stated: "the act of dropping out can be viewed as the ultimate form of noninvolvement". Astin (1993) found three factors of involvement to be especially important: academic involvement, peer involvement, and student-faculty involvement.

Astin (1999) maintained that faculty interaction is the most significant factor on student persistence and student satisfaction. Other studies seem to support the significance of student-faculty interaction. For instance, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling (1996) highlighted how more student-faculty interaction outside the classroom

was linked to greater gains in interpretation and comprehension skills for students. Interestingly, demographic differences play a role in student-faculty interaction. Women and White students are less likely to attribute cognitive gains to student-faculty interaction, whereas men, African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and international students are more likely to attribute cognitive gains to contact with faculty (Kuh 1995).

There are crucial similarities and differences between Tinto's (1993; 1975) theory of student departure and Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement. Both models stress the importance of student-student interaction and student-faculty interaction. Further, student involvement (academic and social) is crucial in both frameworks. However, Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement is principally about student involvement in terms of behavior. For Tinto (1975; 1993), student persistence and dropout are more complex and, as a result, Tinto's models (1975; 1993) are more elaborate. For example, Tinto (1975) included pre-entry attributes and goals/commitments as contributors to students' departure decisions. In Tinto's (1993) model, he added students' intentions and external commitments. This element of student perceptions is a key difference between the theories of student departure and student involvement. Astin (1999) did not believe that students' thoughts, intentions, perceptions, or feelings played as central a role in student persistence and student learning; Tinto (1993) considered these aspects, as well as others, in his model. Similarly, however, one of the central processes in the theory of student departure is student involvement as described by Astin (1999). Practitioners and scholars focus on the academic and social integration of Tinto's (1993) model; however, the mechanisms for achieving academic

and social integration (as portrayed by Tinto (1993)) is through involvement. In this way, the theories of student involvement and student departure are comparable.

Student involvement can be a challenge for the students in this study, as they have many work and family demands and they live off campus. Learning communities have a tremendous amount of potential to enhance student involvement for these students. Learning communities support academic involvement, peer involvement, and student-faculty involvement in a variety of ways. One reason that learning communities are usually small in size is to increase interaction, particularly student-faculty and student-student interaction. Further, involvement theory supports the use of active pedagogies (Wilmer 2009; Astin 1999) that are integral to learning communities. Involvement theory contends that learners need to be active learners. A point of utilizing active pedagogies, teaching and designing an active curriculum, forming cohorts, and extending class time (all significant features of learning communities) is an effort to increase students' academic, peer, and faculty involvement. Further, increasing involvement via the classroom is especially important at community colleges. Students usually have little time to spend on campus due to work and family demands, so in-class outreaches, like learning communities, are beneficial (Park, Cerven, Nations, and Nielsen 2013).

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC CAPITAL

Bourdieu (1986:241) defined capital as “accumulated labor” which enables one “to appropriate social energy in the form of...living labor.” “Labor” is used as a measure of effort or value. In other words, capital allows an individual to use the effort of other people, accumulated over time, toward their own purposes. Bourdieu (1986) also viewed capital as power. In his influential work, *The Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu (1986)

identified three types of capital: cultural, social, and economic capital. Capital is more precisely defined when restricted to one of its types.

Cultural capital exists in three states: embodied state, objectified state, and institutionalized state (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu (1986:243) defined cultural capital in the embodied state as “in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body”. Next, cultural capital in its objectified state is “in the form of cultural goods” (Bourdieu 1986:243). Bourdieu (1986) provided examples of cultural capital in its objective state as books, instruments, paintings, machines, etc. Last, cultural capital can exist in an institutionalized state. A crucial part of Bourdieu’s (1986) theory is how forms of capital can be converted into other forms of capital; these conversions are often disguised. The institutionalized state of cultural capital is one of the primary means for these conversions. Bourdieu (1986:248) described the institutionalized state as “the officially recognized, guaranteed competence”, as opposed to simple cultural capital that “is constantly required to prove itself”. Educational credentials are an example of cultural capital in the institutionalized state (Bourdieu 1986).

A second form of capital is social capital. Bourdieu (1986:243) explained social capital as “made up of social obligations (‘connections’) ... and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility.” The final form of capital, economic capital, is defined as “immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights” (Bourdieu 1986:243). Bourdieu’s (1986) forms of capital are connected and interrelated. For example, social capital can be converted into economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu (1986) believed that understanding the social world

could not be reduced to just economic theory or economic capital, which is why he emphasized cultural and social capital.

Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital have important implications for higher education. In fact, Bourdieu's (1986) ideas came about when he considered how students' differing social classes/backgrounds would impact their academic achievements.

Developmental, working-class, and first-generation college students often do not have the forms of capital that are beneficial to experience success in college. Students' lack of economic capital put them at a larger disadvantage compared to their middle-class counterparts. Higher education is extremely expensive, and tuition can feel out of reach for many working-class students. Even with receiving financial aid and loans, working-class students are likely to have to work a lot of hours while attending college. Such work demands interfere with one's ability to focus on schoolwork and become socially and academically involved. In addition, the students in this study were at-risk because they faced obstacles to acquiring the forms of cultural capital needed to succeed in college. One example, especially for the developmental reading students in this study, was that in their formative years they may not have been exposed to an extensive vocabulary like their middle-class counterparts. At eighteen months, children of a high socioeconomic status know about 60 percent more vocabulary words than children from a low socioeconomic status (Fernald, Marchman, and Weisleder 2013). Other forms of capital, like being familiar with how college works, may be an issue for first-generation students. Such information is often relayed from students' social connections, which is related to their social capital. Also, working-class students usually feel a sense of disconnect with college (Ostrove and Long 2007; Lehmann 2007). They may not relate to their middle-

class peers, and they may feel intimidated by their instructors and professors (Jack 2016). In sum, developmental and working-class students experience many forms of obstacles and feelings of disconnection that are due to a lack of exposure to institutionalized cultural, social, and economic capital.

When access to forms of capital is inhibited, Bourdieu (1986) portrayed how the social structure is reproduced (i.e. the working class remains in the working class). Likewise, when students are unable to obtain cultural capital, it is challenging for them to persist in college. On the other hand, forms of capital can be acquired through institutions and programs and these gains in capital can help students to increase their likelihood of experiencing success in college. This study seeks to understand if/how learning communities may play a role in helping developmental reading students, many of whom may be working-class and/or first-generation students, acquire other types of cultural and social capital.

COOLING OUT OR WARMING UP

The concept of “cooling-out” originated from Clark (1960). He argued that community colleges often influenced students to lower their aspirations. Students who lower their goals once entering community college would be described as cooling out. There were a few ways that Clark (1960) believed that community colleges engaged in the cooling-out process: 1) community colleges deterred students from continuing to a four-year institution, 2) community college encouraged students to switch to “easier” programs and fields, and 3) community colleges accepted students who could not meet degree requirements. Interestingly, Deil-Amen (2006) discovered that cooling out reduces dropout because cooling out may allow for students’ aspirations to better align

with their academic skills. As such, cooling out may not be entirely negative; cooling out is better than dropping out (Deil-Amen 2006). Clark (1960) also highlighted that only a few community college students (from California in 1960) transferred to four-year institutions. There was a tremendous amount of support in the past for students cooling out at two-year institutions (Anderson 1984; Astin 1977, 1972; Dougherty 1994, 1992; Velez 1985). However, community colleges have drastically changed over the years, and many community colleges today offer/advocate transfer programs. For example, the community college in the present study advocates transferring to a four-year institution and offers effective transfer programs.

In contrast to cooling out, the notion of “warming up” was first coined and explored by Deil-Amen (2006). Warming up refers to students increasing their educational goals and aspirations. In more recent years, research indicates that students are warming up instead of cooling out at community colleges (Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008; Deil-Amen 2006; Nielsen 2015). As such, four-year college aspirations are rising rather than decreasing. Using the Beginning Postsecondary Student survey, “a nationally representative longitudinal sample of more than 7,200 college students”, Deil-Amen (2006:45) found that more students experienced warming up in community college than cooling out. Nielsen (2015) also found evidence for warming up. He conducted a longitudinal study over 3.5 years and interviewed 23 working-class women. He found that students’ goals to attend a four-year institution held steady as they attended community college. Warming up and being ambitious are usually considered good traits for student success, but Rosenbaum (2011) warned that students with high plans and poor

information are susceptible to dropout. For example, poor information may lead to low preparation for placement exams, difficulty in navigating obstacles of college life, etc.

Deil-Amen (2006) argued that the concept of warming up has largely been ignored in the literature. In addition, she argued that most studies, when investigating cooling out, fail to ask students about their goals (Deil-Amen 2006). This study will contribute to this discussion. Furthermore, what factors influence students to warm up or cool out? From the 92 interviews with 23 working-class women, Neilsen (2015) discovered that students' reasons for holding steady in their aspirations were in large part due to their efforts to maintain a "good" social standing. However, institutions/colleges have a big impact on student experiences and their decisions to hold steady, cool out, or warm up as well. For instance, Deil-Amen (2006:64) found that "warming up occurred less frequently at the campus dominated by applied programs." Besides external and institutional influences, what other experiences shape students' goals and aspirations? Further, how are the educational and careers goals of developmental reading students at community colleges formed and transformed? Can educational programs, like learning communities, prevent students from cooling out or help students to warm up?

SUMMARY

Four theoretical frameworks have been presented, and each of these concepts are critical to understanding student learning, student persistence, and student dropout. These ideas are also interconnected. For example, Tinto's (1993) model of student departure emphasizes students' commitments to their goals. A lack of commitment to goals may lead to students cooling out; enhanced commitment to the institution and goals may lead students to warming up (Tinto 1975). Social integration is another key aspect of Tinto's

(1993) theory of student departure and working-class/developmental students may struggle to socially integrate as they enter college. Obtaining cultural capital that is prevalent within the institution is a key component to social integration. For example, Astin (1999) asserted that if students did not identify with their institution (peers and faculty could be included here too) that it would be difficult for them to become involved with the institution. A lack of economic capital inhibits students' ability to become socially and academically involved as well.

Student involvement theory and student departure theory stress peer and faculty interaction in the learning process. Learning communities provide meaningful approaches to learning. Such approaches like peer learning (Falchikov 2002), interaction (Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano 2011; Tinto 2003; Chickering and Gamson 1987), personally-relevant content and student engagement (Zhao and Kuh 2004), and encouraging different ways of thinking allow for students to learn on an enriched level (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000). In total, the implementation of learning communities is a practice that is corroborated by several theoretical frameworks. In addition, this study will investigate whether learning communities help students in gaining access to forms of capital that are important for student persistence. Further, beyond persisting at community college, can learning communities prevent students from cooling out and encourage students in warming up their aspirations?

The present study used both deductive and inductive approaches. Deductively, Tinto's (1993) student departure theory and Astin's (1999) student involvement theory were employed. These constructs informed the methodologies of this research and helped to construct the hypotheses and guide data collection in the quantitative methods.

Because student interaction with faculty and peers is a critical component of both involvement theory and student departure theory, this study hypothesizes that student-student interaction and student-faculty interaction will be a factor in student and program success. Hence, data collected in this study seek to understand the impact of social interaction on student performance and satisfaction.

These theoretical frameworks also influenced the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Interviewees and focus groups were questioned about the frequency and quality of interactions with peers and faculty. Further, students in fall 2016 were asked, as a result of increased interaction (especially with instructors), whether they felt they were being monitored or under added scrutiny to perform well. The evaluator posed questions on whether students' ideals or persons were altered as a result of social interaction. In the qualitative analysis, attention was given to potential themes regarding social interaction and its influence on students' experiences and performances.

Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital and the constructs of cooling out (Clark 1960) and warming up (Deil-Amen 2006) were inductively utilized. As such, the qualitative data contributes to the undeveloped theory on learning communities. A combination of sociological constructs, as used in this study, may be critical in understanding how to maximize the effectiveness of learning communities and the role of learning communities in student learning and persistence.

CHAPTER IV

DATA AND METHODS

This evaluation is a case study that examined a learning community program over two years (fall 2014, spring 2015, fall 2015, spring 2016, fall 2016) at a public, two-year college. The program targeted students who required developmental reading. The primary goals of the program were to enhance students' 1) reading skills, 2) academic self-confidence, 3) attitudes about reading, 4) sense of community in the classroom and on campus, and 5) student persistence into the subsequent semester. It is important to note that most of these program goals were not specific to reading.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Carnegie Classification for the school is Associate's College: Mixed Transfer/Career and Technical. The learning communities were formally implemented for first-year, developmental students. The learning communities were of the linked-course variety. In addition, the courses were back-to-back (with FYE meeting first, followed by RDG) and had the same set of students. As the students meet for an extended period of time, the learning communities may also be classified as coordinated studies in addition to linked courses.

All participants in the study, including students in the learning communities and in the comparison group, were restricted to taking two courses: RDG and FYE. Students self-selected into these courses. There were exceptions to this six-credit-hour restriction for students who required full-time status for financial aid (such as military students),

students involved in special programs, or students who had already earned a specified number of college-level credits (whether at the college or another institution). Students were limited to these two courses because institutional research at the institution demonstrated a relationship between RDG students who pursue a full course load and a lack of student persistence (Internal College Reports 2015). The duration of the learning communities at this school was one semester, which is typical for most learning communities (Cerna et al. 2008).

The classes were small, not exceeding 24 students in each learning community. Subjects were encouraged to participate in class discussions, ask questions, and collaborate with other students in the class. Students could not partake in one class while dropping or withdrawing from the other course; they had to remain enrolled in both FYE and RDG or drop/withdraw from both courses.

Each cohort was taught by two instructors, and these same instructors taught both cohorts of learning communities. Instructors were likely selected for the learning community program based on scheduling logistics. The RDG instructor for the learning communities also taught the course for those students not in learning communities.

Each instructor prepared the curriculum for their respective course, instructed it, and provided a grade for the specific class. However, the instructors in each learning community collaborated with each other to reinforce skills from each class. For example, the RDG instructor could have provided reading material to students that related to the FYE class (such as an article on how to effectively manage your time as a college student or financial literacy as it pertains to paying for college). Students worked on their RDG skills as well as FYE skills in RDG. In addition, students worked in groups on projects

and assignments that were required for both classes. Instructors for learning community classes promoted out-of-class interaction, via assignments and projects, between students and faculty. These above-mentioned aspects were characteristics for classes in the learning community program. The classes, RDG and FYE, were not linked or integrated for the comparison group. Instructors in the learning communities were also advised to use active pedagogies. Some examples of active pedagogies used by the instructors at the college included class discussions, student presentations, class activities (a scavenger hunt is one example of an activity used in the program at the college), service learning (that included volunteering at organizations in the community), and various forms of cooperative learning. These pedagogies could have been used by instructors who did not teach in the program. Learning communities, however, are usually more active than standard classes. The instructors were a very important group of stakeholders in this evaluation, as they played a major role in implementing the reform effort. Other stakeholders included program and institutional administrators, and students.

MIXED METHODS

The researcher used mixed methods across a two-year period (fall 2014-fall 2016) including pre-post surveys, pre-post reading tests, secondary data provided by the college (consisting of grades, cohort course completion rates, and demographic data), a content review of internal program documents in addition to public documents that promote learning communities, semi-structured interviews with learning community students, instructors, and program and institutional administrators, and focus groups with students. Mixed methods were employed in this evaluation to gain a more comprehensive

understanding of the program, including both processes and outcomes of the learning community program. In Table 1 below, a timeline for data collection is presented.

TABLE 1. *TIMELINE FOR DATA COLLECTION*

Semester	Data Collection
Fall 2014	Pre-post Test, Post Survey, Two Focus Groups (Intervention Group) with Learning Community Students, Secondary Data Interviews with Two Learning Community Instructors
Spring 2015	Pre-post Test, Pre-post Survey, Four Focus Groups (Two Learning Community and Two Non-learning Community Groups), Secondary Data
Fall 2015	Pre-post Test, Pre-post Survey, Secondary Data
Spring/Summer 2016	Nine Interviews (Two Learning Community and Three Non-learning Community Instructors and Four Program/Institutional Administrators) Internal and External Documents
Fall 2016	Eight Student Interviews (Seven Learning Community Students and One Non-learning Community Student)

The researcher conducted a pilot study (as a part of this evaluation) of the learning community program in fall 2014. The learning community instructors were interviewed in fall 2014 and spring 2016, and they described how the program had evolved. There were no qualitative interviews during spring 2015 and fall 2015. Funding for the learning community program remained consistent over the period studied. This evaluation was

dependent on both the quantitative and qualitative components to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning community program.

Qualitative Methods

Three qualitative methods were used in this study: in-depth interviews, focus groups, and a content review. As contained in Table 1, interviews during fall 2014 consisted of those with the two learning community instructors. (All instructors, administrators, and students were assigned pseudonyms in this evaluation.) These interviews were held on campus near the end of the semester. In addition, these interviews did not exceed one hour in duration. See page 213 for the interview guide with instructors in fall 2014. Instructors were asked about how they got involved with the program, their teaching practices in the learning community and other classes, benefits or complications with team teaching, likes and dislikes about the program, and recommendations for improving the program.

There were 17 in-depth interviews in total during spring 2016 and fall 2016: eight students, five instructors, and four learning community program and institutional administrators participated in interviews. Seventeen interviews provided rich data for better understanding the learning community program. For instance, these interviews conveyed why the program was started, perceptions about the learning community program at the college, strengths and weaknesses of the program, and how students were performing post-program.

All administrators and instructors associated with the learning community program participated in the study. Three instructors who did not teach in the program

were also interviewed. Non-learning community instructors were primarily interviewed to compare teaching pedagogies with the learning community instructors.

The interviews from students provided conceptual insight into student experiences (such as likes/dislikes, learning experiences, and goals). Via random selection, the college supplied the names of 20 students who participated in the learning communities during spring 2015 and fall 2015 and 20 students who did not participate in the program during spring 2015 and fall 2015. Consequently, 40 students were invited to participate in these interviews and eight students (seven learning community students and one non-learning community student) accepted the invitation and were interviewed during fall 2016. There were two or three semesters between enrollment in RDG and the interviews. The invited students all took RDG within one semester of each other (fall or spring 2015).

All eight students who participated in the individual interviews were women. There is concern about a lack of engagement from men on college campuses and its impact on academic performance and student persistence (Schlinsog 2010). Six of the students (including the non-learning community student) were white. At least four of the eight subjects were non-traditional students. Participants were not asked about their age or whether they were traditionally-aged or non-traditional students; however, four students voluntarily provided information that classified them as non-traditional students (e.g. “I have been out of high school for [more than 10 years]”). Similarly, students were not directly asked about their social class. However, they revealed information during interviews about their job titles, hours worked per week, and financial challenges. As

such, the evaluator was able to conclude that at least six of the eight students (including the non-learning community student) were working-class students.

Demographics, social background, and other characteristics were examined to determine how the eight participants compared to the students who did not participate in the in-depth interviews. This comparison helps to identify potential non-response bias related to these several variables. Based on the names of the invited students and public directories, gender and race were identified for most of the invitees. Of the 20 learning community students that were invited to participate in the in-depth interviews, about 70 percent were women, 25 percent were men, and 5 percent were unknown. Approximately 55 percent of these learning community students were white, 20 percent were non-white, and 25 percent were unknown. Of the 20 non-learning community students invited to participate, approximately 80 percent were women, 15 percent were men, and 5 percent were unknown. Approximately 40 percent of these non-learning community students were white, 35 percent were non-white, and 25 percent were unknown. Regarding these variables, the seven students from the learning communities who accepted the invitation had similar social characteristics as compared to the 20 invited students: the majority of those interviewed were women and white.

Other demographic data were unavailable for the 40 invited students. However, from the fall 2014 survey, 15 percent of the learning community students who took the survey were 25 years old or older, 58 percent of the students' mothers did not have a college degree, and 58 percent worked at least 21 hours per week. From the same survey, 24 percent of the non-learning community students were 25 years old or older, 69 percent of the students' mothers did not have a college degree, and 67 percent worked at least 21

hours per week. Based on the hours worked per week and the education of students' mothers, the social class backgrounds of the seven learning community students interviewed were similar to the social class background characteristics of the population of the learning community students who took the survey. The one non-learning community student interviewed was also similar to the social class background of the non-learning community students; the student was working-class. Considering demographics, social background, involvement, etc., the seven learning community students might be similar to the larger random sample. However, four of the seven learning community students who were interviewed provided information that indicated that they were at least 25 years old; in contrast the surveyed learning community students were primarily traditionally-aged students.

In-depth interviews with students in fall 2016 were an important supplement to focus groups, as students revealed new and different information as individuals than they did in focus groups. Further, the evaluator had the opportunity to inquire how the students were performing near the completion of their degrees and how the program contributed to their college experience. Students were asked in fall 2016 whether they felt they were being monitored or under greater scrutiny to perform well, their feelings about the level of monitoring, and how they believed it helped or hindered their performance or other outcomes (such as attitudes and self-confidence). Students were also asked about how they were enrolled in the program, their likes and/or dislikes about the program, their learning experiences, whether the program played a role in achieving their goals at the college, and if their ideas or person were changed because of the program.

Administrators were asked how the learning communities were perceived at the college, the design and operation of the program, strengths, weaknesses, and surprises regarding the program, modifications to the program throughout the two-year period, why the program was initiated, their overall assessment of the program, and recommendations for the program. Instructors were asked these questions as well as questions about their teaching practices and interactions with students and faculty.

Via triangulation, administrators' perceptions and assessments coincided (or not) with students' perceptions and assessments that emerged from the in-depth interviews and focus groups. Another aim of the interviews with administrators, particularly those in broader institutional roles, was to assess to what extent they were connected to the program. Indeed, they had pertinent information on why the program was started and what its future may hold.

These semi-structured interviews ranged from 14 minutes and 25 seconds to 1 hour, 13 minutes, and 2 seconds. The mean length of the interviews was 42 minutes and 43 seconds with a standard deviation of 16 minutes and 9 seconds. Please see the interview guides for instructors, administrators, and students during spring 2016 and fall 2016 on pages 214, 216, and 217, respectively. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis and took place on campus near the end of semester.

The sample for the focus groups during fall 2014 came from the 35 students in the learning communities. All students in both learning communities were invited to participate in the study. In total during fall 2014, 27 students participated in the focus groups with 15 students in one cohort and 12 in the other cohort. These students consisted of six men, 11 women, and gender was unidentified for 10 students. An attempt was

made to conduct two focus groups consisting of those in the comparison group, but no students showed. Therefore, there is only data from two focus group meetings during fall 2014, and these sessions were with the learning communities.

During spring 2015, four focus groups were held. Two of the focus groups were with learning community students. The other two focus groups were with two classes selected at random from those classes not in the learning community program. In sum, 18 learning community students and 18 students not enrolled in the program participated in the focus groups during spring 2015. The learning community students consisted of one man, 12 women, and five students whose gender was unidentified. The non-learning community students were comprised of six men, nine women, and three students whose gender was unknown. Note that the eight students who participated in the in-depth interviews did not participate in any of the focus groups.

Please see the interview guide for focus groups on page 211. Students in both the intervention and comparison groups were asked similar questions about their experiences as first-year students. Focus groups were conducted on campus by the evaluator. The focus groups took place at the end of the semester when students were nearing the completion of the program. Further, the focus groups were held during class time. Refreshments were provided to encourage students to attend. Focus sessions ranged from 13 minutes to 28 minutes. The mean length of the meetings was 24 minutes with a standard deviation of 5 minutes. All six focus groups across the two-year period were audio recorded and the focus group discussions were transcribed for data analysis.

The content review consisted of internal program documents as well as external documents. The materials consisted of three types: documents relating to the IRP (sixteen

contents in total), training documents for learning community instructors (twenty materials in sum), and syllabi from learning community and non-learning community instructors (six contents in total). Internal documents were provided by program administrators and instructors at the college. The evaluator asked for all internal program documents in an effort to reduce bias on which documents were selected. External documents included training documents from other colleges or organizations that were used by the learning community instructors and/or administrators in this study. External documents from other colleges showed similarities and differences regarding the design and implementation of the learning communities. Although this evaluation is both an outcome and process evaluation, the content review primarily contributed to the process component of the evaluation. These documents, particularly the training documents, revealed implementation strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Qualitative data analysis.

Sensitizing concepts were used to initiate data collection and analysis. A sensitizing concept “gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances... directions along which to look” (Blumer 1954:7). Based on analysis from fall 2014, these sensitizing concepts guided further investigation: study habits, time management, goals, active, cooperative, and collaborative activities, interaction inside and outside the classroom, relationships with instructors and peers, attitudes, self-confidence, peer learning, peer feedback, and team teaching. Additionally, stemming from the theoretical frameworks used in this study, the following sensitizing concepts were used for direction in data collection and analysis: reading material,

interdisciplinary methods, and critical thinking. Below the three qualitative methods for this study are described.

Comparisons were made between focus groups on their sense of community, academic self-confidence, attitudes, and perceptions about their reading ability and college-level success. Comparisons were also made on how students were enrolled in the program and implementation aspects of the program. Further, the focus group data from each learning community were compared to determine if there were any notable differences between the four learning communities.

Data from the focus groups and in-depth interviews were categorized by question. Then, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis has conflicting definitions in the literature (Boyatzis 1998; Palmquist, Carley, and Dale 1997; Ryan and Bernard 2000; Smith 1992). Like many scholars, Boyatzis (1998) and Ryan and Bernard (2000) view thematic analysis as a tool for a variety of methods, but not as a method. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a method on its own. In this study, thematic analysis refers to “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006:79). Thematic analysis can be used to describe and categorize data, but it can also be used to interpret data (Boyatzis 1998). In this evaluation, thematic analysis was used to both describe and interpret data. Benefits of thematic analysis is that it is a flexible method, provides rich and complex data, and does not adhere to a particular theoretical or epistemological view (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Sensitizing concepts were used to develop certain themes while other themes were identified via the constant comparison method. Constant comparison method,

identified by Glasser and Strauss (1967), “involves searching for similarities and differences by making systematic comparisons across units of data” (Ryan and Bernard 2003:91). In this study, comparisons were made regarding the texts of participants’ responses to interview questions. The themes that emerged from the data were relevant to both participants and the program. Constructs, such as Bourdieu’s (1986) forms of capital and warming up/cooling out, were then introduced to explain and interpret these themes. These constructs helped to address why such themes were present and to evaluate the impacts on students and the learning community program.

For the content review, an analytic approach of reading and summarizing was utilized for these materials. In addition, the constant comparison method was used when reviewing syllabi to examine comparisons and contrasts between courses and instructors.

Qualitative data from the focus groups, interviews, and content review were used to provide more depth regarding the program goals than what was indicated by the quantitative methods. Qualitative data also revealed implementation problems and successes and how the design and implementation of learning communities could be improved. Further, where appropriate on certain outcomes, qualitative and quantitative data were juxtaposed.

Quantitative Methods

In fall 2014, there were two learning communities. These learning communities began the semester with 24 students in each cohort. The cohorts at the college were deliberately small. Due to some students withdrawing and dropping, the semester ended with approximately 35 students total in both learning communities. Hence, there was almost a 27 percent dropout rate for learning community students. The dropout rate may

have been impacted by an attendance agreement at the college. Students could not exceed a certain number of absences in a full-term course. If this number was exceeded prior to midterm, students were withdrawn from the class. If the number of allowed absences was exceeded after midterm, students received a failing grade in the class. Results from fall 2014 indicated that the dropout rates were similar for both learning community students and the comparison group, using the posttest to indicate the number of students who remained in RDG. Demographic data were unavailable on the posttest to determine if there were demographic differences between who students who remained in RDG and those students who dropped the course.

There were also two learning communities in spring 2015 and fall 2015. Although the communities were designed for nearly 50 combined students, only 25 students enrolled in the program during spring 2015. Stakeholders reported that the overall number of RDG students declined at the college during this time. Seventeen students finished the program in spring 2015, so there was a 32 percent dropout rate for learning community students. In fall 2015, 34 students enrolled in the program, and 25 of these students completed the program. As such, there was an approximate 26 percent dropout rate among learning community students in fall 2015. Similar to fall 2014, using the posttest to indicate the number of students who remained in RDG, dropout rates were similar for both learning community students and the comparison group in spring 2015 and fall 2015.

