

Access Without Support is Not Opportunity

By Cathy Engstrom and Vincent Tinto

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Donald, who describes himself as black, Indian, and Dominican, went to two high schools in San Francisco and Los Angeles. He liked the first school. It was challenging and the teachers were concerned about his welfare. But because of family problems, he left San Francisco and moved in with a foster family in Los Angeles. There he went to a school he describes as a “bad, bad school.” He didn’t learn anything and soon quit. Undeterred, he earned a GED and entered Cerritos Community College, living on his own at age 21 and determined to get a college degree.

Unfortunately, too many low-income students like Donald enter college academically under-prepared, and too few find the support they need to succeed in college. As a result, their rates of completing four-year degrees continue to lag behind those of more affluent students.

Recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that while an estimated 56 percent of high-income students who begin postsecondary education will earn their four-year degrees within six years, only about 26 percent of low-income students will do so. And the gap has not diminished in recent years—indeed it may have increased

somewhat over the past decade. For too many low-income students, the open door of American higher education and the opportunity it provides has become a revolving door.

Why is this the case? The answer to this important question is not simple; there are many complex forces shaping the success of low-income students. But perhaps none is as important as academic preparation: Low-income students are more likely to begin higher education academically under-prepared than those from more affluent backgrounds. Beginning higher education with fewer academic resources than their peers, they are less likely to complete their degree programs.

Beyond Access: Promoting Student Success with Learning Communities

What is to be done? As Cliff Adelman pointed out in a previous issue of *Change* (July/August, 2007), no long-term solution to the problem of retaining and graduating under-prepared low-income students is possible unless institutions find a way to address their academic needs. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that colleges thus far have struggled in their attempts to restructure existing programs to better serve them. But there are signs of change. One particularly promising effort is the adaptation of learning communities to the needs of these students.

With a grant from the Lumina Foundation for Education and additional support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, we