In Year 1 (fall 2014 and spring 2015), 51 students participated in the learning community program. Across the three semesters where quantitative data were collected, 76 students participated in the program. It is projected, based on enrollment from

Semesters I-III, that 126 students participated in the program for the duration of this evaluation (from fall 2014 to fall 2016).

The institution provided data from the pre-post test of fall 2014 for all students who enrolled in RDG and FYE (but not in a learning community). For the comparison group, the data from 50 of these students were randomly selected using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (version 25). Due to lower enrollment in spring 2015, pre-post data were provided for all students who enrolled in a non-learning community ($n = 44$). 50 non-learning community students enrolled in RDG and FYE were chosen for the pre-post test in fall 2015. As such, 76 students in the intervention group and 144 students in the comparison group took the pre-post reading test during these three semesters. Therefore, a total of 220 students took and supplied the pre-post test data.

During fall 2014, the survey participants were from the two learning community cohorts in addition to two other classes (not part of the learning community program) selected at random. The two comparison classes were selected at random from six non-paired, RDG classes. Simple random sampling was used to select these two classes. In particular, Excel 2013 was utilized to generate random numbers for each of the non-learning community classes. From these random numbers, the classes with the two lowest numbers were chosen to participate in the survey.

The first learning cohort consisted of 15 students, while the second learning cohort consisted of 12 students. In sum, 27 learning community students took the survey in fall 2014.³ The comparison groups consisted of 21 participants, with eight students and 13 students in each class. In total, approximately 48 students participated in the survey

³ Some students were absent on the day that the survey was administered.

during fall 2014. The response rate for learning community students was approximately 75 percent. The response rate for the comparison group was 70 percent (21/30). The evaluator administered the post-survey during fall 2014. In subsequent semesters, the pre-post surveys were administered by the reading instructors at the beginning and end of each term.

Pre-post survey data were collected from students during spring 2015. Survey questions asked students about their attitudes toward reading, knowledge of reading techniques, academic confidence, preparation and study habits for class, participation in the classroom and book club, and interactions with peers and the instructor. Altogether there were 51 returned pre-surveys and 43 post-surveys. On the pre-surveys, forty-one students identified as being in a learning community, nine students identified as non-learning community students, and 1 student did not identify. On the post-surveys, forty students identified as being in a learning community and three students classified themselves as not part of a learning community on the post-survey in spring 2015. Approximately 25 students were in a learning community during spring 2015, so many students answered that they were in a learning community when they were not.

In fall 2015, fall 2015, 79 students completed the pre-survey (57 identified as learning community and 23 non-learning community). Post-survey in this semester were collected for 87 students. Forty-one students identified as non-learning community students, 44 students identified as learning community students, and two students did not classify themselves. Approximately 34 students were in a learning community during fall 2015.

Data were unavailable to determine if grades or reading skills were significantly different between the surveyed learning community students and the surveyed non-learning community students. Demographic data for these students were unavailable during spring 2015 and fall 2015. However, for fall 2014, demographic data were examined between these surveyed groups regarding race/ethnicity, gender, age, mother's/father's education, caretaking, hours worked per week, whether they received a Pell grant, and whether they previously attended college. The findings indicate that there were no significant differences ($p > .05$) between the surveyed learning community students and the surveyed non-learning community students for these demographic variables.

From the demographic background of these surveyed students, approximately 54 percent identified as female, 48 percent identified as male, 63 percent identified as white, and 35 percent identified as non-white. ("Male" and "female" were the terms used on the survey by the college; hence, students self-identified on the survey as male or female.) In addition, approximately 31 percent of the surveyed students reported that their mothers had a college degree and 10 percent indicated that their fathers had a college degree. As such, most of the students could be categorized as first-generation students. Surveyed students were not directly asked about their social class; however, students were asked how many hours they worked per week and whether they received a Pell grant. 56 percent of the surveyed students reported that they worked 21 or more hours per week. 50 percent of these students reported that they received a Pell grant, and 25 percent of students reported that they did not receive a Pell grant. The Pell grant is an ineffective measure of low-income, but it may be used as a limited measure of working-class. Dortch

(2018:12) reports that “an estimated 95% of Pell Grant recipients had a total family income at or below \$60,000.” Further, a small percent of Pell grants goes to students from middle- and high-income families, but such families typically have multiple students in college (Dortch 2018). Although these data are limited in measuring social class, these results suggest that most of the surveyed students were likely working-class.

Secondary data from the institution included RDG grades from fall 2015. This sample consisted of 37 learning community students and 50 non-learning community students. In addition, grades were received from students’ subsequent coursework in ENG during spring 2015 and fall 2015. Due to a low number of learning community students in each of these semesters, ENG grades were compiled. In total, ENG grades were derived from 17 learning community students and 47 non-learning community students.

Quantitative measures.

The three quantitative sources of data in this study included a pre-post test, pre-post survey, and secondary data from the college. The pre-post test was designed to measure students’ cognitive reading skills and gains in reading. The pre-post survey measured self-reported reading skills, self-confidence regarding academic ability, attitudes toward reading, and sense of community. The secondary data included grades and course completion rates. Grades were used to measure students’ reading skills. Course completion rates and grades were utilized to measure student persistence. Each measure is described below.

Stemming from the program goals, research questions, and orienting theories, the following hypotheses were tested.

H₁: Post-test scores will be higher for learning community students than for the comparison group.

H₂: Learning community students will earn higher grades in RDG than students in the comparison group.

H₃: Learning community students will persist at a higher rate than students in the comparison group.

H₄: Learning community students will hold better attitudes toward reading than students in the comparison group.

H₅: Learning community students will report higher academic self-confidence than students in the comparison group.

H₆: Learning community students will report higher levels of peer interaction than students in the comparison group.

H₇: Learning community students will report higher confidence when working with peers than students in the comparison group.

The pre-post test in this study was the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE). TABE was created by the California Testing Bureau (CTB), which is a division of the McGraw-Hill Companies. The pre-post test was a single paper-pencil test given at the start of RDG (within the first two weeks of classes) and given again at the end of the program (within the final two weeks of classes); so all questions on the pre-test were identical to those questions on the post-test. Duration of the test was approximately 50 minutes. Instructors of the learning communities administered these tests.

CTB/McGraw-Hill (2009) provided support that the TABE instrument is psychometrically sound. TABE scores, for instance, were statistically correlated to General Education Development (GED) scores.

Information on examinees' performance on both tests was collected from over 50 institutions, including schools, GED testing centers, and

correctional institutions. Participants took both tests within a 12-week period. In most cases, TABE was taken prior to the administration of the GED. The results show that TABE scores are good predictors of performance on the GED Tests. (CTB/McGraw-Hill 2009:8)

In addition to GED scores, TABE scores were also correlated to the National Adult Literacy Survey and the Secretary Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (CTB/McGraw-Hill 2009). The majority of the questions on the reading test asked students to answer questions regarding their comprehension of certain passages.

In fall 2014, a survey was administered at the end of the semester. See page 220 for the post survey that was administered at the end of fall 2014. This survey consisted of 26 questions. The questions asked students about their attitudes toward reading, knowledge of reading techniques, academic confidence, preparation for class, participation in class and the book club, and interactions with peers and the instructor. Nine questions sought demographic data.

However, for spring 2015 and fall 2015, a pre- and post-survey was administered. The pre-survey was administered during the first couple weeks of the semester and the post-survey was administered near the end of the program. Copies of the pre- and post-surveys are provided on pages 224 and 225, respectively. The pre- and post-surveys were like the survey from fall 2014 except that the surveys did not include demographic questions. The pre-survey consisted of seven questions and the post-survey consisted of 14 questions.

Secondary data were studied at the aggregate level to measure student persistence. Further, secondary data revealed rates at which students attempted, failed, or succeeded in their coursework.

Quantitative data analysis.

In fall 2014, the pre-post test results of those students who were enrolled in a learning community were compared with those students who were not enrolled in a learning community to examine any reading differences between the two groups. Further, data collected from the TABE instrument were analyzed to determine if there were differences between the two cohorts of learning communities.

For spring 2015 and fall 2015, similar to fall 2014, the pre-post test results of those students who were enrolled in a learning community were compared with those students who were not enrolled in a learning community to identify any cognitive reading differences between the two groups. Also similar to fall 2014, data collected from the TABE instrument were analyzed to determine if there were differences between the two cohorts of learning communities. Further, data from the survey were analyzed each semester to determine any differences between students in learning communities and students who are not enrolled in a learning community. The evaluator also investigated whether there were differences on the surveys between learning communities. Pre-post data on surveys and tests could not be linked at the student level.

Secondary data from the college were used to study how the program may have influenced student persistence. Course completion and grades from students in Year 1 (fall 2014 and spring 2015) were analyzed in spring 2015 and fall 2015 to understand how learning community students and the comparison group performed in their courses following RDG. As such, course completion rates and grades were assessed for both the intervention and comparison groups. Similarly, secondary data were analyzed to

determine if there were completion rate and grade differences between the learning communities. The secondary data could not be linked to other sources of data in this study.

For the quantitative data, *t* tests were used as appropriate and Cohen's *d* effect size measure was employed. In addition, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess internal consistency for theoretical constructs on the survey; composite variables were created for these constructs. Chi-square was used to determine if demographic differences existed between intervention and comparison groups. However, demographic data were unavailable for the pre-post surveys in Semesters II and III. The college opted to remove the demographic questions on the survey after Semester I. Further, demographic data were unavailable for the pre-post test. The secondary data, comprising RDG and ENG grades, included demographic data.

PROGRAM SUCCESS

Many factors contributed to assessing and understanding the degree of program success. Program success was determined if students in the program increased their cognitive reading skills (as measured by the TABE pre-post test and grades), enhanced their self-confidence regarding their academic ability (as measured by the survey, focus groups, and in-depths interviews), developed more positive attitudes toward reading (as measured by the survey and focus groups), heightened their sense of community and social integration (as measured by the survey, focus groups, and in-depth interviews), and/or enhanced student persistence (as measured from secondary data).

The evaluator equally considered the quantitative and qualitative results to measure and understand program success. Regarding the quantitative data, a sufficient

effect size (Cohen's $d \geq .20$, given prior research on developmental outcomes (Moss and Yeaton 2013)) was considered as a measure of program success in addition to any statistically significant and positive relationships on the TABE and survey. Concerning the qualitative findings, the evaluator considered whether there was a positive difference (favorable to the intervention group) between the intervention and comparison focus group discussions in fall 2014 and spring 2015. Other qualitative data, such as data from interviews and the content review of internal and public documents regarding learning communities, aided in understanding and evaluating program success by identifying program strengths and weaknesses. The information uncovered about the design, implementation, and any revisions to the program may prove useful to stakeholders and others who want to implement or refine their own learning communities.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS: PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Findings are presented in this chapter from two sources of qualitative data: 1) in-depth interviews with instructors and administrators and 2) a content review. These data were collected during two semesters, fall 2014 and spring/summer 2016. Interviews with instructors occurred during fall 2014 and spring/summer 2016. Learning community instructors were also interviewed during fall 2014. Subsequently, in spring/summer 2016, learning community instructors and non-learning community instructors were interviewed. Administrators were interviewed during spring/summer 2016 as well. All administrators, instructors, and students were assigned pseudonyms in this study.

For the content review, internal and external documents were collected during spring and summer 2016. Results from the content review detail the program's origins, motivations, designs, and limitations. These qualitative data, including the in-depth interviews with instructors and administrators, shed a great deal of understanding on how the program was designed and implemented. The results also help to explain and shape outcomes in the subsequent chapter on program effectiveness.

INSTRUCTOR AND ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEWS

Learning community instructors Avery and Emory were interviewed during fall 2014 about their 1) classroom practices, 2) interactions with students inside and outside of the classroom, and 3) assessment of the learning community program. Themes emerged from the two learning community instructors regarding their use of

active and cooperative pedagogies (inside and outside of the classroom), instructor collaboration, and recommendations for the program.

Fall 2014

The learning community instructors engaged students in many active and/or cooperative tasks such as journaling, group work and activities, and class discussions. Cooperative learning and peer learning are considered integral and effective components of learning of communities (Dodge and Kendall 2004). Although both instructors identified a great deal of active and cooperative pedagogies, they also used similar pedagogies in their other non-learning community courses as well. Even with teaching practices being similar in learning and non-learning community classes, learning community students were exposed to some unique interventions that were only available via the program (such as team teaching an integrative curriculum, formation of cohorts, and extended class time with peers and instructors).

Both instructors provided several examples where students were required to work together outside of the classroom: attending campus events, participating in the IRP book club, a scavenger hunt to identify campus resources, projects, and presentations. Interestingly, Emory explained how a service project that was created to be an individual assignment ended up being a more cooperative activity with her/his learning community students.

Emory: I have them do a project where they had to do service learning. They did this individual. But something I did notice is that especially in the learning community classes they have kind of formed these relationships with others in the classes. A lot of them went with a friend and did their service learning together.

Although there were cooperative activities and opportunities for peer learning, there was not a lot of evidence for peer feedback (in a formal sense) in the learning communities.

This expected theme was absent from instructors' responses. As such, peer feedback was a potential implementation weakness during fall 2014. "I didn't do that [*peer feedback*] in my learning communities...I may tweak that to do a little bit more of that in the future because I do think that is important," Emory stated. Peer feedback is usually considered an important and effective practice. However, further study is warranted to understand the impacts of peer learning and feedback among developmental students. There are potential harms from peer learning for developmental students due to their level of preparation.

Both instructors were very positive about their collaborations with the other learning community instructor. Instructors enjoyed and benefited from the teamwork that the learning communities provided. Avery, "We can bounce ideas off each other... It is definitely beneficial in getting you to be creative...it is more beneficial as a learning community I think than being separated from teaching it outside of a community." Emory further attested, "[*Collaborative teaching*] has helped me to understand my content even better because I have had to find ways to apply it differently. To make sure it applies to [Avery's] classes and then talking about ways we can integrate assignments." This finding is consistent with Jackson, Stebleton, and Laanan (2013); one benefit that they found for learning community instructors was collaboration among faculty across disciplines.

Learning community instructors had a great deal of autonomy over their courses. For instance, each instructor assigned her/his own grade to each student. Students could receive a different grade in RDG than FYE. Instructors' high degree of autonomy may have contributed to their level of satisfaction with instructor collaboration. Instructors who team teach are involved in a more intensive form of instructor collaboration. While there are benefits associated with team teaching in learning communities, such as stimulating

growth (Kendall and Dodge 2004), faculty may experience conflict with colleagues (Tinto 2003) because instructors can vary tremendously in their teaching philosophies, pedagogies, and grading criteria. In these learning communities, instructors benefited from a partnership while maintaining a degree of autonomy over their respective courses.

When asked about recommendations on ways to improve the way the program operates, both instructors thought the first semester went well but that there was room for improvement. Commonalities emerged, listed here in order of emphasis, from the instructors on ways to improve the program: expanding student services, requiring students to participate in student services (such as tutoring from an office on campus), increasing training opportunities for instructors, and more tracking/monitoring of students in the learning communities to assess how they do in future classes at the college.

Emory: For learning communities to work, you really have to have a really strong infrastructure of people, labs, and support services available to these students...for certain students I don't think it is enough to just have them. You have to make them use them...they have other reasons why they aren't going to go. You know they're nervous, they feel like the tutor is going to judge them, they don't know who the tutor is, "is the tutor nice?", "where is the room?", "I have to walk in by myself". You really have to kind of put them in that situation to get that uncertainty over with. Then after they do it that first time they are like "oh yeah, they wasn't so bad."

Emory's statement that "they feel like the tutor is going to judge them" may illustrate role taking. It was likely that students envisioned themselves through the eyes of their tutors. In some situations, such as described by Emory, students felt reluctant to be tutored because they worried that the tutors would perceive them in a negative way. Also evident from the passage above, the main recommendation iterated by both instructors on several occasions was the expansion of student support services. Both instructors stressed the importance of student services being *required* for students.

Spring 2016

The learning community instructors were re-interviewed during spring/summer 2016. Also, during spring 2016, three non-learning community instructors (Beau, Campbell, and Drew) and four administrators (Aubrey, Blair, Corin, and Dana) were interviewed. Administrators were questioned about the design, implementation, and effectiveness of the learning community program. Major themes surfaced from the instructors and administrators about how the program was implemented and instructors and administrators' assessment of the program.

Program implementation.

Instructors and administrators shed insight on how and why the learning community program was designed. Faculty discovered high failure rates among developmental reading students when the college was required to identify and address an area for improvement as part of their accreditation process. The learning community program was created to address this problem. Themes emerged regarding how the program was implemented. For instance, a major component of learning communities, team teaching, was not fully implemented. In addition, learning community instructors increased content and assignment integration between RDG and FYE each semester. Training for instructors also increased as the program evolved.

Themes also developed regarding the day-to-day operations of the program. Learning community instructors and non-learning community instructors mostly fixed the structure of their classes, but students had some choice in reading materials and/or assignments. As such, student learning was more cooperative than collaborative. The (full-time) learning community instructors chose the texts for RDG and FYE. Further,

instructors in their courses used two primary motifs: 1) a common book and 2) a motif of motivation. The motif related to the book was more pronounced in the learning community courses. In addition, learning community instructors implemented a few mini-motifs that varied each semester. Learning and non-learning community instructors used interdisciplinary methods, covering a variety of other topics/content areas in their courses. Avery, the learning community instructor who taught reading, also covered study skills/FYE material in developmental reading because these courses were paired.

A final implementation component of learning communities is to foster student-student and student-faculty interaction so that students feel a heightened sense of belonging. The promotion of student-student and student-faculty interactions are supported by both Astin's (1999) and Tinto's (1993) frameworks. Such interactions can enhance involvement and academic/social integration. Further, Astin (1999) recognized that the quality of these interactions, not just the quantity, are essential. Instructors described their interactions with students as positive and valuable. Instructors reported frequent interactions with students inside and outside the classroom. However, students seldom came to office hours. Most interactions outside of the classroom occurred via email or meetings before/after class. Students also seemed to prefer informal ways of communicating with their instructors (hallways, off campus, etc.). Learning community instructors, in contrast to non-learning community instructors, described former students returning for visits and/or help.

Design.

The learning community program stemmed from the college's IRP. A IRP is required periodically for accreditation purposes. As part of the IRP, the college was

required to identify an area of weakness and create a plan to address the problem. Corin, an administrator at the college, discussed results from the college's internal investigation.

Corin: Developmental education was really an area in its entirety that we really felt we had to look at first...what we found is that...students that scored into developmental reading were struggling more than students who just scored into developmental math or just scored into developmental writing.

Because faculty and staff found some of the highest failure rates among developmental reading students, the college focused on this population of students and formed learning communities to retain these students.

Corin: When we looked at developmental reading...they were failing everything in general. Reading was the area that was really causing, in our opinion, them to fail in these other subjects. Because the reading skills were just not able to keep up with the demands of these other classes. And that's when we said "alright, how do we help?" And that is where the learning community concept came in.

Learning community instructors described how team teaching, where both instructors are in the classroom at the same time, was not fully implemented into the program. Team teaching only occurred a few times throughout the entire semester; it was not normal practice within the learning communities. Emory: "We would do some team teaching within the classroom. We would both be in the class together at certain periods throughout the semester, and we called these workshops. And we would do three workshops a semester." The fact that instructors only received credit for teaching one of the classes, not both, made team teaching impractical to implement. Instructors would need to receive credit for both classes to be able to team teach, as it necessitates the time and workload of two courses. This situation likely stemmed from a lack of resources. Although the learning community instructors were not able to team teach, they wanted to team teach. In fact, the instructors, learning community instructors and non-learning

community instructors, had positive perceptions about team teaching. They viewed it as a valuable (particularly for professional development) and an effective method of teaching.

Emory: From a personal growth standpoint, that is another really big strength of the program is that...I learned so much about teaching and different strategies and how to relate to students. And just having that connection with [Avery] and that resource to be able to go to [Avery] all the time, it was just invaluable to me.

Consequently, results from in-depth interviews with instructors regarding team teaching were similar in fall 2014 and spring 2016 (and uniform with student narratives in fall 2016).

Findings from the first semester of the program revealed very little integration of course material and assignments between the two courses. In subsequent semesters, learning community instructors increased the level of integration between RDG and FYE. Dana recounted “The first semester...they had a few overlapping assignments. But as each semester progressed, they have kind of been folding in more and more commonalities.” The amount of training for learning community instructors was an additional change to the program. During the first semester of the program, the instructors had little training. Their training primarily consisted of attending one conference. However, later interviews revealed that instructors had attended yearly training since the launch of the program.

Emory: They were great about sending us to conferences to learn a whole lot more because locally we didn’t really know. We knew the research and we knew what we were trying to do with the learning communities, but as far as implementing everything that we needed to do—administration knew that we needed to go somewhere else to kind of learn a little bit more about best practices and what other colleges were doing. So [Avery] and I have attended a national learning communities conference for the last couple of years, and that has been very, very helpful. Learning about different course pairings and different things to do in the classroom.

Due to these trainings, in addition to increased experience with learning communities, instructors and administrators felt very confident about instructors' level of knowledge about learning communities.

Day-to-day operations.

In learning communities, collaborative learning is often encouraged where student and instructors design course materials together. In the present study, learning and non-learning community instructors designed their courses and chose the materials and assignments. However, instructors provided some examples where students had some choice in assignments, reading materials, etc. Avery: "I give them a few options when we first start covering vocabulary that 'you guys can do a group test...the only resource you can use is each other, so it is going to be up to you all decide'." Often in developmental reading, students were able to choose reading materials that aligned with their interests. Instructors understood that students were more likely to read/learn if they were interested in the topic.

Drew: We used...an electronic component that had other articles within it that you could choose...I actually used a lot of those because the students, rather than my picking them, I would give them "you need an article for this unit whether you are working on comprehension or vocabulary—you need an article that fits this unit." I would let them choose their own so they were more interested in what they are doing.

In addition, reading students voted (along with faculty) for a book that was selected to be read in all developmental reading courses.

Dana: How we pick our books is we let students—faculty and students—vote on the book selection...then we have been emailing that out to faculty and staff [*and students*] and letting me them vote on it... we feel like giving the students that choice helps for them to feel like they have a little bit more say...Take a little bit more ownership of it.

When choosing materials for their classes, instructors were primarily concerned with choosing texts that addressed the skills/objectives. “I wanted to choose materials that would help with the skills that I was teaching—finding the main idea, summary—those six essential skills. The text was actually pretty rich in those kind of articles but also there are articles that I knew about,” said Beau.

A common feature of learning communities is for instructors to incorporate motifs to enhance integration of the paired courses. Administrators, instructors, and students referred to motifs as “themes” in the learning communities, and motifs are designed to integrate concepts between the distinct courses. Motifs are covered in-depth across both classes for the duration of the semester. In the present study, a major motif in the reading courses was the common book selected each semester. The book inspired other motifs (health, poverty, etc.) and assignments and it was associated with the book club.

Emory: We really decided that [book] was going to be one of the main themes in our learning communities. That our students were—both classes—our students were going to read those books and we were going to use the themes within those books to kind of merge the content as far as reading strategies and then also the goal setting, and the themes-- whatever it is, in that book for that semester.

An unexpected motif to emerge was one of motivation. Some instructors specifically mentioned success/motivation/inspiration as a motif, whereas other instructors did not recognize it as a motif but it was clearly interwoven throughout their courses.

Drew: Encourage them. Keep going. You can do this. I got a couple different videos I show...That deal with like Disney and some of those people-- Abraham Lincoln—all the times they failed. And where they ended up because they didn't quit...A lot of times they need that more than they need extra explanations...They just need to not give up so easily. Because they'll try the first time and it doesn't work, they'll get discouraged. No, try again. And usually the second or third time they've actually got it.

Motifs surrounding the common book and success emerged from in-depth interviews with students as well. The learning community instructors used more motifs (in addition to motivation and the common book) than non-learning community instructors. Learning community instructors had a few workshops each semester that included a few mini-motifs; these motifs varied each semester. In addition, the motif related to the book was more pronounced in the learning communities. For example, one semester the learning community students formed a health fair for the campus because the common book concerned health. Further, learning community instructors mentioned watching a film on the book and holding a discussion/workshop connected to the book. In contrast, non-learning community instructors seemed to meet the minimum requirements set forth by the department on involving the book in their classes. For instance, Drew stated “That is a requirement in the Reading classes. They all had to be a part of the book club. They all had to read the book. You had to do a collaborative project using the book.” Conversely, Avery, a learning community instructor, described how the learning community students organized and held the health fair for the college after reading the book.

In addition to health, instructors covered a variety of other topics/content areas in their courses.

Avery: I try to make sure I can include how to tackle specific...course-paced reading like reading through a psychology chapter, reading through a biology chapter, looking at even a math...pulling out like particular textbooks or areas--even nursing—to see this is what kind of reading you’re gonna have to tackle once you leave this class...then what specific strategies can they use in order to get through it—how to summarize. I let them do annotating.

Reading students in the learning communities also covered study strategies/FYE content because RDG and FYE were paired. For example, Avery gave reading assignments that coincided with FYE content such as goal setting and study strategies.

Social interaction.

Overall, most instructors described their interactions with students as positive. In addition, most instructors testified that they had frequent interactions with their students in the classroom. Beau explained, “[*The course*] ...was more of an interactive type lecture...It was fairly relaxed and comfortable and friendly...there was a lot of one-on-one interaction in the classroom.” Instructors enjoyed and encouraged interaction outside of the classroom with students. Also evident was that instructors valued the student-faculty relationship.

Emory: This morning—I got an email from a former FYE student...And he is not my advisee, but he emailed me a question...“this is what I went through this summer, and this what I’m looking at for the fall. What would you suggest that I do?”...when I read those emails...I feel like I am doing what I’m supposed to be doing and what I want to be doing...I want them to feel like they can walk in at any time and...chit-chat with me and catch up. And then also say “look, this is what I’m going through. What do you think I should do?”... I had a student yesterday that has had me for two classes... she stopped in yesterday just to catch up with me and I enjoy that. I encourage that. That’s very, very important to me.

The learning community instructors were the only instructors to mention former students returning for visits and/or help. Further, non-learning community and learning community students seldom came to office hours. Interaction outside of the classroom usually involved correspondence via email or meeting before/after class. “I talked to a lot of them [*students*]...Very few of them actually came in here [*office*]...they would catch me after class. They would catch me walking in the hallways. They would email me. I’ve had some flag me down in the mall,” Drew described. As such, students preferred informal methods of communicating (i.e. hallways, off campus, etc.)

All instructors described the student-student interactions in their classes as positive. There was evidence for lots of student-student interactions in these courses (for

learning community students and students who did not participate in the program).

Students engaged in many cooperative/group activities. In addition, the amount of peer learning and peer feedback (formal feedback) seemed consistent across both groups.

Students received formal feedback from peers on major projects and papers.

The learning community instructors described student-student interactions as positive, friendly, and even familial.

Emory: I have students who are the number one source of support for each other now, and it's amazing to watch it happen... I'm like "Wow. They didn't know each other before they came to that learning community. Now look at them. They're like best friends." And they are saying "I couldn't of done this without you."

These descriptions were consistent with in-depth interviews with students during fall 2016. Although non-learning community instructors described the student-student interactions in their classes as pleasant, they were less likely to use terms like "family" and "friends".

Avery: They [*learning community students*] are family by the time it is over with, whereas the ones that are not learning communities they work well together. But I can tell it's not the same kind of family oriented interaction with them like it is with learning community students. It is definitely a HUGE difference.

This finding suggests that learning community students may have experienced more social integration, as denoted by Tinto (1993), than non-learning community students.

However, perhaps in part due to the large amount of student-student interactions in these classes, instructors did communicate some less than positive experiences. Campbell and Avery had witnessed these experiences during one semester. Drew, a non-learning community instructor, mentioned several negative situations in her/his classroom. Beau, another non-learning community instructor, stated that some of her/his students "didn't gravitate toward each other".

Beau: They group themselves to a large extent. But now, for example the young man I'm just talking about, nobody chose him. It was like the baseball team were you don't get chosen. And there was another—there were other people in group, they just didn't gravitate toward each other.

This statement ran counter to a comment by Avery, “The learning community students seem to draw to each other.” Although primarily depicted as isolated incidents, these negative encounters seemed to occur at a slightly higher frequency in the non-learning community classes.

For student-student interaction outside of the classroom, most instructors stated that they encouraged students to seek help from peers via the “buddy system”.

Avery: I have them to have a class buddy...the first day of class—“I want you to take these last few minute to mingle with somebody. Beside you, behind you, on the other side of the room. Get their phone number, email—so that if you miss class you have that person that you can call on to get notes from or ask them what you missed”...they really take advantage of that.

Two of three non-learning community instructors (Beau and Campbell) did not mention assigning work outside of class for their students. Drew and Beau mentioned that students formed study groups in their classes. In the learning communities, instructors gave example of students forming study groups outside of class as well as citing that students were required to work together outside of class on projects. Emory stated, “In the learning communities they spend so much time together in class and working in group work in class and outside of class that by the end of the semester they have study groups.” From these accounts it was unclear whether students interacted more outside of the class in learning communities compared to students in standard classes. Nevertheless, student and faculty interaction, both inside and outside the classroom, would likely increase students' social connections. This increase could give students new types of social capital as defined by Bourdieu (1986).

Because of the amount of cooperative learning in both learning community and non-learning community classes, students had many opportunities to learn from their peers.

Campbell: I like to pose the question and let the students also have [a] chance to pose questions and find the answers together...There were multiple opportunities in which the students say “ah, I haven’t thought about that.” That was the objective. I loved when I would hear....“you’re right”, or “well, I don’t think it is quite that way.”

From the in-depth interviews of fall 2014 and spring 2016, there was also evidence for a lot of cooperative activities and student-student interaction in the learning communities.

The amount of peer feedback (formal feedback provided to students by their peers) seemed fairly consistent among instructors. Emory recalled “When we do group assignments, they always do a group member evaluation form...they have an opportunity to...actually provide a grade—for the other students in their group.” During fall 2014, there was an absence of peer feedback from the learning community instructors. However, during spring 2016, instructors were using peer feedback for major projects and papers.

Program performance.

Major themes emerged from instructors and administrators concerning their perceptions of the learning community program, administrator involvement in the program, and strengths and weaknesses of the program. Instructors and administrators had largely positive perceptions about the learning community program. They thought the program was important and successful. Instructors, however, had initial reservations about the six-hour restriction for developmental reading students. They expected

resistance from students, and some instructors at the college thought the restriction was a violation of students' rights.

All administrators felt strongly connected to the program. Instructors and administrators described a high level of support from the administration for the learning community program. This support included moral support as well as material support (i.e. funding for professional development and the program in general). The degree of administrative involvement with the program varied by administrative role, i.e., program administrators had more regular involvement with the program than did institutional administrators, who had broader responsibilities.

Themes emerged among administrators and instructors regarding program weaknesses and areas for improvement. Instructors felt there were issues with how students were placed into developmental reading; some students might be placed into developmental reading who do not need it. Regarding improvements, all interviewees wanted the learning communities expanded to other student populations and courses. Consequently, participants thought the program was effective overall and they believed that the strongest aspect of the program was that students had the advantage of belonging to a cohort.

Instructors' and administrators' perceptions of the program.

Instructors and administrators believed that students held positive perceptions about the learning community program. Avery described how students were eager to participate in the program at orientation: "More likely than not we are able to get those students in those classes [*learning community program at orientation*]...if it... [*wasn't for their*] work schedule, I think we would get all students." Non-learning community

students were likely unaware of program. Instructors and administrators identified a couple of negative perceptions that students may hold about the program. They believed students might hold negative views about taking a developmental reading course and being restricted to six hours during their first semester.

Dana: A lot of them [*reading students*] didn't feel like they were "real" college students. Because they were taking just developmental classes... They still don't like being only allowed to take two classes, but it's kind of like the medicine they have to take... They realize that we're doing this to help them become stronger students, so they understand.

Instructors and administrators also believed that students shed these negative perceptions by the end of the program. In-depth interviews with students revealed that the majority of students eventually accepted the six-hour restriction. However, most students felt that they did not need developmental reading.

Instructors held positive perceptions about the learning community program. Participants were asked how their colleagues viewed the program. They thought that other faculty, like themselves, had positive perceptions of the learning communities. In addition, most participants believed that the college faculty were well informed about and involved in the program. Emory elaborated, "The IRP committee and administrators have done a really good job of educating everyone on what the learning communities are, what the purpose of them are, and what the goals are. So it's frequently talked about at college-wide meetings." Further, Aubrey revealed, "From the start, they [*college faculty*] have been a part of the discussions across the college of why we think these students are not successful and what we do to change that." Two of the four administrators mentioned some initial reservations from faculty about the six-hour restriction for developmental reading students. Faculty expected a backlash from students about the restriction, and

some faculty had strong opinions about the restriction. “In the beginning, I think it was a little difficult for people to understand restricting students to two courses...there was some discomfort... people not just comfortable saying ‘no’... Or feeling somehow students’ rights were being violated,” stated Aubrey. Some faculty felt that students should be allowed to make take as many courses as they wanted.

Finally, administrators at the college had positive perceptions of the learning community program. They also thought that the program was a success. Corin stated, “From student testimonials that I’ve heard, faculty reports, and then some of the actual assessment outcomes that we’ve seen. It seems to have been a success.” Administrators discussed how the learning communities influenced the college as a whole. They noted how the program encouraged other faculty to try teaching via learning communities. “To see other areas...take what’s happening in the learning communities out into their areas has been a fascinating thing to watch,” said Corin. They expressed that they hope to see more faculty adopt this method of teaching.

Administrator involvement.

The learning community instructors were happy with the level of involvement from administrators. They described administrators’ role as more facilitative and supportive, and they appreciated their freedoms while teaching in the learning communities.

Emory: They are involved just the perfect amount. [*Laughter.*] They have given us direction, and they have given us resources...asking us what we need for those learning communities. I know they are looking at the data and want to see the effectiveness of it. And they’re looking at, of course, our evaluations. But they really give us freedom within in those class, and I think that is really important.

The non-learning community instructors were mostly unsure about how connected administrators were to the program. However, their impressions were consistent with the learning community instructors. They viewed the administrators as having a satisfactory degree of involvement, while the learning community instructors were highly involved in the day-to-day operations of the program. Administrators were directly asked how connected they felt to the program.

Corin: Very much [*connected to the program*]...I may not be in the classroom day in and day out with the students and faculty. But from the very beginning of this thing, from the research standpoint to really the decision-making standpoint to making sure that people across the college—faculty and staff—knew what this thing was.

All administrators felt deeply connected to the program, but the degree to which the administrators were involved varied by their roles. Those administrators that were directly involved were heavily involved in the program. Dana revealed “It’s very time consuming...we do have good faculty here and our college got behind it...It’s just it was a lot of work.”

The learning community instructors felt that the program was strongly supported by the administration. Both instructors mentioned that the administrators were eager to fund their professional development for teaching in the learning communities. They described moral support as well as material support

Avery: They [*administrators*] were super, super excited and supportive of us doing the health fair...They actually came in to visit the booths and ask our students questions.... We have a learning community conference that we go to [regularly], so they’re always eager to sign for us to go ...other changes we can make to boost the communities ... See what else other schools are doing. They are very supportive as far as professional development. If we do any kind of activity, they always make sure that they are there to support the students...they really jump in 100 percent.

Consistent with instructor interviews, administrators expressed that they valued and supported the learning community program. “We will support our faculty. They are not just out there on an island by themselves trying to enforce something that is a good practice,” voiced Corin.

Program weaknesses and areas for improvement.

Administrators and instructors expressed concerns about how students were placed in developmental reading. They felt that some students were placed in the course who did not need it. Cutoff points on placement exams are often disputed and differ among colleges (Bailey 2009). Students had the option to re-test. However, there may be a waiting period to re-take the placement exam. In addition, the extra cost could be a factor in deterring students from re-assessing.

Dana: I say “now some of you may be looking at your scores and you’re thinking, but when I took the COMPASS test I didn’t get much sleep, I just blew through the reading, I didn’t even try.” And so I say “if that’s you, then you may re-test. Call our testing center. Tell them you want to re-test the RDG portion.” I tell them it’s going to be 20 dollars.

Dana and Drew discussed possible solutions to students being misplaced in developmental reading. During orientation, Dana encouraged students to visit websites (provided on the college’s website) to review their reading skills and re-test. Drew further suggested that the college should have an online tutorial/refresher course available for students. Students would need to be aware that the course/tutorial was available prior to taking the COMPASS. Students seemed to learn about the importance of the COMPASS and resources *after* taking the placement exam.

Both learning community instructors, as a well as a couple of administrators, stressed the need for an additional class to be added the program. These participants

specifically advocated for a computer class due to students' obstacles with technology, which was evident from the in-depth interviews with instructors and students.

Emory: It would also give them an additional class to go ahead and get started...the majority of them the next semester are going to go in to a refresher English, refresher math, which all of those are emporium style classes in computer labs...if they are already having challenges with technology...having that [computer] class on the front in would help them to not be so overwhelmed.

An advantage to adding an additional course is that it would alleviate some of the concerns among faculty and students regarding the six-hour restriction. Students would receive more credits during their first semester. However, adding an additional class would reduce the number of available students for the learning communities due to scheduling conflicts.

All administrators and a couple of the instructors (six of the nine participants) wanted to see the learning communities expanded at the college. Some of these participants noted that they would like to see more instructors involved with teaching learning communities. Corin suggested “For me, learning communities being improved would mean—not necessarily improve in the way our current faculty teach in learning communities—but exposing more faculty to it.” Campbell expressed that s/he would like to have been a part of the program. “I would have liked to...have a common time to plan with the FYE professor in a way that we could have common activities...I would like to have a tighter relationship with the [*FYE instructor*].” Faculty and administrators also discussed expanding learning communities to other courses at the college.

Corin: The learning community concept could be expanded to other areas...the faculty have discussed—are there other opportunities for learning communities? ...I think a psychology and communication course would go really well together. Or psychology and sociology. Psychology and cultural diversity type of course. An ENG and communication with the written and spoken word. I think those

would be very good together. I mean there could be all kinds of different pairings out there.

Participants believed that other students (besides developmental reading students) could benefit from the program.

Drew: I would like to see this program expanded to all of the incoming students. Your biggest dropout rate is after the freshman year. And most of them dropout because they never connected...I think the learning communities like that go a long way towards getting them connected.

As such, they wished to see the program expanded to all first-year students.

Program strengths.

Overall, administrators and instructors believed the program was effective. A couple of subthemes for success included increasing student confidence and persistence. Dana concluded, "One way the learning communities have been so beneficial is they feel more comfortable with people around them. Even if they don't ask the teacher, they'll ask the people around them." Further, Blair claimed "The numbers show that students are doing much better in learning communities...we are retaining more of those students and that they are going into college-level courses."

Overwhelmingly, administrators and instructors believed that the best part of the program was the cohorts. These cohorts helped students to establish relationships with their peers and instructors. As a result, the students experienced a sense of belonging during their first semester of college. This finding also suggests that, in support of Tinto's (1993) student departure theory, learning community students became socially integrated into college.

Emory: They are spending so much more time together through that learning community experience...they don't have a lot more interference outside of those two classes, and they have to really focus on just nurturing that support system

and working on that content together that it really helps to solidify those bonds in the very beginning.

Participants discussed why the cohorts were important, especially to developmental students.

Dana: Our students are kind of isolated because they are so busy. They work; they have children...They are here for school—their classes, then they're gone. So they don't get a lot of socializing. And I think that these learning communities really give them a little bit more of that social aspect, so they form friends and feel like they belong.

Cohorts were not a new phenomenon to instructors and administrators. The college has many technical programs that are cohort-based. These cohort programs, as described by administrators/instructors, tend to be more successful (in terms of student persistence) than standard programs.

Corin: It is really a strength from years and years of teaching technical education and many of our technical programs. All of those students are in classes together through their entire program. That is why you typically see graduation rates higher in technical program or cohort-based programs than what you see in your typical part-time or general education based students that might be taking different courses at different times and different students in every class. They may not form that bond by seeing the same students day in and day out. And the bond that would allow them to communicate outside of class and form support networks...I think those are some of the greatest strengths of a learning community.

Faculty at the college were very optimistic about the effectiveness of the program from the beginning, as it was cohort-based. Administrators' narratives suggest evidence for Tinto's (1993) theory that social integration in college leads to student persistence.

CONTENT REVIEW

Documents pertaining to the learning community program were collected from the college for review. These materials were grouped into three categories: documents relating to the IRP, syllabi from learning community and non-learning community instructors, and training documents for learning community instructors. Collectively,

these documents provided a better understanding of the program and how the program was formed and implemented.

The College's IRP

Materials pertaining to the college's IRP were classified into two categories: 1) the action plan for the IRP and 2) documents from internal meetings at the college. The action plan was created for accreditation purposes. It detailed how the issue of high failure rates among developmental reading students was chosen for the focus of the IRP and how and when the plan would be implemented and assessed to address the problem. The action plan also included an organizational chart and budget for the program. Documents from internal meetings were either IRP committee meetings or college-wide meetings where an IRP committee member presented updates on the IRP.

Action plan.

The action plan contained a 5-year timeline for the preparation and implementation of the IRP. In 2012, the college conducted internal research and decided on the focus on their IRP. The IRP committee was also formed during this time. Documents obtained from the college revealed why the college chose to focus their IRP on developmental reading students. In years prior to the action plan, less than 20 percent of students in developmental reading earned six or more college-level credits, and this percentage was lower than those for students in other developmental courses such as math and English (Internal College Report 2013).

The action plan included survey results from faculty and students about how students were helped or hindered during their first reading class. The survey included factors from inside and outside the classroom. A common factor, both inside and outside

the classroom, identified by faculty for student success in reading was effort (Internal College Report 2013). Another important factor for student success outside the classroom was a support network, and an important factor inside the classroom was attitude (Internal College Report 2013).

From students who participated in the survey, results for success outside the class were largely the same as that for the faculty survey. However, for success inside the classroom, instructors stressed effort whereas students emphasized help and support. Regarding advice, faculty and students reported effort as the main factor for being successful in reading. Interestingly, students mentioned dedication/effort as the biggest external obstacle to their success whereas faculty mentioned responsibilities. Evident from the in-depth interviews with instructors, the largest obstacles were family and work demands. In some ways, these different results may be compatible because students have little time for their school work due to such external demands.

The action plan also included marketing efforts and contests to help faculty and students “buy-in” to the plan to enhance reading skills. The program was presented at college-wide meetings. In addition, articles were submitted to the college newspaper promoting the IRP. The program was advertised by distributing items with the logo and slogan to students and faculty at campus events (Internal College Report 2013). Banners and posters were also displayed around campus. Buy-in is especially important from instructors as they will be the ones referring students to the program and implementing the program. Further, students who do not buy-in are unlikely to benefit from the program.

Evident from the action plan was that advising was a strength of the IRP. The IRP created an advising training program, and frequent meetings were held on how to properly advise developmental reading students. Handouts were also provided that gave step-by-step instructions for registering students. In addition, faculty had to earn a passing score on an assessment to be permitted to advise reading students.

In addition to marketing and advising, a large component of the IRP was the establishment of learning communities. Instructors worked on developing the learning communities during the 2013-2014 academic year, and the learning communities were piloted in fall 2014. According to retrieved documents, the goal was to eventually reach around five learning communities per semester. However, due to a decline in the number of developmental reading students, there have been two or three learning communities each semester.

One limitation regarding assessment of the IRP was that the college was using ENG in the subsequent semester to measure student persistence. Advisers were informed to encourage students to take this class the following semester; however, it was not required. Stated in the action plan was that the college aimed for nearly 3/4 of developmental students to successfully complete ENG in 2014. In addition, they aimed to achieve consistent increases each year.

In the appendix of the action plan was a list of the responsibilities for the IRP Coordinator (Internal College Report 2013). During in-depth interviews with administrators, it was revealed that the IRP Coordinator played a large role in the program. The IRP Coordinator was responsible for professional development, IRP updates to the college, marketing, budgeting, forming and facilitating the IRP committee,

and planning, implementing, and assessing the program. As evident from this list of responsibilities, it seems that this position may approach a full-time workload. Therefore, having one full-time coordinator or two co-coordinators seems warranted.

Internal meetings.

Contents from internal meetings revealed faculty and staff concerns regarding IRP practices, findings from internal research at the college, and student work that stemmed from the IRP. There was concern among instructors during in-depth interviews that developmental reading students were unaware that they would be limited to six credit hours. In a presentation to the college, it was given that there were multiple ways that students were informed of the changes. Students would be informed about limited enrollment on an advising webpage for students, the testing center, student success center, general student orientation, and group and individual advising. However, most of these situations occurred during testing or registration. So, students often had no knowledge of the limitation prior to taking the placement exam.

Syllabi

Six syllabi were retrieved from learning community and non-learning community instructors. The learning community instructor for FYE provided the syllabus from spring 2016, and the learning community instructor for RDG supplied syllabi from spring 2015 and spring 2016. The three remaining syllabi were from RDG instructors who did not participate in the program; these courses were standalone classes for developmental reading.

The syllabi revealed differences between learning community instructors and non-learning community instructors regarding their availability (office hours), amount of

cooperative activities, and assignments. Learning community instructors' syllabi detailed more office hours, cooperative activities, and unique assignments that promoted good study habits like organization and time management. In addition, in contrast to non-learning community students, learning community students had some choice (albeit very little) in their assignments and readings. Learning and non-learning community instructors shared similarities as well. For example, all instructors encouraged the "buddy system" in their classes.

A striking difference between syllabi was instructors' availability for office hours. The learning community instructors held office hours every day of the week. Both the FYE and RDG instructors listed more than 18 hours of availability throughout the week during spring 2016. In contrast, the non-learning community instructors only listed before or after class and/or by appointment. This difference is likely due to the learning community instructors being full-time faculty, whereas the non-learning community instructors were adjunct faculty. However, this difference means that learning community students had the potential for more interaction and involvement with their instructors than non-learning community students.

During in-depth interviews, instructors detailed how some students were resistant to cooperative learning. They did not like working in groups or with other students. Both syllabi for the learning communities stressed that students should expect such a learning environment. The classes were described as "paired to promote collaborative learning...fostered through...shared communication". In addition, a number of cooperative activities were listed on the syllabi for the learning community classes: projects, presentations, a scavenger hunt to locate campus resources, community

engagement, and participation in the book club. Of the three syllabi from non-learning community instructors, only one syllabus listed a single cooperative activity. Interestingly, both learning community instructors had an assignment for checking planners/agendas to ensure that students were organized and effectively managing their time. All instructors, including learning community and non-learning community instructors, included grades for participation/attendance and journaling in their classes. These activities could be classified as active learning. From instructor accounts, the classes seemed similar in terms of the amount of cooperative learning. However, a review of their syllabi indicated that learning community students had more opportunities for group work and peer learning. However, what is listed on a syllabus may be different than what is implemented. Nevertheless, learning community instructors were more intentional to incorporate cooperative activities; as such, learning community students likely had more opportunities for involvement (and hence social and academic integration) than non-learning community students.

In addition to opportunities for peer learning, three instructors (two learning community instructors and one non-learning community instructor) listed peer evaluations in their syllabi. In these cases, students evaluated individual members in their groups. These evaluations were likely an effort to prevent a couple of students from doing most of the work (a common problem with group work). In addition to individual evaluations, the learning community instructor for RDG had the class to evaluate each group's performance. Further, all syllabi included a section where students could list phone numbers and emails of a few classmates if they needed help throughout the semester.

Students had little agency in choosing assignments or reading materials. However, the FYE learning community instructor gave students a few options for their community engagement project: service learning, campus events, or participation in the book club. The learning community instructor for RDG also allowed students to choose a book for their book report. There was no evidence from the non-learning community instructors' syllabi that students had input in choosing their assignments or readings. Although there was a difference on the syllabi, during the in-depth interviews, all the instructors were able to give a few examples of how students had some choice in their assignments and/or readings.

Only one instructor, the learning community instructor for RDG, provided two syllabi. This instructor submitted syllabi for the learning community classes during spring 2015 and spring 2016. From the syllabi, few changes were made to the class over this one-year period. The instructor added an assignment for checking students' agendas/planners. This assignment was likely important as students testified that learning time management helped them to cope with many of their obstacles. Further, Astin (1999) acknowledged that time management was crucial in his student involvement theory. A highly involved student ensures time to 1) study, 2) be on campus, 3) participate in student organizations, and 4) interact with peers and instructors (Astin 1999). Another variation in the syllabi was that there was one fewer workshop held in spring 2016 than in spring 2015. Workshop days were when instructors team taught and the courses were fully integrated. This finding runs counter to instructors' and administrators' accounts that the courses became more integrated over time. On the other

hand, instructor and administrators revealed that the courses became more integrated in other ways such as through assignments and content.

Training Documents

Training documents were used in this study to assess program implementation. Learning community instructors were interviewed about implementation practices in fall 2014 and spring 2016. As the training documents primarily consist of good practices for learning communities, these documented were compared to how the learning community program was implemented. The training documents consisted of materials that instructors received from a national conference on learning communities during fall 2014 and fall 2015. Conference presentations were divided into four tracks: best practices, assessment, administration, and student success. Regarding assessment, many of the presenters reported positive outcomes from their evaluations of learning communities. Most of these gains related to persistence, social integration, and grades for learning community students. As such, the present study is unusual in that considers cognitive gains for learning community students.

Huot and Palm (2014) presented that Georgia State University implemented a learning community program that began in the summer and ended the following spring. This learning community consisted of three courses-- New Student Orientation, English 101, and a Social Science. The program, called Success Academy, had four major components: Summer Bridge Program, Mentorship, Academic Support, and Personal & Professional Development. Students were required to engage in student services (a feature that learning community instructors in the present study wished was a component of their program). Further, students had to attend meetings with a peer mentor and met

three times per semester with their academic coaches and academic advisers. A 10-hour commitment to study each week was expected. If students did not meet GPA requirements during the summer, they were involved in an academy recovery plan. This plan required meetings with instructors, attending workshops, identifying barriers (academic and personal) to their success in college, planning how to remove these barriers, and calling students to reflect on their goals for college. In the fall 2012 cohort, the college reported a 93.3 percent persistence rate and an average 3.02 GPA among students who participated in the learning community program. Some key features of this program, such as mandating student services and meetings with peer mentors, instructors, and advisers, may have dramatic effects on student performance and persistence. Note that all these elements included increasing involvement for students, which is consistent with Astin's (1999) student involvement theory. Additionally, through involvement, students experience academic and social integration according to Tinto's (1993) student departure theory. Involvement is important for students in gaining Bourdieu's (1986) forms of cultural and social capital that are prevalent in the institution. Instructors in the present study believed that students should be required to go to tutoring, counseling, etc. In some cases, services were available (such as tutoring) but many of the students did not go as it was not a requirement. A counselor was unavailable for learning community students at the time of the evaluation.

Baham and Finley (2015) also presented on what they believed to be best practices of learning communities: "fostering partnerships with student services, including advising, media, marketing, institutional research, and administration." Gebauer (2015) identified student engagement, academic affairs, and enrollment

management as pivotal to the success of learning communities. As such, buy-in for learning communities is important and the effectiveness of learning communities is contingent on multiple services provided by the college. In the current study, advising and administrative support proved to be program strengths. For example, the IRP held campus-wide meetings for advising faculty and there was an eCommunity on their course management system for faculty. Student services and marketing (for the learning communities in particular) was an area of weakness for the learning community program. Although the college effectively marketed the importance of reading and the overall IRP, there was little marketing of the learning communities. In-depth interviews with instructors revealed that students were largely unaware of the program if they did not participate in it.

Scholars at a national conference on learning communities also stressed the importance of buy-in, not only from the administration and the college campus, but for students as well. Grela and Humphrey (2014) noted improvements from their college's learning community students on a couple of assignments (research paper and final exam). These scholars hypothesized that student buy-in impacted student performance. Students who did not see value in the intervention may suffer. In their study, for instance, some students did not accept the value in study skills. Another speaker, Steiner (2014), discussed how some students remain unconvinced about the value of active learning within learning communities. In this study, in-depth interviews with instructors revealed that some students did not like group work. This challenge is also acknowledged in the literature (Tinto 2003). For these students, learning communities could be potentially harmful to their academic performance.

Although most of the papers and presentations at a national conference on learning communities centered on first-year, college-level courses, there was a substantial number of learning communities that focused on at-risk students (including developmental students who are involved in this study). As such, learning communities seem to be expanding to reach a larger number of students. A very small amount of learning communities described were designated for sophomores, juniors, or seniors.

Many presentations at a national conference on learning communities focused on best practices for learning communities, conveying what has worked at their institutions. Very few residential learning communities were discussed, but most of the learning communities consisted of linked courses. Linking two or three courses was most common; there were a few cases where four classes were linked. In this study, learning community instructors believed that adding an extra course would enhance the program. Further research is warranted on how the number of linked courses may impact the effectiveness of learning communities. The presentations revealed a wide array of linked courses:

Sociology and English,

English, World Geography, and First Year Experience,

English Composition, Psychology, and First Year Seminar,

Western Civilization and Biology,

Environmental Geology and English Composition,

Human Biology and English Composition,

Art History and Introduction to Literature,

Stress Management and English Composition,

Social Work and Psychology, and

Developmental Math and Developmental English.

As is evident, English was a common class to pair. It is intuitive to link English with another content area. A lot of these presentations were to inform instructors on how to integrate content areas between the linked courses. Learning community instructors in this evaluation enhanced the level of integration between RDG and FYE as the program evolved. However, the courses were never fully integrated into one curriculum.

Continuing with best practices, in the present study, motifs in the learning community emerged regarding success/career and a theme centered around a book. From the content review of training materials, it was clear that motifs play a large role in most learning communities. Examples from various presenters included motifs involving human rights, reality TV, pop culture, horror films, career, happiness, service learning/community engagement, etc. Motifs revolving around careers may be worthwhile. According to Tinto's (1993) student departure theory, students' goals is an influential factor on their departure decisions. A lack of goals/commitments increases the likelihood of dropout for students (Tinto 1993).

Peer learning was also stressed as a best practice. Students in the present study had lots of opportunities to learn from their peers. Several studies at a national conference on learning communities included peer mentors. As such, including peer mentors in the learning community program could be a way to improve the program.

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS: PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

Both quantitative and qualitative data were used to evaluate program effectiveness. Findings in this chapter are given from four sources of quantitative and qualitative data: 1) Student Interviews, 2) Pre-Post Reading Tests, 3) Surveys, and 4) Secondary Data. These data were collected over a two-year span from fall 2014 to fall 2016.

In the first section, Student Interviews, findings are presented from the eight in-depth interviews with students during fall 2016. In addition, the results from focus groups are included in this section. Focus groups were held with the two learning communities in fall 2014. In the subsequent semester, spring 2015, focus groups were held with the two learning communities in addition to two non-learning community classes. Findings from the focus groups were largely consistent with in-depth interviews with students. So, the primary focus of this section, Student Interviews, is from in-depth interviews. However, differences and similarities will be discussed between the earlier focus sessions and the later in-depth interviews. During in-depth interviews and focus groups, students were asked about their likes and dislikes during their first semester of college, learning experiences, and goals.

In the remaining three sections, Pre-Post Reading Tests, Surveys, and Secondary Data, findings are given from the three sources of quantitative data. Quantitative data were collected over three semesters: fall 2014, spring 2015, and fall 2015. Demographic

data were available on the survey during fall 2014 and for the secondary data consisting of grades. On the surveys, the college removed questions about demographics during spring 2015 and fall 2015. In addition, demographic data were unavailable on the pre-post test.

The results provided in this chapter are student-centered. These interviews with students reveal student voices. In addition, the survey depicts student attitudes. The pre-post reading test and the secondary data (consisting of grades) examines student performance.

STUDENT INTERVIEWS

Eight students were interviewed during fall 2016. Seven of these students were in the learning community program, while one student did not participate in the program. The fact that there was little interest from non-learning community students to participate in the study may be an indication that learning community students were more involved and integrated into college life. At the time of the interviews, students had completed developmental reading two or three semesters earlier.

Evident from the individual student interviews, including the seven learning community students and the one non-learning community student, was that students felt a sense of disconnection when they entered college. They also experienced many obstacles while attending college. Based on Tinto's (1993) student departure theory, these factors make students susceptible to dropout. The learning community program, however, served as intervention in helping these students to enhance their sense of belonging as well as cope with their many obstacles. The small cohorts established by the learning communities helped to enhance students' sense of belonging. The collaborative nature of

learning communities also fostered a great deal of involvement and interactions for students, including student-student and student-faculty interactions. The learning community program helped students to cope with their obstacles in three key ways: 1) learning to seek help from instructors, peers, and campus resources, 2) improving their time management skills regarding in school and life in general, and 3) receiving career guidance. At the time of interview, students were near graduation and they did not exhibit any signs of cooling out; they had plans to attend a 4-year university after graduation.

Negotiating Obstacles

Consistent with the literature on working-class students (Park et al. 2013), these students faced a significant number of obstacles while pursuing their academic goals. Primary obstacles that emerged for students included 1) a lack of social and academic self-confidence, 2) family responsibilities, 3) demands from work, 4) difficulties with accessing and utilizing technology, and 5) problems with choosing a career. While some of these issues may be problematic for college students in general, these data indicate that such problems are probably magnified for developmental and/or working-class students. The amount of family responsibilities is likely greater for working-class women or non-traditional students compared to most other college students. In fact, like students' accounts, instructors also reported that most difficulties for students included a lack of confidence, work and family demands, and technological problems; however, instructors conveyed that obstacles were exacerbated for non-traditional students. Despite the number of obstacles that these students faced, at the time of the interviews (post program), they were very optimistic about their futures and achieving their goals. The long-term goal for students was to obtain a satisfying career and their short-term goal was

to graduate. However, these students had difficulty in choosing a career and some of them continued to struggle in choosing a career.

Students overcame or managed many of the obstacles that they faced. Major themes emerged regarding how students overcame these obstacles. In particular, students sought help from peers, instructors, and the resources available on campus. Students expressed that they learned how to manage their time better as well. Last, students described their family as a source of support and/or motivation for achieving their goals.

Obstacles for developmental students.

Most students who participated in the individual interviews, including the one non-learning community student, were apprehensive about beginning college in a developmental course. Even *starting* a developmental class may be a difficult obstacle for developmental students to confront and overcome.

Danna: The first week or two...I was embarrassed...But...it was...a normal class...they didn't make you feel like you were behind...It was just necessary..."Let's refresh these skills"...When I was younger my mom had to...get help because she was a single mom...I would go with her because she didn't read very well... to... the WIC department...they looked at us like "you're needy"...They were very biased of those type of people...I felt that at a young age...and I didn't ever want to feel like that...coming into RDG, I didn't know how the instructor would look at me. Like "you're [over 25] and you need this class?"...I didn't want that feeling, and I didn't get it.

Students felt shame for being in developmental reading. Such stigma may be a factor in the lower completion rates of developmental courses. Developmental students may anticipate being labeled as "bad" students by their instructors and/or peers. Like Danna's experiences, such labeling would be consistent with prior occurrences from their school, family, and/or friends. An increase in positive interactions within the learning communities may result in students redefining themselves as "good" students. In Danna's

comment, for example, there was a suggestion that the learning community program helped to normalize the developmental course, potentially decreasing stigmatization and increasing self-confidence.

It was apparent in this study that the community college was attempting to reduce stigma for developmental students. Such efforts included re-naming the learning community program and holding a “graduation” ceremony for students who completed the program. However, many of the students did not know that they were placed in a learning community that was designed for developmental students, and some of the students were confused about the status of RDG and FYE (whether the courses were developmental, electives, etc.) Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2006) illuminated on how community colleges are making efforts to reduce stigma, and they noted that an unintended consequence of removing such stigma is that students may lack important information. In particular, by normalizing developmental education students may not realize 1) they are not receiving credits for these developmental courses or 2) the amount of time that it will take for them to earn their degrees due to their academic level (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2006). Students in this study were often unaware that developmental courses could not count as electives, so it is likely that they were unaware of how much their developmental status would prolong their education. Park et al. (2013) argued that providing vague and general information was not adequate for working-class students; they need more specific and individualized advising. Working-class students may not have the economic capital or time to waste, so it is important that they receive correct and detailed information about their academic situation (Rosenbaum 2011; Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2006).

Lack of social and academic self-confidence.

Students also discussed a lack of social confidence when interacting with their instructors and peers. “Even in the later semesters...they [instructors] helped me...feel like it’s more okay to raise my hand and talk to my instructors one-on-one,” Courtney said. Another student elaborated on how her peers were initially nervous in class.

Erin: I still got classes with a couple of them [classmates] this semester, and they’re like me. They were nervous about being around a bunch of people they didn’t know. There’s a couple of them that’s a little older than I am, so they were even nervouser [sic] than I was.

These obstacles may have a significant impact on students’ academic performances if they lack the confidence to seek help from peers and/or instructors when they need it. Previous literature has shown social class differences regarding students’ confidence in seeking out help (Jack 2016; Calarco 2011; Lareau 2002). These differences may be explained by Bourdieu’s (1986) form of cultural capital. Developmental and/or working-class students have different types of cultural capital than faculty and staff, which may explain the hesitation that these students have about seeking help from faculty and staff.

Students also expressed a lack of confidence in their academic ability. These students even lacked confidence when they knew the correct answers.

Danna: I’m scared to fail...if I don’t start something it’s because I know I might not be able to finish it or I might not be able to do it...But [reading instructor]...paid attention...[s/he] could tell whenever I was confident or when I wasn’t...wouldn’t call you out...or make a joke or skip over you....gave you time to like get out what you’re saying or figure out a word...there was a worksheet that I was doing...I kept just writing it, erasing it, writing it, erasing it...[s/he is] like “come here”...before I could erase again...[s/he] was like “This is right. This is fine”...just gave me those words of encouragement and [s/he] was like “if you don’t understand, let me know”...[S/he] made sure that we were good. And [s/he] didn’t make you feel stupid.

There is evidence that self-efficacy, or “belief in one’s ability to succeed,” is lower among developmental students than college-ready students (Bowers-Campbell 2008:77; Moore 2007). A lack of academic and/or social confidence can hinder social integration and involvement in college, two factors that have been shown to be critical in student persistence according to Tinto’s (1993) student departure theory and Astin’s (1999) student involvement theory. In focus groups, students simply touched on issues concerning low confidence. In the in-depth interviews, issues concerning confidence were discussed at length; students revealed the lack of confidence to be a major and primary barrier. Students may not have felt comfortable sharing this kind of personal information during focus groups.

Age may also be a stigmatizing or mediating factor on self-confidence, as all the four (self-identified) non-traditional students demonstrated a lack of self-confidence. These students were between the ages of approximately 21 and 32 when they *started developmental coursework* in college. In addition, age was the most common obstacle mentioned by students in the focus groups. This obstacle was mentioned multiple times in every focus group. As such, age was discussed more by students in focus groups than in-depth interviews during fall 2016. From being out of school for a long time, non-traditional students had difficulty recalling content from high school and they had difficulty adjusting their study habits and reading habits. Being a non-traditional student may exacerbate feelings of disconnect. Indeed, students in fall 2016 mentioned their age quite a bit throughout the interviews and seemed to differentiate themselves from traditionally-aged students, heightening a sense of disconnect.

Gina: I have been out of high school for [more than 10] years, so to come back to college...was a big step for me. There’s a lot of things that has changed, and

taking FYE and RDG first—I'm grateful because they showed me that I can do this...That I can finish class, and then I am prepared for whatever they throw at me...if I...would have went into [college] head first, I would probably would have quit the first 3 weeks.

As evident in Gina's comment, all students that exhibited a lack of confidence (six learning community students and the one non-learning community student) also said that their self-confidence improved because of their instructors, peers, and/or classes. Further, the majority of administrators and instructors noted how students' confidence increased throughout the semester/program. Interestingly, only learning community students were described as having an increase in their self-confidence. Non-learning community instructors did not mention an increase in confidence among their students. Drew, a non-learning community instructor, mentioned how improved confidence was a benefit of the learning communities.

Family responsibilities.

Another substantial obstacle for these students was hindrances at home. The majority of students said that their family, in some form, was an obstacle to their college performance. The number of duties at home was quite significant for these students.

Gina: With them [children] having softball games, volleyball games, violin practice, choir practice, and baseball...I don't...get home 'til like 9 ...by the time we get baths done and in the bed, I'm ready to go to bed. So I don't really get nothing done...that's a little downer. Honestly, I can't let it get to me.

Role overload was apparent in students' accounts. Role overload is "trying to do too many things at once to meet the demands of both work and life" (Schulte 2014:22).

Evidence suggested that students felt physically, mentally, and emotionally drained from role overload. Students were tired, which made it challenging for them to process and learn new information while in college. Schulte's (2014) concept of "time confetti",

where time becomes shattered into tiny, not-so-usable pieces of time, helps to explain how these students' busy schedules resulted in little time for in-depth thinking about their schoolwork. While some students discussed the high number of responsibilities that they had at home, other students felt an absence of family or a lack of support from their family. Felicity shared, "This semester with meeting up with my birth parents...like not getting the interest that I wanted-- that has really affected me...I think I'm depressed." As such, diverse circumstances within the family can affect students' performances in similar ways.

Caretaking was another family-oriented obstacle for several of the students, and three of the four caretakers in this study tended for multiple people in their families. Three students in this study were sandwich generation participants; they provided multigenerational caregiving.

Erin: My grandmother and grandpa got [serious illness]...I go to their house every day, get their food ready...I got a daughter...My husband's mom—she's got [serious illness] and it's [serious illness]...so I go...help her take baths and clean her tubes out and cook her supper...I just take care of them...They don't really need much.

Despite the significant number of family obligations, most of the students remained optimistic. In addition, some of the students, like Erin, did not seem to realize the degree to which these caretaking duties influenced their academic performance.

Erin: I emancipated myself when I was 16, so...been doing it [caretaking] for so long that it don't get in the way...I've still got everything timed out around it...when I get out school, I go check on them. Start cooking supper...by 7 o'clock I'm done with bathing and feeding them, then I'm there do my homework and studying.

Recall that Erin was a caretaker for her grandmother, grandfather, daughter, and mother-in-law. Such responsibilities would most certainly interfere with one's academic

performance. In this form, role overload may be insidious. Park et al. (2013) also highlighted the high demands on low-income women at community colleges. However, further study is warranted on whether developmental students experience role overload more than college-ready students.

Demands from work.

Work demands were also major obstacles for developmental students. Seven students in this sample held full-time or part-time jobs, and the remaining student (Erin) had recently quit a job due to a role conflict between work and school (and likely family obligations as well). Four students worked around twenty hours per week, while the other three students worked over thirty hours per week. A couple of students worked full-time. The majority of students discussed how work negatively affected their performances in college.

Felicity: I'm working full time...I have another job where I sit with a lady once or twice a week for about 8 hours. What's really changed also...is my sleep schedule...working 3rd shift...it has made me grumpy...not motivated...always tired.

Working third (night) shift did not seem to be uncommon among these developmental reading students. At least a couple of the students in this sample mentioned working third shift. In addition, Danna recalled her classmates working third shift.

Danna: [Instructors] repeated themselves a lot...when you have students that you know can do well, but they don't—you're unsure of motivation...we were a family and...the students were helping the students. We knew the students that were struggling, but we knew why they were struggling. They were working third shift and coming to class on no sleep.

Overall students worked a lot of hours, especially when one considers the number of family and school duties as well. These working-class students likely worked a lot of hours out of necessity because they lacked Bourdieu's (1986) form of economic capital.

Interestingly, students seemed to believe that work negatively impacted their academic performance to a larger degree than their caretaking duties. Focus groups also described external demands (e.g. work and family) that interfered with their schoolwork. However, work and family issues were more pronounced during in-depth interviews. Students were probably reluctant to go into details, especially in front of their peers, about problems surrounding family and work.

Difficulties with accessing and utilizing technology.

A further theme to emerge regarding obstacles for developmental students, in both focus groups and interviews, was complications with educational technologies.

Technology was discussed by a few of the students as an obstacle. In addition, half of the instructors interviewed in spring 2016 stressed the challenges that developmental students faced regarding technology. Students exhibited a lack of experience with technology. “I didn’t even know how to get on the internet when I started my first semester,” Erin stated. This statement illustrates the lack of knowledge, especially among developmental and/or working-class students, that may exist about technology when students begin their college career. Technology is often required in college classrooms today for learning and assignments.

Gina: [FYE instructor] helped us with our [course management system]...I didn’t realize how much that’s used in EVERY class...[s/he]...show[ed] us how to do the homework and how to find things on it...then the [course management system] [s/he] showed us how to make appointments...check our calendars, check for any upcoming events.

From Gina’s statement, it is clear how much technology is used on college campuses, not only for learning and assignments, but also for scheduling appointments with instructors

and advisers, attending campus events, etc. Gina again mentioned technology as a limitation when she was asked what advice she would give to incoming students.

Gina: Books are online now...I still purchase paper copies...it's easier to read a paper copy than have to worry about where's my Wi-Fi...a lot of the student work is...hard when you don't have Wi-Fi. I have a lot of classmates that don't have computers...they come in and they're like "I didn't get that done!"

This time Gina described a lack of access to technology as an obstacle, not just a lack of experience and understanding. College campuses often have computer labs available for students, but the labs usually have limited hours. The use of technology may exacerbate other obstacles that students face. For example, the majority of students in this sample worked, which makes it a challenge to visit computer labs that are only open during school hours. Further, students attending community colleges typically do not live on campus. They may be unwilling (or lack the resources/economic capital) to drive an hour to complete/submit an online assignment. In addition, for students living in rural areas the internet may be unavailable or "spotted". The "digital divide" is certainly an issue in education, especially for working-class students, as colleges and universities are increasingly reliant on technology.

Students' age may also play a factor regarding technology. According to instructor interviews, a disproportionate number of developmental students were non-traditional students like Gina. The drastic changes in the educational system over time make it difficult for them to adapt.

Of the three students who discussed technology as an obstacle, they also stated how much FYE helped them learn how to use technology.

Gina: We was in the computer lab for half of the semester...[FYE instructor]...took more time out of [her/his] schedule to...prep me for the

computer...I didn't even know how to go to a search engine...I've come a long way.

In addition, students elaborated on how learning these various educational technologies helped them in their future classes at the college.

Problems with choosing a career.

A final obstacle for students was choosing a career path. This difficulty was a source of pressure and stress for the students. The fact that students had difficulty in choosing a career was also evident in the number of times that they changed their career paths. Like many of the students, Heather had trouble with deciding on a career/major. At the time of the interview, she had committed to a degree, but her reasoning for choosing her field was interesting: "I'm almost done. There's no point in just stopping now." It seemed that she decided on the degree because she was almost finished with it. She was not genuinely interested or passionate about her career choice.

Although six students had difficulties in choosing a career, only three students (Bethany, Courtney, and Gina) were still indecisive at the time of the interview.

Courtney: I really struggle with...making a plan for what I want to do at [nearby university]...I think I want to do just a bachelor's in [field]...Just [to]...make me feel like I do have a sliver of a plan, but I don't really feel like I have like a good plan.

Overcoming obstacles.

All students from the in-depth interviews, including learning community students and the one non-learning community student, discussed seeking help as a way of overcoming some of their obstacles. (Administrators and instructors also described how learning community students sought help.) The three major sources of help for these students came from peers, instructors, and resources available at the college. All of these

students sought help from instructors. Students discussed how their willingness to seek out help was an alteration in their behavior. Gina said, “And ask for help now...now if I don’t have that [a dictionary] available, I don’t mind asking a teacher—“hey, what does this mean?” My English teacher now I’m constantly going to her.” Further, students gave credit to the program and their classes during their first semester for this transformation.

Danna: [Learning community instructors] also taught me...about networking... I haven’t picked a mentor yet. But I have one in mind. I’m going to ask her...I don’t really have anyone in my family to go to when it comes to stuff like this, but people always think that they’re alone....you don’t really have to be...bring people in that will pick you up. They may not be able to physically do for you, but you’ll have...a positive person telling you how you can do it.

Students received support and help from instructors (and peers and the college) where it may have been lacking in their families. As illuminated, the help sought from instructors was not always concerned with cognitive skills.

Heather: [Instructors] just made sure... if we...needed anything...they would help us, even if like it wasn’t something to do with FYE or RDG...I had an issue with my adviser, but they helped me so that I was able to get my classes for spring.

Although students stated that they received the most help from instructors, peers were also a major source of aid for students. Many of the students attributed the positive relationship with peers as a factor in seeking help. Courtney attested, “I also like that the students were the same too in both of the classes. So I could like make friendships or like contact them outside of class to like ask questions.” In this statement, there was also indication of the close-knit cohort in the learning community program. As such, students experienced social integration, a key component for student persistence in Tinto’s (1993) student departure theory. Students particularly liked the cohort aspect of the program, which is consistent with focus group findings from fall 2014 and spring 2015. Danna, a

non-traditional student, discussed how she felt like a mother to some of the “kids” and she encouraged them to do their work.

Danna: We [class] would have...these conversations...to like get these kids who think it's a waste of time.... it's not a waste of time. You need this. Otherwise you wouldn't be in this class....it was us to them, and not really the teachers to them.

Like instructors, when students described seeking help from peers they often credited it as a change in their behavior and they also attributed this change to the classes/program. “RDG and FYE helped me. Before I would have never reached out and done group projects or even thought about asking classmates for help,” conveyed Gina.

Last, students talked of utilizing campus resources as a way to overcome some of their obstacles. During in-depth interviews with instructors, the instructors indicated that students did not take advantage of campus resources. However, the majority of these students did use campus resources. Although it cannot be determined from this study due to an absence of interviews with students who did not persist, it may be that seeking out help (whether in the form of peers, instructor, and/or campus resources) could make an impact on whether students, especially developmental students, persist in college.

The kind of help that students received from the college was mainly academic in nature. Students discussed using the writing center, learning center, and tutors that were available on campus.

Erin: I'm...bad at math, and [FYE instructor] helped me get the tutor....now...I [am more than 10 points] above my COMPASS test on math...take tutoring classes...it helps to prepare you for the other classes to come... I'm taking tutoring in history, math, and English...don't even really need it in English, but every little bit of help helps.

Jack (2016) highlighted the need for studies to shed light on how/if students are using institutional resources (like tutoring, counseling services, etc.). The present study finds

that the majority of students used campus resources that they learned about through their instructors and the learning community program. Students utilized the writing center, learning center, and tutors that were available on campus. This outcome lends supports for Astin's (1999) involvement theory that student involvement in college is associated with student persistence, as these students were near graduation.

Interactions with peers, instructors, and campus resources helped developmental students enhance their confidence, acquire social and cultural capital, and prevent cooling out. The learning communities fostered these processes. Like this study, Deil-Amen (2006) discovered that students begin community college with low confidence. She also found that college faculty, in particular, were key in increasing students' confidence and aspirations.

Time management emerged as another way that students overcame some of their obstacles in college. Students referred to time management, not only as a skill that they learned for studying, but also as a skill that they learned and applied to their lives in general. Time management helped with managing role conflicts for students. Students provided numerous examples where they made sacrifices so that they could be successful in their different roles, including their role as college students. Danna talked about how difficult it was for her to quit certain activities.

Danna: I have issues with saying no, I don't like failing and quitting something is failing to me. I had to get over that...after this semester I told my teacher that I was going to not work anymore...I had to choose between...school and work because of my health.

Five students testified to working fewer hours or quitting their jobs as a way of managing their time better. A few students gave additional examples.

Danna: Putting more focus on me is/was the struggle. I focused on everyone else around me and not myself ...I took work off...then the duties at the house...I told my husband that he had to start helping. And I also said I don't care if the house is like messed up. These are the times during this week that I need to study. Keep the kids away...Those types of changes had to happen in order for me to fulfill school priorities or physical therapy...me and my husband had to agree what future do we want?

Danna described how a class activity on time management allowed her to realize that she was overworked.

Danna: It's the time management that they [learning community instructors] taught me that I have more time. We [classmates] had to do like this chart...it was like a sheet that had all the hours of the day. Write down everything that you have to do on that sheet. And then those time slots that you have, what can you do within in those time slots?...mine was just overly filled. And I didn't realize how much I did in one day. And I was always either in pain or stressed.

Danna recognized that she was not "lazy"; there was not enough time in the day to complete all her tasks. It now made sense to her why was tired and stressed. She also grasped there was little time for school and studying in her schedule. Consequently, she stopped work and spoke with her husband about helping more with the children and household duties. These findings regarding time management add to the literature on how learning communities (and other programs) can help developmental and working-class students manage their obstacles while attending college.

Last, there was evidence that the program, particularly the FYE course and instructor, helped students in choosing a career.

Erin: I did a lot of research on everything that I felt like I could be...then I'd go talk to [FYE instructor] about it...[s/he would]ask me questions like "do you see yourself doing this in 15 years? Can you handle somebody coming at you sick or bleeding?"...if I felt like I couldn't do it, then I'll tell her...then [s/he would] say "well, what are you interested in?" And I love children, and I want to work with kids. And [s/he is] like "you could be a teacher"...I don't think I'd be a really good teacher because I don't feel as smart as I should be...I was in social services...when I was a kid...[the instructor was] like "well since you were in

social services...is that something you would get interested in?" And I thought about it for a couple days, and it just hit me. And I've wanted to do that ever since.

These students heavily relied on their classes and instructors for career guidance. An interesting question is whether non-developmental students rely on classes and instructors as well, or if they received advice, etc. on career goals from other sources (such as the family). A student's cultural capital and/or social capital likely have strong impacts on career choices. Social connections often play important roles in obtaining a job, and cultural capital can equip a student with knowledge that can aid in career-making decisions.

It is possible that developmental students who were not in the program also benefited from the FYE class in choosing a career. However, learning community students had positive and close relationships with their instructors in the learning community program. Therefore, it is expected (though cannot be verified due a lack of participation among non-learning community students) that effects of the FYE class on the career decision-making process of learning community students was magnified. Well-defined career goals are linked to student persistence (Hull-Blanks, Kurpius, Befort, Sollenberger, Nicpon, and Huser 2005), so additional studies are needed to investigate whether learning communities help students establish these goals. This study suggests that learning communities aid students in forming their career goals, but future research should explore this issue further.

In focus groups and in-depth interviews, students demonstrated that they valued college. "[College] made me know exactly what goals I want to hit and working on hitting them. That's my main concern is graduating and then going back to [nearby

university],” declared Erin. In addition to valuing college, students were also determined and motivated to graduate as evident from Erin’s comments. All students, including the non-learning community student, planned to proceed to a four-year university for a bachelor’s degree.

These developmental students sought fulfilling careers. Amanda wanted to be a teacher, Danna wanted a career in Human Resources, Erin aspired to be a social worker, Felicity wanted to be a nurse, and Heather sought a career in criminology. Even for the students who were undecided, it was clear that they wanted a successful career. Bethany, though undecided, discussed transferring to a nearby university, while Courtney and Gina considered the possibility of a career in visual arts and business, respectively. In addition, all the students believed that they were being successful in achieving their goals at the college. (This theme of resiliency, that students were determined to achieve their goals despite encountering several obstacles, was present during focus groups too.) All eight students in fall 2016 testified that RDG or FYE played a role in their success in college, and six students stated that RDG and FYE played a significant role in them achieving their goals.

Family was an interesting and complex factor in this study. Students discussed a vast amount of hardships and obstacles related to their families and how family-oriented obstacles negatively influenced their academic performance. Interestingly, however, the majority of students also described their family as a source of support and/or motivation while pursuing their educational goals. This familial support toward students’ goals may explain why students did not believe that their caretaking duties hindered their

performance in college. Amanda discussed the support that she received from her grandmother.

Amanda: She [grandmother] is really understanding...She currently broke her shoulder, and she just sits there in her chair and she's like..."I'm going to help you. I do want you to take time and just push it [caretaking duties] away for a while. And go hang out with your friends, even if it is studying"... she is very supportive.

Some students also revealed that their family was a source of motivation for them in achieving their educational pursuits. Danna shared, "School is huge because I'll be able to hopefully get the job that I'll love and have decent hours and spend it with my kids. It's the most important for me, being able to do that." Hence, students desired a good job to improve their quality of life. Like Danna, Gina disclosed how her children were a source of motivation.

Gina: My goals are kind of personal because I have three children, so I don't want them to see me fail. So I strive every day to make sure that when I'm here, I'm here...physically, mentally, emotionally...I feel that my goals are being met because I am pushing myself every day to keep coming and keep trying.

Note that the type of support described by these students was moral support, as opposed to material support. The present study, in addition to Reay, Ball, David, and Davies (2001), found that working-class students may receive moral support from their families but there is little evidence of them receiving material support (money, teaching, etc.) from their families.

Social Integration and Involvement

Learning community students, via small cohorts and frequent, positive interactions with peers and instructors, may be able to increase their sense of belonging and social integration when starting college. Over time, an improved connectedness to college may result in student persistence (Cerna et al. 2008; Engstrom 2008). All students

who participated in the in-depth interviews, including the non-learning community student, reported positive relations with their instructors. They also reported frequent interactions with their instructors, both inside and outside of the classroom. Interestingly, the instructors seemed to serve in a variety of roles for the seven learning community students. These students described their instructors with terms like “parent”, “family”, “friend”, and “coach”. Further, the learning community students and the non-learning community student had positive and frequent interactions with their peers. They attested to engaging in a lot of peer learning and cooperative activities. In general, students can experience social integration in college through family and co-workers (Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano 2011). However, learning community students and non-learning community students in this study (from the in-depth interviews and focus groups) experienced social integration primarily by way of their instructors and peers. As such, this study suggests, along with Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano (2011) and Park et al. (2013), that the classroom is an important place for students to get integrated into college.

Student-faculty interactions.

The seven learning community students, along with the one non-learning community student, liked their instructors and found them caring and encouraging. Felicity corroborated, “In high school they say ‘oh, college instructors they don’t care. They’re mean’...So I was...scared of what they would think and how they were, but then it was definitely a shock that they were nice. And that they actually cared.” In addition to finding their instructors caring and motivating, these students also thought that their instructors were effective. Students were asked if they felt any pressure from their instructors. Any pressure that students conveyed was described as “good” pressure.

“They pushed us to do well so we would do well...our next semester and all throughout the rest of our college,” said Bethany.

These students indicated that they were comfortable around their instructors, and they found their instructors approachable. In a learning community, frequent interaction is necessary for students to have the interaction that is required to change their self-esteem, educational ideologies, attitudes, and study habits in a more positive direction. It is also necessary to shed any negative labels that students may have received or perceived. From the in-depth interviews, the learning community students and the non-learning community student engaged in frequent interactions with their instructors. Felicity described some of the in-class interactions with her instructors: “We would do our journal entry...and [FYE instructor] would like comment back and some of the comments... [were] really helpful and insightful...my RDG instructor—s/he was really helpful, supportive too.” Another objective of learning communities is that the interaction between students and instructors (and student-student interaction) will carry over outside the classroom. Consequently, students are more likely to feel socially integrated into campus life. Learning community students provided examples of interactions that happened outside of the classroom.

Erin: I had extremely a lot of one-on-one time throughout the whole semester. Make an appointment with [FYE instructor], [s/he will] talk to you. Stay after class and [s/he will] still work with you...one time...I wrote four papers and I didn't want to do any of those. And I got out of class at 3:00, and [s/he] stayed with me until 5:00 ...[s/he] was done with school, so it was on her/his own time. So I just feel like [s/he] had my back 100% and was gonna figure it out with me no matter what.

Gina: I still have communications with them [learning community instructors]. Three semesters later, I still go to them...I really, really liked how supportive they were for our future educations...probably two of the teachers I felt most that actually cared if we did good in school.

Many of the students, like Gina, reported talking with their learning community instructors after the program. This interaction was obviously outside of the classroom as well. Such out-of-the-classroom experiences with instructors could constitute mentoring, which likely have more powerful effects on student outcomes than in-class interactions with instructors. From focus groups in fall 2014 and spring 2015, learning and non-learning community students reported frequent in-class interactions but a small amount of interactions outside of the classroom with their instructors.

The instructors played a variety of roles for the seven learning community students. One of the most common themes from these students was that their instructors played a familial role. Erin explained the role that her instructors played when her mother passed away during her first semester of college.

Erin: When my mom passed away, I was actually going to quit. I got a little depressed...She was the last person in my family other than my father...the FYE and the RDG teacher, they...wanted me to have a meeting with them. And they...basically told me “well you gotta do this for yourself”...I feel like that helped me out a lot...felt like I still had family even though it wasn’t blood family.

These students described their instructors in a variety of other ways as well—“friend”, “coach”, “adviser” (although not in an official capacity), and mentor.

Felicity: One of my teachers gave us a really personable letter...that really meant a lot just to put your story out there to the other students that may be going through...a hard time. And like going/looking back at that letter it has really helped me like with a lot of things I’m facing, and it was just like encouragement...I look up to her.

This letter/openness allowed Felicity to connect with her instructor. This instructor later became a mentor for Felicity.

The ways in which students described their instructors were overwhelmingly positive, which is unlikely to be the case for students who did not participate in the program. (This finding was evident from the focus groups with learning community students and non-learning community students in spring 2015.) Minkler (2002) found that learning community instructors were more aware of their students' needs, likely due to the increased amount of interaction that happens in learning communities. In addition to being aware of their needs as students, this study finds that learning community instructors seemed to be fulfilling a variety of other needs for their students. Jack's (2016) study provided evidence that interventions can make it possible for working-class students to obtain the cultural capital (defined by Bourdieu in 1986 as dress, mannerisms, skills, and knowledge that one acquires through social status and may be used to maintain or promote social status) that is dominant within the institution. Jack (2016:2) stated that "Institutions—not exclusively the family—can equip students with the cultural competencies that they need to succeed in college."

Student-student interactions.

From the in-depth interviews, students (including the one non-learning community student) described in positive ways their relationships and interactions with their peers. The learning community students often cited the people in the learning communities (including instructors) as the best part of the program. Many of the learning community students referred to their classmates as "friends". They used the term "friendships" and "study partners" interchangeably. These students credited the program with helping them to form these friendships. Courtney stated, "Since both of the classes were in the same room in the same building and had the same students in there. I was

definitely able to make like close-knit groups of friends.” Further, Courtney encouraged future students to appreciate this aspect of the learning community program: “Embrace the idea of this close-knit classroom. Really feel like that you are connected to the teacher and your classmates...because we are all on the same boat.” Tinto (2003) also found that learning communities fostered support groups for students. Further, learning community students who view themselves as more socially engaged, persist at a higher rate than non-learning community students (Tinto 2003).

From in-depth interviews, the eight developmental reading students demonstrated that they interacted a lot with their peers inside the classroom. Examples of peer learning, discussed below, provide more evidence of in-class student-student interactions. The learning community students also described their peers in the learning communities as very talkative, which is another indicator of frequent student-student interactions. “I liked the people that I was in there with. We all got along really well...it wasn’t like all my classes today...they all talked to each other. It was more of like a family,” shared Bethany. Gina described how her interactions with classmates influenced her. Her statement is consistent with Vygotsky’s (1978) constructivist framework that people may redefine themselves via interactions with others: “They [classmates] would be all so eager and excited to do something, made we want to be that way too.”

Although not as common as in-class interactions, many of the eight students conveyed that they interacted with their peers outside of the classroom. Gina provided some details about her interactions with peers that occurred outside of the classroom: “We [peers] do come here to college like on Fridays...we’ll meet up in like the library and we’ll read together, we try to help each other a little bit. It doesn’t happen as much as

I would like, but they've also got lives too.” Note that this institution did not hold classes on Fridays, so these students were making a concerted effort to interact outside of the class.

From focus groups as well as individual interviews, there was a lot of cooperative learning and peer learning among learning community students and non-learning community students. Students described a variety of cooperative learning opportunities, including presentations, speeches, projects, class discussions, a scavenger hunt, health fair, “culture day”, and the book club. As such, students were given many opportunities to learn from their peers. Learning community students, from in-depth interviews, attested to how much the cooperative learning benefited them, including helping with their social integration and future courses. In addition, cooperative learning may help learning community students to see other viewpoints and perspectives. Dodge and Kendall (2004), for instance, note how learning communities can help students prepare for a diverse society because students are likely working and learning with peers from various backgrounds and cultures. These authors also note that students reinforce “their own skills by teaching and mentoring fellow students” (Dodge and Kendall 2004:151). Peer feedback (in a formal sense) did not develop as a theme from student interviews in the way that peer learning (in a more general sense) did. Learning community students and non-learning community students did seem to have, due to the number of cooperative activities, ample opportunities to provide feedback in informal ways. Considering the amount of interactions that students had with faculty and peers, it was evident that students were highly involved and involvement is closely associated with student learning and student persistence (Astin 1999).

Program Outcomes

Themes surfaced regarding students' performances in their classes. Several themes emerged about students' attitudes, improvements, and challenges concerning reading. Students held positive attitudes about reading, and they enjoyed reading. They also expressed challenges in K-12 with reading. At the time of the interviews, students struggled with the amount of reading assigned in their classes and comprehension. Despite their difficulties with comprehension, students cited major gains in comprehension and vocabulary from RDG.

Students liked their FYE course. Two major, specific gains that students received from FYE was an improvement in study habits (mainly time management and study strategies in particular) and gaining a better understanding of finances, which involved student loans, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and personal finances.

Themes appeared concerning students' performances following the program. Two or three semesters after the program, students were asked about their courses and grades, and about any ways that they may have changed while in college. All eight students testified that their classes were going well, and each student maintained that they made average or above-average grades. In addition, all students experienced some change to their self while in college. Most commonly, students described how they had matured since their first semester. The learning communities may have contributed to the maturation of some of the students, for example, by teaching them time management skills and encouraging them to alter and mature their study habits.

Reading skills and habits.

All eight students expressed that they enjoyed reading at the time of the interview. Overall, the amount of enjoyment that students shared about reading was surprising considering their performance level and challenges with reading. Three students (Courtney, Erin, and Heather) said they had always enjoyed reading. Erin revealed, “I’m a real big reader. I love reading. I read a book a day...It’s my number one favorite thing to do.” Although Erin stated that she could read very fast, it became clear later that she may not comprehend what she reads. Four students (Amanda, Danna, Felicity, and Gina) claimed that their level of enjoyment for reading had increased after taking RDG. Dana stated, “Before it was...“the more you read, the more you know”...now it’s more of a pleasure thing.” While Danna became intrinsically motivated to read, for some of the students it seemed more forced. Gina said “Trying to become more positive on reading as I know how important it is for college. So I’m trying [laughter].” So for a few of these students, in contrast to Danna’s intrinsic motivation, their motivation/enjoyment for reading seemed more extrinsic. From Gina’s comments, she seemed to think that she should enjoy reading and that it will help her in college, so she was trying to like reading and change her attitude.

Students expressed several hardships with reading. Many of the students (six students in total) mentioned that problems in K-12 contributed to some of their challenges with reading.

Amanda: I want to be an elementary school teacher and...the biggest thing that started me to do that was because my elementary school teachers would always leave me behind...I wouldn’t really get the material. And they were like “well it’s not...that we don’t want to help you, it’s just we don’t want the other students who are getting it to fall behind”...I did have to learn how to accept that.

It is disheartening that Amanda had to “accept” that she would be left behind in school. Such experiences can negatively affect students’ self-confidence and educational ideologies.

While some of the students talked about “missing something” in elementary school, other students spoke about problems that they had during high school. Most students discussed how they did not do their best in high school and it negatively affected them when starting college. Pre-entry attributes, like skills/abilities and prior schooling, are associated with dropout in Tinto’s (1993) student departure theory. “Before [high school] I never done homework,” revealed Gina. It was unclear whether she was not assigned homework or if she chose not to do it. A major misconception among students is that poor performance during high school will not influence their college readiness and performance (Rosenbaum 1998; Steinberg 1996). There seems to be a need for programs to help students transition from high school to college, as there is a disparity between students’ college expectations and experiences (Brinkworth et al. 2009). In addition, Jack (2016) found a big difference among the “privileged poor” (low-income students who attended high-performing high schools) and the “doubly disadvantaged” (low-income students who attended “distressed high schools”). He discovered that the “privileged poor” were able to acquire forms of cultural capital prior to entering college. As such, they did not experience culture shock when entering college and they were confident in seeking help from their professors in contrast to the “doubly disadvantaged.”

Students shared some current challenges that they faced with reading. One challenge was getting behind on the amount of reading assigned. “I don’t have time [to read]...It’s upsetting...I work third shift and sometimes I try to read but I end up falling

asleep,” shared Felicity. Felicity’s comments relate back to the concept of “time confetti” (described by Schulte 2014) where these students seem to have little time, considering work and other demands, for reading or studying.

Comprehension was another struggle for many of these students. Danna talked about how her peers (and likely herself) had difficulty with comprehending what they read.

Danna: A lot of the people in my class I noticed struggled on comprehending...if we were to read like they were not able to pull things out, and I know everyone is on different levels but because we are in this class comprehension is the biggest deal.

A few students shared other struggles with reading such as vocabulary, summarizing, and grammar. In total, students expressed many distinct challenges that they faced with reading.

In focus groups during fall 2014 and spring 2015, students did not believe that their reading habits had changed throughout their first semester (i.e. reading more or reading less). However, in fall 2016, most students claimed that their reading skills and reading habits had improved because of taking the developmental course. Regarding reading habits, four students (Amanda, Courtney, Danna, and Gina) said that they now read more because of RDG. “[Reading Instructor] encouraged us to read more books...on my free time. That was good because now that’s what I’m doing,” said Gina. All students said that their reading skills had improved since college, and all students, except Erin, attributed their progress to RDG. Mainly students expressed improvement in vocabulary (Amanda, Bethany, Danna, Felicity, and Gina) and comprehension (Amanda, Courtney, Danna, Felicity, Gina, and Heather). Erin stated that she had improved in these two areas

as well, but she did not feel that it was because of RDG. Danna described her improvements with vocabulary.

Danna: I learned a lot from just applying those words. Like I can use these big words or if someone speaks to me using these words, I'm like [gives a "wow" facial expression]...I know that word. Which before...I would like listen but take a note of that word and going home to like look it up.

Students in focus groups during spring 2015 also reported an improvement with vocabulary. One's vocabulary relates to Bourdieu's (1986) idea of cultural capital. Individuals socialized by people with an extensive vocabulary will tend to have a large vocabulary themselves. The developmental students in this study were probably not exposed to an extensive vocabulary in their formative years.

In addition to learning vocabulary, many students also improved their reading comprehension. "I like learned...if you break down each paragraph...it makes it easier to understand like the whole book," shared Heather. It is important that students grasp this skill, so that they can perform well in their future courses. If students cannot comprehend what they are reading, it makes learning and student persistence very difficult.

Study skills.

Students expressed that they received many benefits from their FYE course and that they would recommend this class to their friends and other students.

Danna: In FYE a lot of the things in the book was very informative...the kids that were in there...I was just like telling them it's so good that they're getting this now...I didn't get that information early on. So a lot of those things that we were receiving was just like really good tips that you can put forth in your studies and real life.

Interestingly, most students ($n = 5$) reported more gains from FYE than RDG. "If they don't have to take it [RDG] I don't think they should...everyone should take FYE because it teaches you a lot about things at the campus...we learned where things are,"

suggested Bethany. It may be that improving their study skills (such as time management) poses greater difficulties for these students than improving their cognitive skills (such as reading), considering their work, school, and family obligations. However, developmental students may obtain (or *feel*) greater benefits by learning and improving their study skills compared to cognitive areas. Learning how to effectively study and manage their time should enhance their cognitive skills as well.

All eight students, including the non-learning community student, reported changing their study habits. Two main changes in their study habits were related to time management and study strategies. Earlier, time management was analyzed in terms of life more generally (balancing school, family, and work). However, students also described their struggles and improvement with time management as it relates to their schoolwork.

Heather: Learning study habits that you can use throughout college...how to prepare. Because I'm a crammer. I do everything at the last minute [nervous laughter]...say, like I have a paper. It's easier to like make a timeline of what you have to do, than to do it all the night before.

In addition to improvement with time management, students described how their study habits and strategies had changed in a variety of ways. More specifically, a few students discussed how their note-taking habits had changed. Below in Amanda's and Courtney's testimonies, there is also some indication for success in college (and the workplace) and enhancing their study skills by effectively pinpointing main ideas in their readings.

Amanda: Not really taking as much notes as I did. Like a lot of students believe that they have to write everything down that the teacher says or everything that's on the board. Just like short-handing it and just underlining. And if they say "hey, this is really important" just to underline it, star it, and remember it... Because of my study notes that I took from FYE, I'm actually passing a lot of my other classes with my study notes. There not just jumbled up. They're actually organized and highlighted.

Bethany and Heather also mentioned using flash cards. In addition, Gina talked about how FYE enhanced her organizational skills. Last, four students mentioned that the amount of time that they spent studying had increased.

Courtney: [My study habits] definitely has improved, and I'm more likely to study now. I'm more likely to like sit down at my desk and...work...I've figured out a style of studying that I like... in high school...I didn't really study as much as I should have. I was very bad at studying...I feel like the RDG and FYE courses helped me to study better and more efficiently.

This change is likely important, as research indicates that, for learning, nothing can substitute for time on task (Arum and Roksa 2011). Interestingly, the focus groups non-learning community classes in spring 2015 cited that they studied more but the learning community classes, in contrast to fall 2014, did not note any changes in their study habits.

Six students stated that they experienced an improved understanding of finances from FYE. Most students stated that they learned about student loans. It was clear from students' comments they were very concerned about the expense of college and their ability to pay back these loans.

Danna: [FYE instructor] would...talk about like "before you take out a loan, let's think about all the other things we can do"...also...Like the different types—unsubsidized, subsidized. Like what are the differences? Then how to manage it like if you HAVE to take a loan out. Because sometimes you have to. Let's be smart about it. Let's calculate what this amount is going to be...make sure it is worth it in the long run...are you in a field that when you get out of school that you're going to be able to afford this?

These students seem to have a legitimate worry when it comes to paying back student loans. Hurst (2010:267) acknowledged that "college is not paying off equally for everyone who participates." Middle-class students often have social capital (i.e. "connections" as defined by Bourdieu 1986) that differ from the connections of working-class students. As a consequence, upon graduation, working-class students generally do

not obtain high-paying jobs like many of their middle-class counterparts. This situation makes paying back loans more problematic for working-class students as compared to middle-class students. Gina also expressed some anxiety over the FAFSA.

Gina: [College] just recently changed our FAFSA to start October 1 and normally I'm used to doing mine in January. So when they kind of sprung this up on us, like my adviser didn't reach out and say "hey, you need to come meet with me and get your classes"...I just went and had a meeting with [FYE instructor] the other day because I couldn't get a hold of my adviser.

Semesters after the program, Gina still reached out to her FYE instructor for help with the FAFSA. The learning community instructors continued to be a source of help and support for these learning community students.

Post-performance.

Students discussed how they were performing in their classes post-RDG. All students self-reported average or above-average grades. Half of the students reported making A's and B's. Based on students' accounts of their grades and classes, it appeared that these students were experiencing college success, persistence, and likely graduation.

Erin: When I scheduled my classes, she [adviser] said that I'm [a few] classes more than what most people are because I've been taking [several] classes...she said when I start this next semester, I'll graduate in [accelerated fashion] from the way that I'm going.

These students were ambitious about their futures. All the students planned to proceed to a four-year university. As such, these students were not cooling out. Because data were unavailable about students' initial college aspirations, it was unclear if they experienced warming up while attending college. For instance, students may have aspired to attend a four-year institution prior to enrolling in the community college. However, it was evident that, through the learning community program, the learning community students gained more specific guidance, information, and skills to make their college aspirations more

concrete. Further, it was apparent from these individual interviews that learning community students increased their career aspirations. Students testified to being previously undecided about their careers, and most students had pinpointed a career at the time of interview. The majority of learning community students acknowledged how the program contributed to their success in college.

Danna: [The program] was really cool...it was like “gosh, they really care about me being successful.” And it also made me like “you know, I’m not the only one.” There wouldn’t be a whole program around it if I was the only one. Because I was a part of this group, I want to do well. I want this thing to keep going because there is a lot more people who need it and I don’t want it to fail.

All students said that they had changed while being in college. Most commonly, students described maturing during or due to college. Erin: “[I have changed] a lot...I basically come to school and I go home and I study. I want to learn every little bit that I can learn because I didn’t really get all that in high school. So being in college has helped me grow up.” Further, Amanda revealed, “I’ve grown more mature and just stopped doing childish habits. And started dressing more appropriately. And watching what I say and who I hang out with.” Interestingly, Amanda’s comment that she “started dressing more appropriately” may reveal that she was altering her self to fit the role/label to that of a college student. Courtney provided similar remarks about altering her self to be a college student: “I felt pressure to really act like a college student...like giving myself the mindset that I am in college and I need to start thinking like a college student.” Relatedly, the degree to which these students identified as college students was also interesting. Courtney said, “School definitely isn’t for everyone, but I’m kind of like making it for me. [Nervous laughter.] I’ve never really been good at school.” Further, Felicity commented “I’m an average student. I’m not an A. I try not to be a D or F...I wish I was

an outstanding student but I'm not." Both Courtney and Felicity did not seem deeply connected to their roles as college students. Such a disconnection could be explained by the notion of institutional habitus, which is defined as "the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation" (Reay, Cozier, and Clayton 2009a:3). Indeed, Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2009a:7) found that "The degree to which students' learner identities became their main and strongest source of identity was connected to a key aspect of institutional habitus, the extent to which students either lived at home, on campus or in university accommodation." In the present study, students did not live on campus. Further, Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2009a:5) discovered that "the type of higher education institution these working-class students attend exerts a powerful influence on how they see themselves and are seen by others in terms of both their learner and class identities." The present study argues that institutional programs, like learning communities, implemented by community colleges have the potential to affect such decisions for students as well.

Evaluation of Program

A major benefit of the program cited by students was that the program showed them what to expect in college and prepared them for future courses at the college. Developmental reading students' feelings were mixed on the two-class restriction. In the end, however, most students accepted and understood the reason for the restriction. The majority of students testified to a couple of major dislikes: 1) they did not feel that they needed developmental reading (even though they seemed to benefit from it) and 2) they experienced isolation and a lack of support from the college as a whole during their first semester.

The core components of learning communities, and how these components were implemented at the college, was investigated. Four primary components are addressed: 1) active learning, 2) interdisciplinary methods 3) overarching “themes” (referred to here as *motifs*) between the two courses (which relates to interdisciplinary practices), and 4) team teaching. Overall, there was significant evidence among students for active learning, interdisciplinary methods, and motifs. However, team teaching was not fully implemented into the learning community program.

Likes and dislikes of program.

During in-depth interviews, these developmental students were upset about being restricted to two classes (RDG and FYE) when they started college.

Courtney: I was not very open to the idea of it [the restriction] starting out...I was very mad that I couldn't take more classes... I feel like as a student, if you feel like you can take more classes on, then the program should let you...the classes themselves were fun, but in the end...I feel like it held me back from like getting all my courses I could do. I definitely feel like I could have taken more classes had I been given the opportunity.

Although Courtney was still upset about the two-class restriction, almost all of the eight students acknowledged that they probably needed the restriction in the end ($n = 6$).

Gina: I thought that they [the classes] wouldn't pertain to anything that I would need for my general education. But the surprising thing was that everything about the class pertained to my general education....I really thought that this was just something they stuck us in to see if we was gonna take the money and run or actually stick it out and learn...come to find out, it's actually educational. They teach you how to socialize, they teach you how to be prepared, how to...work from books, how to work from the computer, they teach you how to prepare projects...there was more to it than what I actually seen going to it at first.

A few students (Amanda, Danna, and Heather) understood and accepted the restriction from the beginning. During fall 2014 and spring 2015 the majority of students in focus groups, including learning community students and non-learning community students,

expressed that they would recommend the classes to their friends. Surprisingly, a majority of students in fall 2016 expressed that RDG was easy and should have been more challenging.

Erin: A lot more reading [should be in RDG]. And the vocabulary...should be a little bit more college level... “cannibalism”, like those were in there. Like most people already know what that stuff is...they should teach you words that you don’t hear every day just so you know what the meanings are.

Although Erin discussed how it should be a college-level class, it was not intended to be such a course. Students did not receive any college credit for it. Following the same idea, a few students complained that their first semester felt like high school. “It was just like my reading classes in high school...I don’t think I needed it,” declared Bethany. In total, five students did not think that they needed developmental reading. Seven students, however, in other parts of the interview testified to their reading habits improving as a direct result of developmental reading.

A few students explained why they were placed in developmental reading, considering they viewed themselves as strong readers. A couple of students testified that they were bad test takers, while Heather confessed that she did not try on the placement exam. “I guess it [RDG] did help me just a little bit. I’m just a really bad test taker. I think that’s why I scored so low,” said Bethany. These reasons provided by students could potentially be defense mechanisms as well. It might be difficult for students to accept that they needed developmental reading, especially considering the stigma that is associated with such a course.

In part due to the stigma, and that developmental courses are not college-level courses, students may feel disconnected and unsupported by the college. Ostrove and Long (2007:381) found that “a sense of belonging at college...predicted social and

academic adjustment to college, quality of experience at college, and academic performance”. Students from the in-depth interviews had mixed views when it came to feeling supported by the college. Five students stated that they did not feel supported by the college as a whole during their first semester, whereas three students did feel supported. Further, Lehmann (2007) found that first-generation students were more likely to dropout of college due to feelings of disconnection than due to academic performance or financial need. A few students cited that they felt isolated during their first semester due to being in one building and classroom. Students expressed that this isolation created a lack of social integration with the college as a whole.

Courtney: The classes were both in the same building and then both in the same classroom. So I didn’t really explore the campus as a whole or any of the other professors...that was the only negative...my instructors did encourage me. They were like “go explore a little bit”...it was outside of my comfort zone.

As apparent in Courtney’s comment, students’ insecurities and feelings of disconnection were widespread throughout the interviews. A few students added that, even though they did not feel supported by the college in their first semester, they did in subsequent semesters. Danna, after participation in the learning community program, commented, “Not now [if she felt uncomfortable around campus]...I do feel at home and I feel like I could go to anybody on the campus and...ask whatever I need.” Social interaction on campus, such as that prevalent in the learning communities, may help to alleviate feelings of disconnection. It is important to note that the majority of students did utilize and benefit from campus resources that were emphasized in the learning community program during their first semester; in this way, students expressed receiving support from the college.

Although students had dislikes of the program, overall, they cited more benefits of the program. For instance, students in both focus groups and in-depth interviews liked that the classes were small. Another key advantage of the program was that the majority of the students ($n = 7$) highlighted how the program prepared them for college and that they knew what to expect in subsequent semesters because of the program. “I kind of liked the fact that they put us in the FYE and RDG classes to show us what college could be about,” Gina stated. This finding was also evident in focus groups during spring 2015.

Program performance.

It was previously detailed how students engaged in many cooperative activities, so active, independent learning is explored here. In total, seven of the eight students gave examples of engaging in active, independent learning. For example, students described a change in their reading and studying habits from passive to active. Danna explained how becoming an active reader helped her with studying.

Danna: I write all over my books and it helps me...if you have to put a bookmark in and go, if you write down your last thought...you'll know where you left off and you can just keep going. So, it helps study too. Go through and scan what you wrote...what popped up in your mind at that point or an example to help you understand...I feel like I have to study less because I was so into my reading.

The most common forms of active, independent learning by students were highlighting, note taking, and the use of flash cards.

Amanda: Learning how to if I read something I don't...understand it, I highlight it or underline it. And I actually look it up because that is what the [RDG] teacher taught us to do. [S/he is] like if you just don't understand it...come back to it or actually learn what it means and then read that whole paragraph again and try to comprehend what it means.

Active pedagogies are known to be effective for student learning (Chickering and Gamson 1987; Engstrom 2008; Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano 2011; Kuh et al. 2010;

Pascarella and Terenzini 2005) and, in sum, there was a lot of evidence for cooperative and active learning. There was less evidence of collaborative learning. Students and instructors did not seem to be on “equal footing” in these learning communities; instructors seemed to create the assignments, choose the textbook, and primarily present the class content. However, students revealed some agency in choosing assignments and reading materials.

Learning communities advocate for interdisciplinary methods, and linking/integrating two or more courses, like RDG and FYE, is an interdisciplinary practice. Students also liked that the two courses were linked together. Bethany: “It was just kind of cool how they brought everything together and...made it one whole class of two subjects.” Students in this study were able to identify several other content areas that were covered in their courses. Erin recalled learning about music during RDG: “[RDG instructor would]...get on YouTube and we’d listen to music because we were in a music-- the chapter in our book-- for like 3 weeks of music. Jazz and hip hop, how hip hop got here.” One of the biggest topics, mentioned previously, was finance. Students benefited a great deal from learning about finances. Students also named other areas/subjects involved in their classes such as community service, diversity, culture, politics, history, math, English, and health. “We did everything...in [FYE]. There was one girl that always had trouble with her history and she would ask [FYE instructor]. So we would have like a 30 minute history lesson. [S/he would] teach us all...[S/he] taught us a lot,” stated Erin. From focus groups in spring 2015, a majority of students reported that their writing had improved. Further, non-learning community students mentioned learning about the importance of community service and they cited an improvement in

their technological skills, such as learning how to create presentations via PowerPoint, in spring 2015.

Motifs also relate to interdisciplinary methods. Students were asked about any motifs that may have been present in their classes. The most common motif mentioned by students involved a book. In particular, four students explained that a chosen book served as a motif between the two classes, and it was studied/integrated in the two courses throughout the semester. Gina explained, “We had to read the book...Then we had to do a project on a board and show...what we learned...We also did the health and wellness fair...I actually enjoyed it...themes like the health and wellness fair kind of stuck out to me.” Like Gina, Heather also mentioned health as being a major motif when she was enrolled in the learning community program. The book was relevant to the health motif as it was an autobiography of a medical doctor.

Gina mentioned career-themed papers as a motif. Students’ goals and their careers were a major focus of the learning communities.

Gina: We had to do career-themed papers, which helped me a whole lot discover if I was truly interested in the career I was going for. Which I’m still kind of iffy on it but...I like being able to write the paper about it that helped me get in touch more with the career I was wanting to do.

Relatedly, Danna talked of how success (or career goals) may have been a motif in her classes: “The teachers that we had...they just were all about being successful... So maybe success was it [a motif].” Felicity seemed to share a similar perspective about success: “A theme...study. Do your work on time. Be punctual. It’s just like having a job.” Although only a couple of students mentioned “success” when asked about a motif in their courses, elsewhere in the interviews students often mentioned their instructors being “all about success”. In addition, the chosen book every semester seemed to center

around an inspiring story of a person successfully overcoming difficulties. In addition, the learning community program was designed around the notion of helping at-risk students to persist. It seemed that the students sensed this purpose.

Learning communities also advocate team teaching. Students seemed to benefit, and enjoyed it, when their learning community instructors worked together and team taught. Heather stated, “They [instructors] worked together so...we were working on kind of the same thing at like the same time...it made it easier.” However, team teaching was not entirely integrated and implemented into the learning communities at the college. Team teaching, where both instructors were present in both classes, only occurred a few times in a semester. “Every so often we would have a day where both teachers were in there at the same time, and we would like bring in together what we were learning in both classes... Those days were actually my favorite days,” stated Bethany. Instructors referred to these days as “workshops”. Although team teaching were isolated occurrences, the instructors communicated with one another and worked together outside of the class on curriculum, etc. throughout the semester. It was likely that instructors lacked the resources to fully implement team teaching in its fullest form. For example, a learning community instructor only received credit for teaching one of the classes, not for both.

PRE-POST READING TESTS

In addition to student interviews, three sources of quantitative data were analyzed to understand the effectiveness of the learning community program and student performance: a pre-post reading test, a survey, and secondary data from the college (which primarily consisted of grades). Developmental reading students took the pre-post

reading test in fall 2014, spring 2015, and fall 2015. Demographic data were unavailable, so it was unclear whether there were demographic differences between the intervention and comparison groups on the pre-post test. Missing data were addressed by using listwise deletion. Findings on the reading test are presented in this section by semester.

Fall 2014

The total number of participants for the pre- and post-reading test in fall 2014 was $n = 85$ ($n = 35$ for learning community students and $n = 50$ for non-learning community students). Findings indicate that there was not a significant difference between these groups on the pre-test $t(80) = .77, p = .22$. Further, there was not a significant difference on the post reading test between students in learning communities and students not enrolled in a learning community $t(64) = -1.39, p = .09$. (Please reference Table 2 on page 145 for a summary of the results from the pre-post reading tests.) For all participants taking the TABE diagnostic, a correlation $r = .7, p < .05$ existed between the pre-test and post-test. Thus, this relationship is a strong correlation (Dancey and Reidy 2004). Further, the two learning cohorts were compared and there was not a significant difference between these groups on the pre-test $t(24) = -1.61, p = .06$ or post-test $t(24) = -1.21, p = .12$.

An additional analysis was performed to examine whether dropout rates from RDG were different between learning community students and non-learning community students. If a grade was absent for the post-test, the student was classified as dropping from the course. Findings suggest that there was not a significant difference in dropout rates between learning and non-learning community students, $\chi^2(1, N = 85) = .93, p = .35$.

A final analysis was conducted to determine if students in learning communities made larger gains on the TABE from their pre-test to post-test than non-learning community students. For fall 2014, results show that there was a significant difference on gain scores between learning and non-learning community students $t(83) = -2.57, p < .05$. On average, students not enrolled in the learning community program had larger gains ($M = .83, SD = 10.60, SE = 1.50$) than students who were enrolled in a learning community ($M = -5.51, SD = 12.02, SE = 2.03$), where M represents mean, SD represents standard deviation, and SE represents standard error.

Spring 2015 and Fall 2015

In spring 2015, the total number of students who completed the pre-post reading test was $n = 69$. This total consisted of 25 learning community students and 44 non-learning community students. Like fall 2014, there was not a significant difference between learning community students and non-learning community students on the pre-test $t(67) = .77, p = .44$ or post-test $t(22) = -.23, p = .41$. Further, there was not a difference in gains on the TABE between learning community students and non-learning community students $t(67) = -1.04, p = .15$. A final analysis was conducted to examine dropout rates between learning community students and non-learning community students, and there was not a significant difference in dropout rates between these groups, $\chi^2(1, N = 69) = .40, p = .53$.

Additionally, the two learning community cohorts were compared and there was not a significant difference between these groups on the pre-test $t(15) = .22, p = .83$ or post-test $t(15) = -.37, p = .36$. A correlation $r = .6, p < .001$ existed between the pre-test

and post-test for all developmental reading students. This relationship is strong (Evans 1996).

In fall 2015, 84 students took the pre- and post-reading test comprising 34 learning community students and 50 non-learning community students. Findings indicate that there was not a significant difference between learning community students and non-learning community students on the pre-test $t(75) = .42, p = .67$ or post-test $t(67) = -.89, p = .19$, and there was not a difference in gains on the TABE between learning community students and non-learning community students $t(82) = -1.20, p = .12$. Last, there was not a significant difference in dropout rates between these groups, $\chi^2(1, N = 84) = 2.89, p = .08$. Additional analyses revealed that there was not significant difference between the learning communities on the pre-test $t(23) = .12, p = .90$ or post-test $t(23) = -.68, p = .25$. A correlation $r = .4, p < .001$ existed between the pre-test and post-test for developmental reading students, which is a moderate relationship (Dancey and Reidy 2004).

Table 2, below, shows a summary of the results from the pre-post reading tests. Independent samples t -tests of mean difference were conducted between the two groups. Across all three semesters, there was not a significant difference between learning community students and non-learning community students on the pre-test. This result should lessen some of the concern about self-selection into the learning community program. Consistent with this study, Weiss et al. (2010) found no improvement on reading performances for learning community students. In fact, in this study, learning community students scored lower on the post-test than on the pre-test during some terms.

TABLE 2. MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND SIGNIFICANCE FOR PRE-POST READING TESTS (FALL 2014-FALL 2015)

Reading Test	Learning Community Students	Non-learning Community Students	
	<i>n</i>, Mean (Standard Deviation)	<i>n</i>, Mean (Standard Deviation)	<i>t</i>
Fall 2014 I Pre-Test	<i>n</i> = 32, 72.50 (12.40)	<i>n</i> = 50, 70.40 (11.91)	.77
Fall 2014 I Post-Test	<i>n</i> = 29, 66.34 (17.63)	<i>n</i> = 37, 71.86 (14.70)	-1.39
Spring 2015 Pre-Test	<i>n</i> = 25, 70.80 (14.02)	<i>n</i> = 44, 68.32 (12.17)	.77
Spring 2015 Post-Test	<i>n</i> = 17, 70.82 (17.47)	<i>n</i> = 33, 71.88 (10.20)	-.23
Fall 2015 Pre-Test	<i>n</i> = 34, 70.88 (11.11)	<i>n</i> = 43, 69.72 (12.64)	.42
Fall 2015 Post-Test	<i>n</i> = 25, 67.68 (14.38)	<i>n</i> = 44, 71.18 (16.38)	-.89

p* < .05, *p* < .01, ****p* < .001

Stakeholders reported that negative gains have occurred in the past from RDG students. They suspected that because the post-test has little bearing on students' grades, it was not taken seriously by some students. Further, in fall 2014 the non-learning community students showed gains while learning community students exhibited negative gains. However, in subsequent semesters there was not a significant difference between groups on gain scores.

Results regarding students' performances on the TABE may be due to the short duration of the program. Cognitive gains may take longer to detect than social gains. These findings are largely consistent with prior studies on learning communities, where academic gains are less common than changes in classroom climates and social support networks (Cerna et al. 2008; Wathington, Pretlow III, and Mitchell 2010). However, there is evidence that learning communities enhance cognitive learning strategies, such as critical thinking and problem solving, for learning community students (Stefeanou and Galisbury-Glennon 2002).

Although the pre-post reading test indicated that there was no evidence that students' reading skills improved, findings from the in-depth interviews and focus groups detailed cognitive gains in annotating, finding the main idea, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. One possible explanation for these inconsistencies is that the students interviewed were the higher-performing students. In-depth interviews were held two or three semesters after students completed RDG, so these students were persisting. It also important to consider the limitations of standardized tests in measuring students' cognitive skills.

SURVEYS

Because the learning community program was piloted in fall 2014 and evolved in subsequent semesters, survey findings are examined by semester. In fall 2014, developmental reading students took a single survey at the end of the semester. During spring 2015 and fall 2015, students took a pre- and post-survey.

Fall 2014

The Reading Student Survey was taken by 48 students in fall 2014. All students present in the four classes (two learning cohorts in total ($n = 27$), two non-learning community classes in total ($n = 21$)) opted to take the survey, so the cooperation rate was 100 percent. Cooperation rates are "the proportion of all cases interviewed of all eligible units ever contacted" (American Association for Public Opinion Research 2015:5).

Cronbach's alpha was used to assess internal consistency for three theoretical constructs on the survey: attitudes toward reading prior to RDG, attitudes toward reading following RDG, and interaction in the classroom. The survey questions are as follows (please see page 220 in the Appendices for the complete survey with response choices):

- 1) Rate your attitude towards reading before taking RDG.
- 2) Rate your attitude towards reading after taking RDG.
- 3) Rate your knowledge of reading techniques (word meaning, interpretation, recall, evaluation) before taking RDG.
- 4) Rate your knowledge of reading techniques (word meaning, interpretation, recall, evaluation) after taking RDG.
- 5) Rate your confidence level in completing college-level work before taking RDG.
- 6) Rate your confidence level in completing college-level work after taking RDG.
- 7) How many hours a week did you prepare for RDG outside of class?
- 8) How many times a week did you participate in classroom discussions?
- 9) What was your level of preparation (completed homework, reading assignments, etc.) at the beginning of class?
- 10) How often did you work in groups and collaborate with other students in RDG?
- 11) How often did you interact with your RDG instructor?
- 12) Rate your level of confidence in collaborating with other students in RDG.
- 13) Rate your level of participation in the Book Club.
- 14) How often did you participate in the Book Club discussions?
- 15) How welcomed did you feel at the Book Club?
- 16) Did you receive a free book from the Book Club?
- 17) Following your completion of RDG and your participation in the Book Club, do you feel more encouraged to read for your own enjoyment?

Four questions on the survey were used to measure prior attitudes (Questions 1, 3, 5, and 9), three questions to measure post attitudes (Questions 2, 4, and 6), and four questions were used to measure interaction in the classroom (Questions 8, 10, 11, and 12). $\alpha = .72$ on prior attitudes, $\alpha = .76$ on post attitudes, and $\alpha = .72$ on interaction. According to Kline (2000), these alphas denote satisfactory reliability.

All nine background variables on the survey (gender, age, mother's education level, father's education level, being a caretaker, number of hours worked per week, race/ethnicity, received a Pell grant, and attended another college) were not statistically significant between the intervention and comparison groups (χ^2 test, $p > .05$).

A correlation matrix of survey items is presented in Table 3. The numbers on the axes of Table 3 refer to the survey questions. Seven correlations had a moderate or strong effect, $r > .5$, $p < .001$ (Dancey and Reidy 2004); these positive and significant

relationships included 1) students' attitudes toward reading before taking RDG and students' knowledge of reading techniques before taking RDG, 2) students' attitudes toward reading after taking RDG and students' confidence in collaborating with other students, 3) students' confidence in completing college-level work after taking RDG and students' knowledge of reading techniques after RDG, 4) students' confidence in completing college-level work after taking RDG and students' confidence in collaborating with other students, 5) students' participation in class discussions and students' interactions with their instructors, 6) participation in the book club and participation in discussions at the book club, and 7) participation in the discussions at the book club and how welcomed students felt at the book club.

Most notable in these relations is the connection between confidence, collaboration and interaction, and belief in skillset. Moreover, college instructors have control over the amount of collaboration and interaction in their classrooms.

TABLE 3. CORRELATION MATRIX FOR SURVEY ITEMS (FALL 2014)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	—																
2	.38**	—															
3	.61***	.31*	—														
4	.05	.48**	.30*	—													
5	.40**	.13	.43**	.1	—												
6	.28	.48**	.16	.57***	.22	—											
7	.08	.24	-.05	-.02	-.08	.15	—										
8	.23	.15	.21	.21	.07	.20	.28	—									
9	.27	.24	.40**	.35*	.26	.25	-.06	.35**	—								
10	.33*	.05	.39**	.01	.18	.03	.07	.45**	.30*	—							
11	.30*	.24	.32*	.30*	.15	.14	.09	.53***	.42**	.47**	—						
12	.16	.53***	.13	.44**	.09	.58***	.26	.41**	.25	.12	.34*	—					
13	.20	.11	.30*	-.07	.09	.13	.33*	.39**	.20	.35*	.36*	.15	—				
14	.20	.21	.25	-.04	.23	.07	.30*	.35*	.28	.39**	.26	.12	.63***	—			
15	.20	.28	.16	-.06	.15	.19	.40**	.48**	.26	.27	.34*	.21	.36*	.54***	—		
16	.14	.18	.15	.12	-.01	.08	.09	.16	.33*	.15	.20	.20	.40**	.36*	.26	—	
17	-.02	-.07	.05	-.05	-.11	-.22	-.08	.08	.13	.29	.16	-.05	.06	-.08	-.08	-.02	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4 illustrates independent samples t tests of mean difference. Means, standard deviations, significance, and effect size on survey items and the three theoretical

constructs are reported. Ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high), students responded to a 5-point scale on Questions 1-6 and 12, a 4-point scale on Questions 7-8, 10, and 11, and a 3-point scale on Questions 9, 15, and 17.

Questions 1-3, 5-8, 10-13, 15, and 17 were non-significant between learning community students and students who did not participate in the program.

TABLE 4. MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, SIGNIFICANCE, AND EFFECT SIZE FOR SURVEY ITEMS BETWEEN LEARNING COMMUNITY STUDENTS (LC) AND NON-LEARNING COMMUNITY STUDENTS (NON-LC), FALL 2014

Question	LC, <i>n</i> = 27 Mean (Standard Deviation)	Non-LC, <i>n</i> = 21 Mean (Standard Deviation)	<i>t</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
1	3.52 (1.08)	3.41 (1.00)	.33	.1
2	4.39 (.66)	4.06 (.90)	1.35	.4
3	3.65 (.78)	3.35 (1.00)	1.07	.3
4	4.39 (.78)	3.88 (.78)	2.04*	.7
5	3.39 (1.16)	3.29 (.92)	.29	.1
6	4.48 (.73)	4.18 (.88)	1.18	.4
7	2.35 (.78)	2.53 (.80)	-.72	-.1
8	2.74 (.92)	2.47 (.87)	.94	.3
9	2.87 (.34)	2.47 (.51)	2.94*	.8
10	2.97 (.64)	2.82 (.81)	.58	.2
11	3.35 (.71)	3.00 (1.00)	1.29	.4
12	4.35 (.71)	4.06 (.83)	1.18	.4
13	2.22 (1.17)	1.65 (.93)	1.66	.5
14	2.00 (.95)	1.41 (.87)	2.00*	.6
15	2.22 (.74)	1.88 (.93)	1.27	.4
(Question 16 was separately analyzed.)				
17	2.17 (.65)	2.12 (.49)	.30	.1
Composite Variables				
Prior Attitudes	13.38 (2.21)	12.48 (2.77)	1.25	.4
Post Attitudes	13.19 (1.65)	12.19 (2.06)	1.85*	.5
Interaction in the Classroom	13.23 (1.99)	12.52 (2.77)	1.02	.3

p* < .05, *p* < .01, ****p* < .001

As depicted in the above table, learning community students rated their knowledge of reading techniques (Question 4) higher after RDG than non-learning community students. Further, learning community students reported preparing more for their RDG course at the start of the semester (Question 9) than non-learning community students. Last, it appears that learning community students participated more in the book club discussions (Question 14) than non-learning community students.

The effect sizes for two of the significant variables, knowledge following RDG and the amount of discussion in the book club, were medium-sized (Cohen 1977). The other significant item, preparation for class at the start of RDG, had what is considered a large effect size (Cohen 1977).

Also, from the above Table 4, learning community and non-learning community students were very similar regarding their attitudes toward reading, knowledge of reading techniques, and confidence in completing college-level work prior to taking RDG. Interestingly, however, students in the learning communities did not self-report more interactions with their peers or instructors than non-learning community students.

In the final three rows of Table 4, the theoretical constructs were analyzed to determine if differences existed between groups on students' prior attitudes (by summing Questions 1, 3, 5, and 9), post attitudes (by summing Questions 2, 4, and 6), and interactions in the classroom (by summing Questions 8, 10, 11, and 12). Students' attitudes at the start of developmental reading were similar for learning community students and non-learning community students. However, at the end of the course, learning community students rated their attitudes higher than non-learning community

students. This construct had a medium effect size (Cohen 1977). Last, there was not a significant difference between groups regarding their classroom interactions.

For Question 16, students had the choice of responding with a “yes” (=1) or “no” (=2). As such, a chi-square test was performed on this survey item. Learning community students were more likely to receive a free book than non-learning community students ($p < .01$). The phi coefficient, $\phi = -.5$, concludes a large and negative correlation (Cohen 1988).

Spring 2015 and Fall 2015

The surveys administered during spring 2015 and fall 2015 varied from the survey given in fall 2014. In spring 2015 and fall 2015, students took a pre- and post-survey (see page 224 and page 225). The post-survey was the same as the pre-survey, but the post-survey contained additional questions (Questions 8-14).

In spring 2015, there was a lack of participation on the surveys among non-learning community students on the pre-survey ($n = 9$) and post-survey ($n = 3$). (There was indication, however, that some non-learning community students incorrectly identified themselves as learning community students during this term.) As such, group comparisons could not be made between learning community students and non-learning community on the pre- and post-survey in spring 2015. Due to a larger number of non-learning community students participating in the pre-post survey in fall 2015, comparisons could be made between learning community students and non-learning community students on the pre-post survey in fall 2015. There was not a significant difference on survey items between learning community and non-learning community students on the pre-survey. Table 5 shows independent samples t tests of mean

difference. This table also includes means, standard deviations, significance, and effect size for post-survey items in fall 2015. The numbers on the axes in Table 5 refer to survey item numbers (see page 225 for the complete survey with response choices):

- 1) Are you currently taking a paired Learning Community for RDG with FYE?
(Ask your instructor if you are unsure.)
- 2) Rate your attitude towards reading.
- 3) Rate your knowledge of reading techniques.
- 4) Rate your confidence level in completing college level work.
- 5) How many hours a week did you prepare for RDG outside of class?
- 6) How many times a week did you participate in RDG classroom discussions?
- 7) Rate your level of confidence in collaborating with other students in RDG.
- 8) What was your most common level of preparation at the beginning of each RDG class? (Completed homework and reading assignments.)
- 9) How often did you work in groups and collaborate with other students in RDG?
- 10) Do you feel more encouraged to read for your own enjoyment after taking RDG?
- 11) How often did you participate in the Book Club Discussions (in class or online discussions) for [*book title*]?
- 12) How welcomed or included did you feel in the Book Club?
- 13) Rate your level of participation in the Book Club.
- 14) Has your experience in the Book Club encouraged you to read for your own enjoyment?

The final row in Table 5 is a composite variable, Composite of Attitudes, which sums four questions that are used to measure attitudes (Questions 2, 4, 7, and 10) on the fall 2015 survey. Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$ for this construct, which is satisfactory (Kline 2000).

Two survey items were significant between groups. (A larger sample size, with increased power, might have detected more significance between groups on these items.) As depicted in Table 5, learning community students reported a higher level of preparation for class than non-learning community students. Students had three options on this survey question: A) Complete, B) Partially Complete, or C) Incomplete (coded as "Complete" = 3, "Partially Complete" = 2, or "Incomplete" = 1).

TABLE 5. MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, SIGNIFICANCE, AND EFFECT SIZE FOR SURVEY ITEMS BETWEEN LEARNING COMMUNITY STUDENTS (LC) AND NON-LEARNING COMMUNITY STUDENTS (NON-LC), FALL 2015

Question	LC, <i>n</i> = 38 Mean (Standard Deviation)	Non-LC, <i>n</i> = 35 Mean (Standard Deviation)	<i>t</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
2	3.08 (.78)	2.77 (.97)	1.49	.4
3	2.89 (.61)	2.86 (.73)	.24	.0
4	3.05 (.73)	2.89 (.80)	.93	.2
5	2.74 (.72)	2.69 (.83)	.28	.1
6	2.92 (1.08)	3.00 (.77)	-.36	.1
7	3.63 (.54)	3.49 (.66)	1.03	.2
8	2.92 (.27)	2.60 (.50)	3.46*	.8
9	3.26 (.89)	3.17 (.99)	.42	.1
10	2.34 (.63)	2.29 (.62)	.39	.1
11	2.89 (.61)	2.66 (1.16)	1.11	.3
12	2.37 (.66)	2.63 (.55)	-1.82	.4
13	2.87 (.70)	2.20 (1.23)	2.88*	.7
14	2.11 (.73)	2.23 (.65)	-.77	.2
Attitudes toward RDG				
Composite of Attitudes	12.12 (1.76)	11.43 (2.41)	1.45	.3

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

In addition, learning community students reported a higher level of participation in the book club than non-learning community students. The effect size (.80) regarding the level of preparation was large, while the effect size (.67) for the level of participation in the book club was medium-sized (Cohen 1977).

Results from the survey were similar in fall 2014 and fall 2015. For instance, in both semesters, there was a significant difference between learning community and non-learning community students on their level of preparation for class and participation in the book club. Learning community students reported more preparedness for class and higher participation in the book club than non-learning community students. The fact that

learning community students participated in the book club at a higher rate than non-learning community students is consistent with other studies that have found a link between learning communities and student engagement (Zhao and Kuh 2004).

There was a contrast on the survey between fall 2014 and fall 2015. In fall 2014, learning community students rated their knowledge of reading techniques higher than non-learning community students. However, in fall 2015, there was not a significant difference between learning community students and non-learning community students on this survey item.

SECONDARY DATA

Findings are presented on grades that were received from the college. Grades in RDG were provided by the college for fall 2015. Demographic data (gender, age, and county of origin) were also included. Grades in English 101 (ENG) were provided by the college for spring 2015 and fall 2015. Due to a low number of learning community students enrolled in ENG in spring 2015 and fall 2015, grades were compiled across these two semesters. Demographic data for ENG grades included age, gender, and academic load (full-time, half-time, or less than half-time).

Grades for Developmental Reading

For RDG grades during fall 2015, the total number of students was $n = 87$. Of those students, 69 percent and 31 percent of the sample were female and male, respectively. As such, students in developmental reading were predominantly women. These percentages differ from the college as a whole where about 56 percent of the student population are women. Approximately 72 percent of the sample were 24 years of age or younger. In addition, approximately 60 percent of the students attended college in

their county of origin. This sample included 37 program participants and 50 non-learning community students. Chi-square tests revealed that the demographic variables gender, age, and county were non-significant between intervention and comparison groups ($p > .05$). Hence, learning community students and non-learning community students were demographically similar.

Grades were coded as “F” = 1, “D” = 2, “C” = 3, “B” = 4, or “A” = 5. There was not a significant difference in grades between learning and non-learning community students $t(79) = -.66, p = .26$. Analyses were also performed for all developmental reading students during fall 2015. There was a substantial increase in the number of students who passed developmental reading in fall 2015. The passing rate was approximately seven percent higher in fall 2015 than spring 2014 (Internal College Reports 2015). This finding may suggest that the six-hour restriction for developmental reading students may positively impact students’ ability to successfully complete RDG.

For all reading students, correlations were investigated on four variables: RDG grade, age, gender, and county. There was a significant relationship between students’ RDG grade and gender, $r = .40, p < .001$. Further, there was a significant difference in RDG grades between men and women $t(85) = -3.96, p < .001$. On average, women earned higher grades ($M = 4.22, SD = 1.21$) than men in RDG ($M = 2.93, SD = 1.77$).

Enrollment and Grades for English

The college concluded that approximately 95 percent of students in learning communities enrolled in a college-level course (spring 2015) at the institution compared to approximately 75 percent of non-learning community students (Internal College Reports 2015). Further, the percentage of learning community students who enrolled in

ENG at the institution was about 30 percentage points higher than non-paired RDG students (Internal College Reports 2015). Data were unavailable to determine if these differences were statistically significant. These percentages exclude students who persisted into the subsequent semester but chose not to take ENG. Further, it is important to recognize that these percentages include students who *enrolled* in a college-level course, not *completed* a college-level course.

ENG grades were received by the college for spring 2015 and fall 2015. These semesters were combined due to the small number of learning community students in each semester. Demographic data for these grades included gender, age, and academic load (whether students were full-time, half-time, or below half-time). The total number of students was $n = 64$ with 32 students in each semester.

This sample included 17 program participants and 47 non-learning community students. The background variables gender, age, and academic load were not significant between learning community and non-learning community students (using chi-square tests, $p > .05$). As such, these groups were demographically comparable.

There was not a significant difference in ENG grades between learning and non-learning community students $t(33) = .44, p = .33$. Additionally, correlations were investigated for all ENG students on five variables: ENG grade, age, gender, academic load, and the ENG class in which the students were enrolled. There was a significant relationship between students' ENG grades and academic load, $r = .46, p < .001$. Therefore, full-time students' ENG grades tended to be higher than for those students enrolled half-time, and half-time students' ENG grades tended to be higher than students enrolled less than half-time.

In sum, there was not a significant difference of RDG or ENG grades between learning community students and non-learning community students. These findings are largely consistent with prior studies of learning communities at two-year institutions, particularly involving developmental education. ED, IES, and WWC (2014a) concluded, based on a meta-analysis from six studies, that linked learning communities have no effect on academic achievement, postsecondary enrollment, credit accumulation, and progress in developmental education at two-year institutions. However, in the present study, internal research revealed that learning community students enrolling in the subsequent semester at a higher rate than non-learning community students (Internal College Reports 2015). In addition, Weiss, Mayer, Cullinan, Ratledge, Sommo, and Diamond (2015) found a higher credit accumulation among learning community students in their study. This study was unable to assess credit accumulation due to the duration of the study. Regarding grades and persistence, these outcomes for learning communities seem more promising at four-year institutions. For instance, Purdie and Rosser (2011) found higher persistence and GPAs among learning community students. As such, two factors seem to impact the effectiveness of learning communities: 1) lack of resources at two-year colleges and 2) developmental education. Further investigation is warranted into which learning community model(s) might work best at two-year colleges, under which conditions, and for which group of students. In addition, exploring various learning community models for developmental education is merited. Weiss et al. (2010) attributed their finding (a lack of improved reading performance among learning community participants) to using basic models of learning communities. It may be that learning communities involved with developmental

education need to be more intensive, consisting of fully integrated curriculum and assignments, tutoring, counseling, and frequent meetings with advisers and instructors. The learning community program in this study, likely due to a shortage of resources, was using a basic model of a learning community. For instance, the curriculum and assignments were not fully integrated between courses, team teaching only occurred a few times throughout the semester, and the program did not require students to receive tutoring or meet with their instructors and advisers on a regular basis. Qualitative data in this study revealed that students who persisted frequently used student services, like tutoring, provided by the college. In addition, learning community instructors argued that expanding and requiring student services would positively impact the effectiveness of the learning community program.

Per Astin's (1999) involvement theory, student involvement is linked to student success. Astin (1993) identified three primary factors of involvement: academic involvement, peer involvement, and student-faculty involvement. Students in this program may be lacking academic involvement. Participation in student services may also help with students' social integration on campus, which is also thought to enhance student persistence (i.e. Tinto's (1993) student departure theory). In fact, there is evidence that Astin's (1999) and Tinto's (1993) theories are related. Student involvement influences social and academic integration, which consequently impacts students' commitment to college (Milem and Berger 1997). The quantitative results from this study demonstrated higher involvement with the book club and higher persistence among learning community students than among non-learning community students. These findings are consistent with Astin's (1999) student involvement theory that student

involvement increases student persistence. Furthermore, learning community students and non-learning community students rated their knowledge of reading techniques at the beginning and end of RDG on the survey during fall 2014. From Table 4, Question 3 of the survey shows that at the start of RDG there was not a significant difference between learning community students and non-learning community students on how they rated their knowledge of reading techniques $t(38) = 1.07, p = .29$. As such, both groups held similar perceptions about their reading techniques at the start of RDG. However, from Question 4 on Table 4, near the end of RDG, learning community students rated their knowledge of reading techniques significantly higher than non-learning community students $t(38) = 2.04, p < .05$. Also, the composite variable Prior Attitudes from Table 4 shows that at the beginning of RDG, both non-learning community students and learning community students held similar attitudes toward reading $t(45) = 1.25, p = .22$. The Post Attitudes composite variable from the same table shows that near the end of the program, learning community students had a significantly higher attitude toward reading than non-learning community students $t(45) = 1.85, p < .05$. In the short time that learning community students were involved in the program, the quantitative data revealed that their views about their knowledge of reading techniques and attitudes toward reading became more positive than those views of non-learning community students. The qualitative data revealed similar findings that students' perceptions and attitudes toward their college experiences became more positive during the program. Students' attitudes and perceptions play a large role in Tinto's (1993) student departure theory. These findings shed greater insight on the relationship between Astin's (1999) and Tinto's (1993) theories. Student involvement seemed to increase along with students' positive

perceptions (as evident from the in-depth interviews with learning community students), which supports Tinto's (1993) model.

Hypothesis Tests

After analysis of the three sources of quantitative data, the seven hypotheses in this study can be addressed. H₁ predicted that post-test scores would be higher for learning community students than for the comparison group. Across the three semesters (fall 2014 through fall 2015), there was not a significant difference between learning community students and non-learning community students on post-test scores. In addition, in fall 2014 the non-learning community students showed gains while learning community students demonstrated negative gains; in subsequent semesters there was not a significant difference between these groups on gain scores. During in-depth interviews, instructors and administrators revealed concerns over the accuracy of the post assessment. They felt that students did not put forth much effort on it. The post-test occurred later in the semester and students were aware that it did not impact their grades in the course. H₂ asserted that learning community students would earn higher grades in RDG than students in the comparison group. RDG grades were obtained by the college for fall 2015. During this semester, there was not a significant difference in RDG grades between learning community students and students who did not participate in the program. Grades, and especially standardized tests, are limited in measuring cognitive skills. There is a lack of studies that examine whether learning communities impact reading performance. However, Weiss et al. (2010) found, like this study, that learning communities did not enhance students' reading skills.

H₃ stated that learning community students would persist at a higher rate than students in the comparison group. Although data were unavailable to study persistence rates in this study, the college reported that more than 95 percent of learning community students who participated in the learning community program during fall 2014 enrolled in a college-level course for spring 2015. In contrast, approximately 75 percent of non-learning community students during fall 2014 enrolled in a college-level course for spring 2015. These reports suggest that learning community students may be persisting at a higher rate than non-learning community students. In the literature, student persistence is one of the most common outcomes associated with learning communities (Allen and Bir 2012; Barnes and Piland 2011; Johnson 2001). It is likely that persistence outcomes are of the most importance to stakeholders, as among the primary goals of the program are for students to persist and ultimately graduate. In addition, first-year retention, graduation rates, and job placement/satisfaction could arguably be three of the most important outcomes when evaluating educational programs in higher education. Evaluations including these three measures may be a more comprehensive way of evaluating learning communities and other educational programs. However, due to the time span of this evaluation and the lack of quantitative data, first-year retention, graduation rates, and job placement/satisfaction outcomes were not studied.

H₄ suggested that learning community students would hold better attitudes toward reading than students in the comparison group. An item on the survey inquired about students' attitudes toward reading after taking RDG. In the two semesters that data were available, fall 2014 and fall 2015, there was not a significant difference on this item between intervention and comparison groups. In addition, H₅ claimed that learning

community students would report higher academic self-confidence than students in the comparison group. There was not a significant difference between learning community students and non-learning community students on how they rated their confidence in completing college-level work after taking RDG. However, in fall 2014, learning community students rated their knowledge of reading techniques higher than non-learning community students on the survey. This result could suggest a higher level of confidence for learning community students. There is a shortage of studies that examine the potential impacts of learning communities on students' academic confidence and attitudes. Allen and Bir (2004) found that academic confidence directly impacted academic performance for the learning community students in their study (but not for the non-learning community participants). Further, there seems to be little consideration in the literature regarding whether learning communities can enhance students' attitudes toward reading.

H₆ proposed that learning community students would report higher levels of peer interaction than students in the comparison group. On the survey item in fall 2014 and fall 2015 students were asked how often they collaborated with peers. There was not a significant difference between groups. Last, H₇ indicated that learning community students would report higher confidence when working with peers than students in the comparison group. On this survey item across three semesters, there was not a significant difference between program participants and non-learning community students on how they rated their confidence in collaborating with their peers. Yet, across both of these semesters, there was a significant difference between learning community students and non-learning community students in their participation in book club discussions. These

discussions primarily consisted of interactions with peers. Students may have interrupted the question, “How often did you work in groups and collaborate with other students in RDG?”, as more about group work and class activities as opposed to overall collaboration and general interactions with their peers. Further, because learning community students reported more involvement in the book club, this finding may indicate that the learning community students were more socially integrated and involved in college. Social integration is linked to student persistence (Braxton 2008; Cerna et al. 2008; Engstrom 2008; Kuh et al. 2010; Pascarella and Ternzini 2005; Sax 2008). This study seems to support this link, as learning community students reported higher levels of involvement than non-learning community students and persisted at a higher rate than non-learning community students. These findings also lend support for Astin’s (1999) involvement theory that student involvement is associated with student success.

In sum, only H₃, regarding persistence, was clearly supported by the quantitative data. The duration of the learning community program may have been too short to allow for robust quantitative findings regarding outcomes like reading skills, grades, attitudes, and confidence. A single semester is not much time to create a significant difference between learning community students and non-learning community students. As such, a year-long learning community program may yield more robust quantitative results.

A contribution of this evaluation is that the qualitative data revealed key ways that learning communities may enhance student persistence for developmental reading students at two-year, public institutions. These components included enhancing students’ help-seeking strategies, developing students’ time management skills, and providing students with career guidance. In addition, from the qualitative data, there were

indications that the learning community program 1) increased student persistence (consistent with the quantitative findings), 2) prevented cooling out, 3) warmed up students' career aspirations, 4) provided new types of cultural and social capital for students that aided in their college success, and 5) enhanced students' academic and social confidence. Nevertheless, based on the quantitative data, the effectiveness of the learning community program could be improved and the qualitative data revealed implementation weaknesses.

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter begins by responding to the limitations of the study. In addition, this chapter summarizes and explains the primary results from the evaluation of the learning community program, including both quantitative and qualitative findings.

Recommendations will be made for the program under study; these recommendations could be helpful for learning community programs at other two-year institutions. Further, sociological and theoretical implications of the study will be addressed.

Recommendations for social policy will also be examined and how this study generates the need for further research.

LIMITATIONS

As with all evaluations, this study has limitations. This evaluation is not a randomized experimental design because students opted into the learning communities. Stakeholders wanted to ensure that the two learning communities reached maximum capacity, so during orientation advisors were encouraged to check for open spots in the learning communities before enrolling students. If a spot was open, advisors strongly encouraged students to participate in the learning communities. However, students were not required to follow their advisors' recommendations. To help address this limitation, during the focus group sessions students in the learning communities were asked why they chose to participate in the program. The majority of students claimed that they did not have a choice, suggesting that they were placed into the program. Another limitation

is that passive or more introverted learners may be less likely to opt into the program. On the other hand, learning community students were perhaps more inclined to follow recommendations from an authority figure or perhaps learning community students are more conformist. Thus, there are various interpretations of this behavior; unfortunately, this study is unable to test these alternate interpretations. Subsequently, additional research may be warranted. Because students opted into the program, this study lacks optimal rigor. However, the most rigorous design possible is being implemented considering the context of the evaluation. From instructor interviews, when students did not opt into the learning community program, it was usually because of conflicts with their work schedules. Work obligations were significant obstacles for students in this study, and the learning community program may have enrolled fewer students with such obligations. This limitation, as well as the other limitations previously discussed, could potentially bias the findings related to the learning community program.

There were in-depth interviews with seven learning community students out of dozens of learning community students. However, the social backgrounds and demographics of the students who participated in the in-depth interviews reflected the social backgrounds and demographics of much of the student body at the community college under study. Many of the obstacles that these students experienced were likely similar to those obstacles of other students at the college. As such, these findings are likely generalizable to much of the student body at the community college.

This learning community program took place at a two-year, public college. Findings in this case study may or may not be generalizable to other two-year institutions, even among public institutions or within its Carnegie Classification.

Administrators at other institutions could expect some generalizability at two-year colleges with a similar learning community program and student body. However, generalizability is more limited at other schools that may implement learning communities differently than the college in this study. Learning communities can take many forms—cluster learning communities, coordinated studies, residential learning communities, etc. Even within the linked variety, these learning communities can be implemented very differently. For instance, this program did not include any support services for students (tutoring, counseling, career advising, etc.) that are common in learning community programs. Programs can vary tremendously depending on the amount of support and academic services provided. It is also important to note that this evaluation only examined students over a two-year period at one school. Studying programs over a longer time frame and at multiple institutions would produce more generalizable results.

Further, the in-depth interviewees voluntarily agreed to be interviewed so there is likely some selection bias. In particular, the learning community students who were interviewed tended to be older than the typical learning community student. Non-traditional students have unique obstacles and unique experiences. The findings from the interviewed, non-traditional students would likely stress the impacts that the learning community program had on helping with these obstacles. Further, students who struggled and dropped out were not interviewed. It is possible that among the students who persisted in the program, those students who had favorable experiences with the learning community may have been the most willing to participate in the interviews. In addition,

only one non-learning community student participated in the in-depth interviews, which provides a very limited perspective.

Theoretical saturation likely did not occur in the in-depth interviews. Students who dropped out were not interviewed, so obstacles that were unique to these students were not examined. Therefore, it is not clear what impacts, if any, the learning community program had in helping these students manage these particular obstacles. In addition, those students who dropped out may have actually cooled out (even within the context of learning communities).

It is likely that a more representative and/or diverse sample would have produced additional conceptual insights. For example, a more diverse /or and representative sample could have provided a better understanding of the obstacles and experiences of younger, male, and/or racial/ethnic students. Students who participated in the in-depth interviews were all women and mostly older than the typical student at the college. Certain obstacles, in particular those challenges relevant to male students or traditionally-aged students, may have been missing from the discussion. A consequence of not interviewing men is that it is unknown how program effects might differ by gender. As such, the findings from this study may not be generalizable to men.

It has been shown that using pre-post comparisons (such as the pre-post survey and reading test in this study) can fail to provide credible findings about a program's impact due to other intervening services or events (Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman 2004). Several intervening factors in this evaluation could have impacted program performance: 1) class size, 2) increased maturation among students, 3) the two-course restriction, and 4) use of instructor pedagogies. A limitation when studying learning community

programs may be that it is difficult to determine if program effects are due to small class sizes or the program. In this evaluation, all RDG classes were capped at approximately 25 students (for both learning community and non-learning community classes). Hence, differences in class sizes between learning community and non-learning community courses are unlikely to be a limitation for this study.

Students, during in-depth interviews, reported greater maturation. This change may be due to learning community participation, or maturation may explain many of the apparent positive effects of the learning community program (e.g., better study habits, higher grades, more confidence, etc.) With only one non-learning community interviewee, there is no way to rule out maturation effects over time. In addition, perceived benefits of the learning community program may be mainly due to the two-course restriction. The limited enrollment may be less overwhelming for students. Students could learn first about reading and college preparation, and subsequently they could apply these skills with more success in later semesters. Further, learning communities have been studied in a variety of contexts, but not often with developmental students. It is expected that learning communities with developmental students differ in their effectiveness compared to learning communities not designed around developmental courses. It is possible that the stigma associated with developmental courses may interact with the success of learning communities.

Further, while most students in the study were only taking two courses, there were exceptions for students who were required to have full-time status for financial aid. Examples of such students are military students, students involved in special programs, or students who had already earned a specified number of college-level credits (whether at

this institution college or another). These students could take more than six hours of coursework. Data were unavailable on students' course loads while they were enrolled in RDG, so comparisons could not be made on this measure between learning community students and the comparison group. As follows, differences between these two groups regarding their amount coursework could potentially explain some of the variation on the outcome measures in this evaluation.

A final intervening factor on program performance could be instructors' pedagogies. From instructor interviews during fall 2014, findings indicated that instructors used the same teaching pedagogies in their standard courses as in their learning community cohorts. Another interpretation of these findings is that the instructors may have not used an optimal number of novel pedagogies. In spring 2016, in-depth interviews with learning community instructors and non-learning community instructors also revealed that teaching practices were similar. However, in analyzing syllabi received from instructors, learning community instructors appeared to more intentionally incorporate cooperative learning activities. As such, it is difficult to determine the degree that teaching pedagogies may have differed or compared. Even though the learning community instructors may have used some of the same teaching practices in learning community classes and other classes, learning community students were still exposed to some unique interventions that are only available via the program (such as team teaching an integrative curriculum, formation of cohorts, and extended class time with peers and instructors). Another finding that emerged from instructors is that some students did not like cooperative learning. These students preferred to work independently. For such students, learning communities could potentially be harmful. So,

it is important that students are aware, if placed into the learning community program, that the program entails active and cooperative methods. From the content review, this information was included on the syllabi for learning community students. However, it is often the case that students do not carefully read the syllabi for their courses.

In fall 2014, learning community students participated in the focus groups, whereas students in the comparison group did not. But this situation was likely due to the scheduling of the focus group sessions. For learning community students, focus groups were held during class time. Focus groups with the comparison group were scheduled outside of class time. Unfortunately, differences between learning community students and the comparison group could not be identified due to a lack of participation from the students in the comparison group during fall 2014. Hence, the evaluator was unable to establish why students in the comparison group did not participate in the program. In spring 2015, however, focus groups were held with two learning community cohorts and two non-learning community classes.

A limitation often specific to studies involving focus groups is that reliability and validity may be jeopardized because students publicly answered questions. As such, some students may feel pressure to conform to the group or feel uncomfortable with making negative and/or public comments about the program and/or their instructors. Considering how focus groups have a social desirability bias by nature and students may have suspected the researcher was there to evaluate the learning community program, results may be biased in a favorable direction.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

The goals of the learning community program, as stated by the college, were student-centered. The goals were the following: to increase student persistence, improve cognitive reading skills, improve the transition from developmental to college-level courses, to demonstrate a heightened sense of community, increase self-confidence regarding their academic potential, and develop more positive attitudes toward reading due to participating in the learning communities. Qualitative and quantitative findings were used in this study to evaluate the learning community program. The qualitative data indicated that the IRP was achieving its goals to increase student persistence, improve successful transition to college-level courses for students, heighten students' sense of community, increase students' self-confidence regarding their academic work, and develop more positive attitudes among students toward reading. However, quantitative and qualitative findings were conflicting on some outcomes. For instance, using the TABE diagnostic as a measure of students' cognitive reading ability, there was no evidence that their reading skills improved during a semester of the learning community program. Conversely, from in-depth interviews and focus groups, students reported cognitive gains in annotating, finding the main idea, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. While many of the survey items measuring confidence, attitudes, and interaction were non-significant in the quantitative results, in-depth interviews with learning community students showed that they improved their attitudes toward reading, enhanced their academic and social confidence, and engaged in frequent interactions with their instructors and peers. One possible explanation for these inconsistencies is that the students interviewed were the higher-performing students. In-depth interviews were held

two or three semesters after students completed RDG, so these students were close to graduation. (Consequently, these students were able to provide valuable insight on “what works” for helping developmental and working-class students to succeed in college.) Alternatively, it could be that program impacts take longer to detect, which would explain why the results are qualitatively robust and quantitatively weaker. For example, reading skills were measured over a single semester. A semester may not be long enough to achieve significant gains in the reading skills of college students. Although there were inconsistencies between qualitative and quantitative data, there were similarities as well. Findings from both qualitative and quantitative data indicate higher levels of involvement, persistence, and class preparedness for learning community students.

IMPLICATIONS

Below, Figure 1 displays a conceptual model of potential trajectories for developmental and working-class students when they begin college. This model stems from findings from the in-depth interviews with students. The present study, as well as many others (Hurst 2010; Jack 2016; Lehman 2013, 2007; Ostrove and Long 2007; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009a, 2009b), indicate that working-class students may often feel a sense of disconnect when starting college. Developmental and working-class students may be the only member of their family (i.e. first-generation students) or social group attending college. As such, these students may feel that they do not belong in college. The majority of students in this study reported that they did not feel supported by the college as a whole during their first semester, which may be another indication of their sense of disconnection. Colleges, even two-year institutions, have a sizable number of middle-class students (Carnevale and Stohl 2010:137). Also, faculty and administrators

are professionals in the middle class, and as such, they hold middle-class norms and expectations that are often imposed (whether intentional or not) on working-class students. Thus, these feelings of disconnection for working-class students may also be due to the cultural differences that they experience when they begin college.

FIGURE 1. THE INFLUENCE OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES ON TRAJECTORIES OF WORKING-CLASS AND DEVELOPMENTAL STUDENTS IN COLLEGE

This clash of cultures can create other obstacles for working-class students. For instance, students who seek help from college professors vary by social class (Jack 2016). Low-income students are less likely, unless they have been culturally equipped via a high-performing high school, to engage with their professors (Jack 2016). Educational programs can also equip students to engage with faculty. In the learning community program under study, individual interviews with students revealed that students initially expressed intimidation and fear about seeking help from their instructors as well as their peers. These findings show that students often have challenges stemming from their forms of cultural capital, such as their help-seeking strategies, when entering college.

In addition to feelings of disconnection, working-class and developmental students experience many obstacles during college. The present study highlights the vast number of obstacles, such as work demands and family obligations, that working-class students (especially women) face while attending community college. These findings are consistent with other studies such as Park et al (2013), who also highlighted some of these obstacles in their study of low-income women who attended community college. In addition, the present study finds that working-class students encounter difficulties with educational technologies. These obstacles involve both access and utilization of such technologies.

Besides issues with social integration and external demands from work and home, working-class students encountered academic obstacles. Students in this study were developmental reading students, so they struggled with reading comprehension. They also expressed challenges with the amount of required readings in their classes. These students also exhibited low academic confidence and were ashamed to be in

developmental reading. Students often questioned the quality of their schoolwork; they doubted their answers even when they were correct. Most obstacles, however, related to feelings of disconnection and external demands from work and family. This finding relates to Lehmann's (2007) conclusion that feelings of disconnect played a larger role in student dropout than poor academic performance.

In Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, he expounded on what impacts students to dropout of college. Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure includes pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments, institutional experiences, and academic and social integration. For the pre-entry attributes, Tinto (1993) identified three components: family background, skills and abilities, and prior schools. Although beyond the scope of this study, it is likely that students came from low-income homes and/or attended distressed high schools. Students in this study lacked academic skills and abilities when entering college, as they were developmental students. Further, they lacked skills in reading and reading comprehension. Such skills are absolutely critical for students if they are to experience success in college.

Regarding goals and commitments, students were very committed to graduating from the college. However, students did have difficulty deciding on a career and this factor could lead to eventual dropout if they could not authenticate their plans. Encompassing goals and commitments, Tinto (1993) also acknowledged the role that external commitments may have on students. Students in this study had numerous external commitments, especially regarding work and family. For example, half of the students who participated in the in-depth interviews were the primary caretakers of family members.

Institutional experiences also have a large impact on students' decisions to leave college. In institutional experiences, Tinto (1993) included both formal and informal academic and social experiences such as academic performance, faculty/staff interactions, co-curricular activities, and peer interactions. Students' academic performances in this study were already at-risk due to them being developmental students. In addition, the students entered college lacking social confidence. This latter obstacle hindered their ability to engage with faculty and peers. Finally, though students were not asked about their extracurricular activities, it is assumed that they were not involved in many clubs and activities on campus as their time was primarily consumed with work, schoolwork, and family responsibilities. These obstacles impacted the students' abilities to academically and socially integrate into campus.

Some final and critical elements of Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure involve academic and social integration. Tinto (1993:114) illustrated how students' institutional experiences influence social and academic integration. In the present study, students' low academic and social confidence, reading ability, and commitments to work and family, hindered their ability to socially and academically integrate into college life. As such, students in this study exhibited a lot of factors associated with dropping out that put them at-risk for opting to leave college.

From the first day of college, students such as those students in this study are vulnerable to dropping out. As such, early efforts and interventions are necessary to help working-class and developmental students feel a sense of belonging in addition to helping them to cope/manage their obstacles. Ostrove and Long (2007: 384) made the following statement about their findings: "Knowing that its [poorer college outcomes] primary

influence may be about belonging, in contrast [to social class], is very useful, because we can change the extent to which institutions of higher education are welcoming and inclusive with respect to social class.” Many kinds of programs, not just learning community programs, have the potential to help with these issues.

Learning communities, as evident from this study and as illustrated in Figure 1, have the potential to increase a sense of belonging for students as well as help them to cope and manage some of the obstacles that they may face (whether they are academic or social in nature). The small cohorts formed in learning communities and the frequent, positive interactions with their peers and instructors (as indicated by qualitative findings from fall 2014 and fall 2016) are likely to increase students’ sense of belonging when starting college. Many of the likes and benefits cited by students of the learning community program included interactions with peers and instructors, formation of cohorts and class size, and cooperative learning. There was little interest from non-learning community students to participate in in-depth interviews, which may be an indication that learning community students were more involved and integrated into college life. The fact that students are placed with peers from similar backgrounds, both academically and culturally, may also enhance their sense of belonging and decrease feelings of disconnection.

Learning communities may assist students in acquiring the forms of social and cultural capital that aids success in college. Students formed valuable relationships with instructors, peers, and staff, which expanded their social capital. In addition, a course like FYE in particular, helps working-class students who may be unfamiliar with how college works. Students, during the in-depth interviews, expressed that one of their favorite

aspects of the program was that it showed them how college works. With changes in their social and cultural capital, students noted changes in their selves. They attested to maturing while in college and learning “how to act like a college student”. Other scholars have also verified this transformation for working-class students who attend college (Lehmann 2013; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009b).

FYE also stresses time management which, based on the findings from the present study, is an obstacle for working-class women who are often juggling family obligations, school, and work demands. Students in the present study reported great improvement in their time management skills because of the learning community program (both in fall 2014 and fall 2016). Improvement in time management allowed students to cope with their external demands from work and home while attending college. A focus on time management is likely to be an important part of learning communities, or other educational programs, that are designed for working-class students. By improving their time-management skills, students were able to become more academically involved, and academic involvement is highly important for student persistence in both Astin’s (1999) and Tinto’s (1993) models.

Students in this study also learned how and where to seek help, for a variety of different issues (tutoring, financial aid, etc.), from the learning community program. Students in the present study expressed that they gained enough confidence to seek help (likely stemming from their increased sense of belonging), and then they utilized the campus resources that they learned about from the learning community program. In addition to seeking help from student services, students reported learning how to seek assistance from their instructors and peers. Engagement with instructors, peers, and

student services helped students to manage some of their academic obstacles. As a consequence, students reported a variety of increased reading and study skills including gains in comprehension and vocabulary and improving their study strategies (including time management).

These findings of student involvement with peers, instructors, and campus resources offer support for Astin's (1999) student involvement theory, as the students who described being very involved in campus services and with peers and instructors were persisting two or three semesters after the program. This level of persistence brought students at or near their final semester of a two-year program. Astin (1999) stressed that both the quantity and the quality of involvement were important. Learning community students not only expressed frequent interaction with peers, instructors, and staff, but that these interactions were valuable and meaningful. For instance, students described their peers and instructors as "family". They also received quality advice, guidance, and instruction from campus staff, peers, and instructors. Furthermore, these findings illustrate that students acquired forms of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) that are dominant in the institution via their peers, instructors, and campus staff. By acquiring cultural capital, students' behaviors changed. Students sought out help, altered how they managed their time, and became more invested with performing well in school.

Astin (1999) argued that the effectiveness of any education practice is directly related to increasing student involvement. This evaluation concludes that learning communities significantly increased student involvement. Further, this learning community program was able to engage students with their instructors during their first semester of college. Milem and Berger (1997) found a link between early involvement

with faculty and student persistence. In addition, these findings of frequent interaction with their peers, instructors, and campus staff, suggest support for the constructivist approach to learning (i.e. that social interaction is the foundation for learning) and promote social and academic integration into college via Tinto's (1993) model.

Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement have similarities and yet essential differences. Involvement is important in both models. The foundation of Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement is student behavior; the more that a student is involved the more likely that the student will persist. Therefore, student involvement is linked to student persistence. When examining dropout and student persistence, Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure accounts for students' behaviors *and* perceptions. Tinto (1993) argued that student involvement influences students' perceptions. In addition, he maintained that student involvement impacts effort, learning, and persistence. Milem and Berger (1997) seemed to find support for Tinto's (1993) theory. They concluded: "forms of involvement do influence students' perceptions of institutional support and peer support. In turn, these perceptions of support appear to have an effect on students' level of institutional commitment" (Milem and Berger 1997:398). Another finding of Milem and Berger (1997), that early involvement increases subsequent involvement, seems to support the idea student involvement impacts student perceptions as well. Although causal links cannot be made from this study, the qualitative data suggests that student perceptions were a barrier for students when they entered college. They were very uncomfortable and shy about engaging with peers and faculty. However, the learning community program seemed to change these perceptions via student-student and student-faculty interaction. In-depth interviewees were highly

involved with instructors, peers, and campus staff. Furthermore, these students were committed to the institution and to graduating. In totality, these findings seem to support Tinto's (1993) and Astin's (1999) theories. However, there was more support for Tinto's (1993) theory than Astin's (1999) theory in the sense that Tinto's (1993) model was more useful for explaining the findings in this study. Factors identified by Tinto (1993), like family background, pre-entry skills and abilities, external commitments, goals, and intentions, greatly impacted the college experience for students in this study.

As indicated in this study, students who have experience in a learning community may have improved time management skills and are more comfortable seeking help from the college, instructors, and peers. Therefore, they may be better able to manage and cope with certain obstacles than those students who have not participated in such a program. Park et al. (2013), in their study involving working-class women, advocated for the use of classroom interventions. Programs and interventions in the classroom are encouraged because of the demands on working-class students, in addition to the driving distance from their home to the college. Learning communities are an example of an in-class outreach. Park et al. (2013:8) promoted learning communities specifically, stating that "Learning communities are a promising response to this problem [students lacking a sense of belonging in college] because they meld academic developmental with social support."

As evident from Figure 1, students who feel a sense of belonging and who can manage their many obstacles are likely to persist. For instance, students may increase their ambitions/goals, or they may enhance their personal-social development.

From key findings of this study, factors that help students overcome their obstacles, as illustrated, are time management and seeking help. Learning communities not only provide students with the resources that they need, but they also help students to feel connected. In the alternate route students feel a sense of disconnection, and they experience difficulties coping with the obstacles that they encounter. Therefore, such students are more likely to experience college disintegration. All students face obstacles. For those students with a sense of disconnection, obstacles may act as greater barriers because of students' lack of belonging and social connections.

This present study, consistent with the findings from Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle (2008), Nielsen (2015), and Deil-Amen (2006), found support that students were not cooling out. The eight students who participated in the in-depth interviews during this study planned to pursue a bachelor's degree after they completed their work at the community college. Most of them planned to continue their education at a nearby university.

When entering college, however, students struggled with deciding on a career. This situation was a major source of stress for the students. For these two-year college students, they may be susceptible to dropout if they cannot decide on an occupation. The learning community program, and in particular the learning community instructors, played a large role in shaping students' career decisions. Students sought advice from the learning community instructors about potential career pathways. Although not specific to learning communities, Deil-Amen (2006) also found that college instructors play a vital role in the formation of students' plans. It has been argued that developmental students need early and frequent individual advising regarding their college and career plans due

to these students entering college uninformed and misinformed (Deil-Amen 2006). Further, beginning college with poor information about degree and career requirements increases dropout (Rosenbaum 2011). Although not in an official capacity, the learning community instructors frequently served as advisers and mentors for students. Students reported going to their learning community instructors when they had issues with their advisers and/or problems with registration. A few semesters after the program, students were still going to their learning community instructors for help.

Students described their learning communities as being success and career oriented. For example, a paper was required in FYE that required students to research and write about a potential career. Students seemed to like and benefit from this assignment, likely due to their indecisiveness regarding their future plans. Further, it is common for learning communities to have motifs. Considering the immense help that these students required to formulate and maintain their career plans and the ways that the program aided with these challenges, career motifs may be especially effective for learning communities at two-year institutions. Only three of the eight interviewees were still undecided, regarding their career plans, at the time of the interview.

Despite changing career plans, students' desires to pursue a bachelor's degree held steady. Nielsen (2015) also found that working-class women at community colleges held steady in their aspirations to earn a four-year degree. However, despite high plans, students in Neilson's (2015) study had not transferred to a four-year institution within 3.5 years from their initial interviews. Nielsen (2015) used two models to explain his findings: a pragmatic model and a "moral self-improvement" framework. The pragmatic model maintained that students hold steady in their aspirations for pragmatic reasons,

such as getting a job with higher wages. The moral self-improvement model contends that students may continue being ambitious to maintain their self-image and social standing. In this study, students' motivations seemed more in line with the pragmatic model. They wanted to earn a college degree in hopes of getting a better job. They dreamed of getting out of the cycle of long hours and low wages. Students wanted to improve their quality of life. For the caretakers in this study, they especially wanted a better quality of life for their children and family. Such motivations make it difficult for students to part with these ambitions, as they are essentially relinquishing a better life for them and their family.

In sum, the effectiveness of the learning community program was contingent on the primary mechanisms of several interacting constructs such as integration, interaction, and involvement. To adequately study learning communities, one must understand the interplay of these theoretical approaches. Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and Astin's (1999) involvement theory support the general structure of learning communities. Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital are relevant to understanding the college experiences of developmental students from largely working-class backgrounds.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of learning communities by using a case study to apply four existing theories and constructs in a novel combination. Further, the data for this study lends support for a refinement of the concept of warming up. More precisely, findings from this study lend support for both Astin's (1999) and Tinto's (1993) theories. The learning community program under evaluation helped students to get socially and academically integrated into college. Consistent with Astin's (1999) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1993) student departure theory,

involvement and interactions with peers, faculty, and campus staff seem to be key in getting students socially and academically integrated. It is also clear from the results of this study that, consistent with Tinto's (1993) model, students' goals were influenced by their interactions with their instructors. Learning community instructors in this evaluation helped students formulate their career plans and encouraged them to attend a four-year institution. Similar with Deil-Amen (2006), instructors seemed to be highly influential in developing students' aspirations. Whereas Deil-Amen's (2006) findings pertained to students warming up their college aspirations, this study found support for students warming up their career aspirations. Warming up career aspirations, as opposed to college aspirations, is a new application of the concept of warming up. In addition, the findings from this study support a refinement of warming up. Many students do not achieve their academic goals, even with high aspirations (Rosenbaum 2011). Forming concrete plans and career goals may be important for student success. The students who participated in the in-depth interviews in this study did not have clear career goals when entering college. However, after the program, the students had concrete career aspirations. The students warmed up their career goals by making their goals concrete. This study did not find any evidence of learning community students cooling out their college aspirations.

This study also illustrates that learning communities can provide developmental and working-class students with certain kinds of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) that they may not possess upon entering college. Interaction and involvement were key components of the learning community program, and so students in the program became more academically and socially integrated with their peers and instructors.

Therefore, students expanded their social connections and acquired social capital. In addition, students were exposed to forms of cultural capital. Consequently, students learned time-management skills, how to seek help from peers, instructors, and campus staff, and benefited from career guidance. Findings indicate that interactions with learning community instructors were especially important in obtaining cultural capital. For example, acquiring the types of cultural capital that allow students to readily seek help from faculty, staff, and peers, may help them to cope with their obstacles. As shown in this study, developmental students are confronted with numerous obstacles to their academic success. Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital help to illuminate the nature of these students' obstacles and improve understanding of how these obstacles may be managed.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study adds to the literature in several significant ways: 1) including student voice in reform efforts, 2) the use of mixed methods to evaluate a learning community, 3) an evaluation of a learning community designed for developmental reading at a public, two-year institution, and 4) applications and interconnectedness of Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, Astin's (1999) student involvement theory, Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital, and Clark's (1960) concept of cooling out and Deil-Amen's (2006) concept of warming up to better understand learning communities. The concept of warming up was refined to include career aspirations, not simply college aspirations. More precisely, students in this study warmed up their career aspirations (and possibly college aspirations) by developing concrete career goals. New research questions also

arise from this evaluation regarding the design and implementation of learning communities and theory.

First, this study is unusual in that it includes student input concerning reform efforts. Many authors argue that there is a lack of student involvement regarding such reform efforts (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991; Ingersoll 2003; Taines 2012). It is important to note that all eight students who participated in the in-depth interviews were very open with their feelings and opinions, and they wanted to be heard. They wanted their struggles to be understood, and they wanted to share what they needed to succeed in college. The students expressed that learning time management, learning to seek help, and receiving career guidance were crucial to their success. Students sought help from instructors, peers, and campus resources (primarily tutoring, a writing center, and a learning center). These factors, which all involve social interaction, are important to consider in future reform efforts.

No men showed interest in participating in the in-depth interviews of this study. Studies that examine men's voices and experiences at community colleges would be beneficial. Also, are outcomes different for men and women who participate in learning communities?

This evaluation is also notable in that it evaluated learning communities using mixed methods. Mixed methods may allow for a more comprehensive evaluation of learning communities. In particular, an evaluation using mixed methods can connect processes to outcomes. This connection is important to the understanding of learning communities, so that the effective components of learning communities can be identified and implemented. Further, the less effective components of learning communities can be

identified, modified, and improved. Mixed methods played an important role in this study by suggesting that the lack of some outcomes was likely due to implementation issues.

Regarding design and implementation, what interventions are effective and special to learning communities? For instance, many instructors utilize active and cooperative pedagogies. Instructors in this study reported that they used similar teaching strategies in both their learning and non-learning community courses. Perhaps the structure and design of the learning communities, in particular allowing for more interaction via extended class time and the formation of cohorts, is what is crucial to the success of learning communities. In addition, does team teaching influence the effectiveness of learning communities and teacher creativity? If so, how? The lack of team teaching in the program under study may have negatively impacted outcomes (particularly the quantitative results). The practices that are fundamental to learning communities should be fully and intensively implemented so that students can receive both the social and academic benefits of the learning communities. Further, learning communities that are longer in duration may be more effective. The learning community program in this study lasted a semester. It would be worthwhile to examine any potential differences in outcomes between one-semester and one-year learning communities.

Studies regarding learning communities at two-year institutions are limited. Findings from the available studies suggest that positive outcomes are less robust for learning communities at two-year colleges than those at four-year institutions. Also, evaluations of learning communities designed for developmental education are very limited. The present study argues that more intensive models of learning communities,

equipped with tutors and counselors, may be needed for two-year institutions and for developmental education. Further research would be beneficial in these areas.

The majority of developmental students during in-depth interviews talked about how they had difficulty in choosing a career. An interesting question is whether this issue is a greater problem for developmental students compared to college-ready students. This sample only included developmental students, so such a question was not addressed in this study. However, it would be an interesting topic to explore in a future study. Also, do developmental students seek as much career guidance from instructors as compared to college-ready students? Are college-ready students more likely to receive career guidance from family and friends as opposed to developmental students? Students in this study who were not exposed to certain forms of cultural or social capital struggled with making career decisions. For instance, students' social connections may provide exposure to "models of success" and they can "follow in the footsteps" of a family member, friend, or acquaintance.

Jack (2016) found that low-income students who had attended a well-performing high school were more confident in seeking help from their professors in college compared to low-income students who had attended distressed high schools. Due to demographics of the student body at the college, students in the present study were likely to have come from distressed high schools. More research is warranted that studies the influence of developmental students' high school experiences on their social and academic performances in college.

Would developmental students benefit from learning communities more (or less) than college-ready, first-year students? There is a lack of attention in the literature

regarding the impact of learning communities on developmental students. This study included a conceptual model (Figure 1) to understand working-class and developmental students' trajectories in college. In addition, this model illustrated key ways that learning communities can encourage persistence in college for these students. Major benefits of learning communities at two-year institutions for developmental students and working-class students, derived from this study, included learning to seek help, improving time management, and receiving career guidance. Additional research is needed to study these processes. Moreover, what other key components of learning communities for developmental and working-class students at two-year institutions can be added to this model?

Research concerning the effects of learning communities involving developmental reading students seems almost nonexistent (with Weiss et al. (2010) being an exception). Evident from internal research at the college under evaluation is that students who require developmental reading may be more likely to dropout compared to other developmental students (such as developmental math students, for example). If students have difficulty comprehending what they read, it is unlikely that they will experience success in college. As such, the intersection of learning communities and developmental reading is an important subject of study. This evaluation suggests that developmental reading students can benefit from the learning community experience.

Evaluations of learning community programs often lack theoretical frameworks. Astin's (1999) student involvement theory and constructivist frameworks have been used to describe learning communities. Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure has been widely used in advocating for the use of learning communities. However, studies are

limited that apply or test theoretical frameworks in evaluations of learning communities. Furthermore, Clark's (1960) and Deil-Amen's (2006) work do not seem to have been applied to the study of learning communities. Bourdieu's (1986) form of social capital has been applied to learning communities in high school (Lee and Friedrich 2007) and virtual learning communities (Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla 2003). However, it would be of interest to further study the role that learning communities at two-year colleges could play in altering students' capital (including cultural capital). In addition, does an increase in capital lead to greater involvement and academic and social integration? Further studies could examine whether learning communities prevent cooling out. Moreover, are there other theoretical frameworks that support and/or contribute to the understanding of learning communities? Theory is key to understanding how and why learning communities work.

More rigorous designs are needed to better understand students' backgrounds (rural/urban, first-generation students, etc.) at the college and similar institutions, how learning communities serve such a student body, and whether the impacts of the learning communities persist over time. Extensive surveys and randomized designs could be implemented to better understand the demographics and the experiences of the students. For example, the in-depth interviews revealed that students are sometimes primary caretakers and many have full-time jobs. It would be of interest to know how common such situations are among the student body of the college and similar institutions; these issues greatly impact students' academic performances and persistence. Students' sense of belonging could also be investigated through survey questions and in-depth interviews. As a follow-up to this evaluation, one could conduct a study with surveys that directly

address the structure and experiences of the student body, over a longer period of time, and with more in-depth interviews.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking into consideration all forms of data, especially qualitative data that exposed implementation weaknesses, the evaluator makes the following recommendations: 1) fully implement team teaching into the learning communities, 2) create and implement an integrative curriculum between RDG and FYE, 3) expand services available to students and require students to partake in some of these services as part of the learning community experience (such as tutoring, weekly or bi-weekly meetings with advisers and/or instructors, counseling, etc.), 4) more thorough instructor training for learning communities, and 5) better assessment of the learning community program by faculty and administrators.

Team teaching, where both instructors teach together for the duration of both classes, only occurred a few times throughout the semester. Ideally, learning communities should be team taught during all classes for the entire semester: “The daily practice of team teaching creates an environment of continuous learning for everyone and for acculturating new members of the community” (Smith and MacGregor 2009:128).

However, team teaching in this form may be impractical under budgetary constraints.

Instructors in this study enjoyed team teaching and reported many benefits from it. These benefits included the opportunity for learning community instructors to exchange and share ideas that boosted their creativity for classroom pedagogies and assignments. In addition, when instructors did team teach, students described these days as their “favorite days”. On these days the methodologies of learning communities were

in full effect with a variety of active learning opportunities that allowed for frequent instructor-instructor interaction, student-student interaction, and student-faculty interaction. As such, a full implementation of team teaching into the learning communities would likely enhance the effectiveness of the program.

Qualitative data were conflicting on whether RDG and FYE became more integrated, in terms of content and assignments, as the program progressed.

Administrators and instructors described the classes as becoming more integrated, but syllabi did not seem to reveal any major changes to the courses. It is possible that these changes were not evident from the syllabi. Even with the classes becoming more integrated as the program evolved, the program still lacked a single and comprehensive curriculum between RDG and FYE. There were a few assignments and content that overlapped, but primarily the courses were independent. A fully integrated curriculum, in addition to sharing the same assignments between the courses, would likely improve program outcomes.

Last, as evident from the literature, many learning communities require students to partake in a variety of student services. At this institution, student services were voluntary. Mandating students to attend weekly or bi-weekly meetings with their instructors, tutors, and advisers would be particularly beneficial for developmental students. In fact, findings from this study revealed the importance of student services. In-depth interviews with learning community students revealed that students learned about student services from the learning community program. These services primarily included a learning center, where tutors were available in various subjects, and a writing center. Further, students who had persisted two or three semesters after the program

described how they had learned to effectively use these services. This evaluation finds that increasing students' confidence to seek help, and the subsequent involvement with student services, instructors, and peers, are key steps in helping working-class and/or developmental students to succeed in college.

In this study a lack of training for instructors was an issue when the program was piloted. However, instructors felt more confident and equipped as they gained more training and experience. More thorough training, especially for instructors that are new to the program, would likely enhance the effectiveness of the learning communities. In addition, instructor and administrators should implement better assessments of the learning communities. Through a higher level of program monitoring, they could pinpoint program strengths and weakness while adapting the program to changes in the student body and college. In total, these five recommendations would allow for a more intensive model that may yield more robust results (particularly quantitatively). Developmental students and students at two-year institutions (where they do not reside on campus) may require more intensive reforms to enhance social and cognitive skills.

CONCLUSION

The developmental reading students in this study reported a few distinct and significant benefits from participating in the learning community program. They benefited from learning to seek help, learning time management, and receiving career guidance. As such, these three components could be important features of learning communities at two-year institutions for developmental reading students, many of whom may be working-class and/or first-generation students. Developmental and working-class students have unique obstacles to overcome while attending college. These obstacles to

college persistence need to be properly understood using, for example, the interplay of theoretical frameworks (such as the constructs used in this study). Learning communities, and other educational reforms and practices, need unique interventions to support these students during college. Effective reforms for these students will likely require changes on an institutional level as well.

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APPENDICES

Definition of Key Terms

The following key terms are used in this study. The definitions of the terms are derived from the author unless otherwise cited.

Active learning. Students are engaged in the learning process through an activity.

At-risk student. A student who is susceptible to dropout. Characteristics may include being low-income, underprepared, disabled, and/or of a racial/ethnic minority (Heisserer and Parette 2002; Laskey and Hetzel 2011).

Caretaker. One who provides care for another individual (usually a family member).

Collaborative learning. Students and the instructor work together to design and teach a course (Paulson and Faust 2015).

Cooperative learning. Learning that is group work, usually consisting of three or more students (Paulson and Faust 2015).

Developmental education. “Designed to strengthen skills so students can successfully complete college-level courses” (Bailey 2009:11).

Developmental reading student. A student, enrolled in a non-degree-credit reading class, who requires “study strategies and reading skills necessary to deeply comprehend college texts” (Burgess 2009:12; Elder and Paul 2004).

Developmental student. A student who is enrolled in a non-degree-credit course (such as math, reading, or English) in preparation for college-level courses.

First-generation student. A student who is the first in her/his family to attend a college or university (Lehmann 2007).

Learning community. “A curricular model that links two or more classes together for a cohort of students” (Cerna, Richburg-Hayes, Sansone, Schneider, Visher, Ware, and Washington 2008:7).

Non-traditional student. A student who may have one or more of the following characteristics: lack a high school diploma, delayed entry into college, part-time status in college, have a dependent, mid-twenties or older, or full-time employment (Brock 2010; Taniguchi and Kaufman 2005).

Peer feedback. Formal feedback provided to students by their peers.

Peer learning. Student-student observation and/or feedback via activities and assignments created by instructors (such as presentations, group projects, etc.)

Student success. Students persisting toward their academic or occupational goals.

Student persistence. Students who continue their education in subsequent semesters. Also known as student retention.

Team teaching. “A group of instructors working purposefully, regularly, and cooperatively to help a group of students learn” (Buckley 2000:4).

Working-class student. A student from (or a member of) the working class, where “the working class basically consists of those who work in manual or blue-collar occupations” (Scott and Marshall 2005:706).

Interview Guide: Focus Groups (Fall 2014/Spring 2015)

Likes/Dislikes

1. Why did you choose to enroll in RDG and FYE?
2. Did you like anything about your courses (RDG and FYE) this semester?
If so, what?
3. Did you dislike anything about your courses (RDG and FYE) this semester? If so, what?
4. Would you recommend RDG and/or FYE to your friends? Why or why not?

Learning Experiences

5. Have your reading habits (both inside and outside of the classroom) changed as a result of taking RDG and FYE?
6. Have your study habits changed as a result of taking RDG and FYE?
7. Are there things that you have learned from RDG and FYE that you can apply to future courses that you take at this college or another college? If so, what?
8. Has your attitude changed toward reading? If so, how?
9. What have you learned from RDG?
10. What have you learned from FYE?

Interactions

11. In what ways, if any, did you work with other students this semester?
12. Do you work with other students outside of the classroom? If so, how often and in what ways?

13. What are your interactions like with other students at the college?

14. What are your interactions like with teachers at the college?

Goals

15. Do you expect to be successful in achieving your goals at this institution?

Why or why not?

Interview Guide: Instructors (Fall 2014)

1. Did you choose to teach in a learning community?
2. What practices do you use in your learning community courses?
3. What practices do you use in your regular courses?
4. Do you use active pedagogies when teaching the learning communities? If so, what?
5. In what ways, if any, do you foster student collaboration and social learning opportunities in your learning community courses?
6. In what ways, if any, do you foster collaboration among students outside of the classroom?
7. Were students given opportunities in your class to engage in peer learning and peer feedback? If so, please give examples.
8. Are there ways in which you benefit from team teaching? If so, please explain.
9. Did you experience any problems with team teaching? If so, please explain.
10. Are there things that you enjoy about teaching the learning communities?
11. Are there things that you dislike about teaching the learning communities?
12. Do you have any recommendations on ways to improve the way learning communities at the college operate?

Interview Guide: Instructors (Spring 2016)

1. In what ways, if any, do you foster collaboration among students outside of the classroom?
2. Were students given opportunities to engage in peer learning in your class? If so, please give examples.
3. Were students given opportunities to engage in peer feedback in your class? If so, please give examples.
4. How do you choose reading material for your classes?
5. Are there themes used in your classes? If so, please explain.
6. Are there interdisciplinary methods used in your classes? If so, please explain.
7. How satisfied are you with how students interact with you in class?
8. How satisfied are you with how students interact with you outside of class?
9. How would you describe your interactions with students?
10. How are the learning communities perceived at the college?
11. What do you consider to be strengths of the learning community program?
12. What do you consider to be weaknesses of the program?
13. Have you experienced any surprises—either pleasant or unpleasant--with the learning community program?
14. Has the program changed since fall 2014? If so, how?
15. Why were the learning communities created?
16. What is your overall assessment of the learning community program?

17. Do you have any recommendations on how to improve the way the learning communities operate?

Interview Guide: Administrators (Spring 2016)

1. How are the learning communities perceived at the college?
2. How are the learning communities designed?
3. How do the learning communities operate?
4. What would you consider to be strengths of the learning community program?
5. What would you consider to be weaknesses of the program?
6. Have you experienced any surprises—either pleasant or unpleasant--with the learning community program?
7. Has the program changed since fall 2014? If so, how?
8. Why were the learning communities created?
9. How connected do you feel to the program?
10. What is your overall assessment of the learning community program?
11. Do you have any recommendations on ways to improve the way the learning communities operate?

Interview Guide: Students (Fall 2016)

1. Think back to your first semester at _____. What factors led you to enroll in RDG and FYE?

Learning Experiences

2. Think back to your experiences with RDG and FYE. Tell me what you remember about RDG and FYE.
3. Describe any themes you remember in your RDG and/or FYE class.
4. Did your instructor combine any subjects in RDG and/or FYE classes? For example, did you study any other subjects in RDG or FYE such as math, art, music, geography, or history?
5. What did you learn from RDG?
6. What did you learn from FYE?
7. Are there things that you learned from RDG and FYE that you applied to other courses at _____? If so, please provide examples.
8. How supportive were your instructors in RDG and FYE? Please explain.
9. How supported by the college did you feel on campus during your first semester? Please explain.
10. Describe any pressures to perform well in reading RDG and FYE.
11. Tell me about any obstacles to academic success you faced in your first semester.
12. Describe any challenges you experienced with reading at _____.
13. Tell me how you overcame things that got in your way to reading success.

14. Since you started college, how much have your reading habits (both inside and outside of the classroom) changed as a result of taking RDG and FYE? Give me an example if you can.
15. How much have your study habits changed as a result of taking RDG and FYE? Can you think of any specific examples?
16. How have your attitudes changed toward reading?

Likes/Dislikes

17. Tell me what you liked about RDG and FYE.
18. Tell me what you disliked about RDG and FYE.
19. Did you experience any surprises—either pleasant or unpleasant--with RDG and FYE? Can you describe them or provide an example?
20. What would you tell other students who were thinking about taking RDG and FYE?
21. How could RDG and/or FYE be improved?
22. How do others at _____ view the learning community program? How do you view the learning community program?

Goals

23. How successful have you been in achieving your goals at the college?
Please explain.
24. How much did RDG or FYE play a role in achieving in your goals? Please elaborate.
25. How have you changed while in college?

Background

26. Have you been primarily part-time or full-time at _____?
27. About how many hours do you work each week for pay?
28. Tell me a little bit about how you spend your time outside of school,
especially the activities that fill the most time.
29. What grades do you usually get in your courses at _____?
30. Do you serve as a primary caretaker to another?

Reading Student Survey (Post/Fall 2014)

1. Rate your attitude towards reading before taking RDG.

- ☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Neutral ☐ Poor ☐ Very Poor

2. Rate your attitude towards reading after taking RDG.

- ☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Neutral ☐ Poor ☐ Very Poor

3. Rate your knowledge of reading techniques (word meaning, interpretation, recall, evaluation) before taking RDG.

- ☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Average ☐ Poor ☐ Very Poor

4. Rate your knowledge of reading techniques (word meaning, interpretation, recall, evaluation) after taking RDG.

- ☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Average ☐ Poor ☐ Very Poor

5. Rate your confidence level in completing college-level work before taking RDG.

- ☐ High ☐ Somewhat High ☐ Average ☐ Low ☐ Very Low

6. Rate your confidence level in completing college-level work after taking RDG.

- ☐ High ☐ Somewhat High ☐ Average ☐ Low ☐ Very Low

7. How many hours a week did you prepare for RDG outside of class?

- ☐ 6 or more ☐ 3-5 ☐ 1-2 ☐ none

8. How many times a week did you participate in classroom discussions?

- ☐ 6 or more ☐ 3-5 ☐ 1-2 ☐ none

9. What was your level of preparation (completed homework, reading assignments, etc.) at the beginning of class?

- ☐ complete ☐ partially ☐ incomplete

10. How often did you work in groups and collaborate with other students in RDG?

- ☐ Frequently ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Never

11. How often did you interact with your RDG instructor?

- ☐ Frequently ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Never

12. Rate your level of confidence in collaborating with other students in RDG.

- ☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Neutral ☐ Poor ☐ Very Poor

13. Rate your level of participation in the Book Club.

- ☐ Very Active
(attended all
meetings, read the
book, and participated
in discussions) ☐ Active (attended
some meetings,
participated in some
discussion) ☐ Present (attended
meetings, but did not
read the book, or
participate in
discussion) ☐ Did not participate
at all

14. How often did you participate in the Book Club discussions?

- ☐ Frequently ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Never

15. How welcomed did you feel at the Book Club?

- ☐ Very welcomed ☐ Somewhat welcomed ☐ Unwelcomed

16. Did you receive a free book from the Book Club?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

17. Following your completion of RDG and your participation in the Book Club, do you feel more encouraged to read for your own enjoyment?

- ☐ Very Much ☐ Somewhat ☐ Not at all

18. Race/Ethnicity

- ☐ African American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

19. Gender

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

20. Age

- ☐ 24 or younger
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55 or older
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

21. Mother's level of education

- ☐ High school graduate or less
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Associate/Technical degree
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Master's/Professional degree or beyond
- ☐ I don't know
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

22. Father's level of education

- ☐ High school graduate or less
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Associate/Technical degree
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Master's/Professional degree or beyond
- ☐ I don't know
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

23. Do you have a family member (such as spouse, child, parent, etc.) that relies on you for care?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

24. Hours worked per week

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1-10
- ☐ 11-20
- ☐ 21-30
- ☐ 31-40
- ☐ 41 or more

25. Are you receiving a Pell Grant?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

26. Have you attended another college?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Reading Student Pre-Survey (Spring 2015/Fall 2015)

1. Are you currently taking a paired Learning Community for RDG with FYE? (Ask your instructor if you are unsure.)
A)Yes B)No
2. Rate your attitude towards reading:
A)Excellent B)Good C)Neutral D)Poor
3. Rate your knowledge of reading techniques:
A)Excellent B)Good C)Neutral D)Poor
4. Rate your confidence level in completing college level work:
A)High B)Somewhat High C)Average D)Low
5. How many hours a week do you plan to prepare for RDG outside of class?
A)6 or more B)3-5 C)1-2 D)None
6. How many times a week do you plan to participate in classroom discussions?
A)6 or more B)3-5 C)1-2 D)None
7. Rate your confidence level in collaborating (working) with other students:
A)Excellent B)Good C)Neutral D)Poor

Reading Student Post-Survey (Spring 2015/Fall 2015)

1. Are you currently taking a paired Learning Community for RDG with FYE? (Ask your instructor if you are unsure.)
A)Yes B)No
2. Rate your attitude towards reading:
A)Excellent B)Good C)Neutral D)Poor
3. Rate your knowledge of reading techniques:
A)Excellent B)Good C)Neutral D)Poor
4. Rate your confidence level in completing college level work:
A)High B)Somewhat High C)Average D)Low
5. How many hours a week did you prepare for RDG outside of class?
A)6 or more B)3-5 C)1-2 D)None
6. How many times a week did you participate in RDG classroom discussions?
A)6 or more B)3-5 C)1-2 D)None
7. Rate your confidence level in collaborating with other students in RDG:
A)Excellent B)Good C)Neutral D)Poor
8. What was your most common level of preparation at the beginning of each RDG class? (Completed homework and reading assignments.)
A)Complete B)Partially Complete C)Incomplete
9. How often did you work in groups and collaborate with other students in RDG?
A)Frequently (Once a week) B)Often (Once every two weeks)
C)Sometimes (Once every three or more weeks) D)Never
10. Do you feel more encouraged to read for your own enjoyment after taking RDG?
A) Very Much B) Somewhat C)Not at all

11. How often did you participate in the Book Club Discussions (in class or online discussions) for [*book title*]?

A)Frequently (Three times or more) B) Often (Two times) C)Sometimes (Once) D)Never

12. How welcomed or included did you feel in the Book Club?

A)Very welcomed B)Somewhat welcomed C)Unwelcomed

13. Rate your level of participation in the Book Club:

A)Very active (attended events, read the book, participated in discussion)

B)Active (attended some events, read the book, participated in some discussions)

C)Present (attended an event but did not read the book or participate in discussions)

D)Did not participate at all

14. Has your experience in the Book Club encouraged you to read for your own enjoyment?

A) Very much B) Somewhat C)Not at all

CURRICULUM VITAE

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PhD in Applied Sociology, May 2019

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Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY

Master of Arts in Sociology, December 2011

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Bachelor of Arts in Mathematics, May 2006

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Experience:

Instructor of Sociology, Southcentral Kentucky Community & Technical

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Adjunct Faculty/Sociology, Southcentral Kentucky Community & Technical

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Center Director, Mathnasium of Bowling Green, Fall 2016-Spring 2017

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Instructor, Sylvan Learning Center, Fall 2007-Fall 2012

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System Support, Fruit of the Loom Corporate Headquarters, November 2007-

December 2011

Bowling Green, KY

Mathematics Teacher, Warren County Board of Education, Fall 2006-
Spring 2007
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Respite Teacher, Family Enrichment Center, May 2005 – January 2006
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Research:

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Kentucky University, December 2011
Bowling Green, KY
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Scholarly Presentations:

“Operationalizing Good Schools in Kentucky.” *Forty-First Annual Conference:
The Mid-South Sociological Association*. Lafayette, LA: October 21-24, 2015.

“A Proximal Outcome Evaluation of a Learning Community Program at a Two-
year Postsecondary Institution in KY.” *Association for Applied and Clinical
Sociology*. Montgomery, AL: October 8-10, 2015.

“Operationalizing Good Schools in Kentucky” and “A Proximal Outcome
Evaluation of a Learning Community Program at a Two-year Postsecondary
Institution in KY.” *University of Louisville: Brown Bag Series*. Louisville, KY:
September 29, 2015.

“A Proximal Outcome Evaluation of a Learning Community Program.”
Southcentral Kentucky Community & Technical College. Bowling Green, KY:
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Review of Book Proposal:

Oxford University Press, Reviewed a book proposal for a sociology textbook, Fall
2016

Courses Taught:

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Service:

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Southcentral Kentucky Community & Technical College, Fall 2018-Present*

Media Mentions/Quotes and Interviews:

Bowling Green Daily News, Story on Homelessness, Spring 2018

Memberships:

Anthropologists & Sociologists of Kentucky, Fall 2015-Present

American Sociological Association, Spring 2014-Present

Alpha Kappa Delta (The International Sociology Honor Society), Spring 2009-Present

Skills:

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)

Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, and PowerPoint)

Blackboard

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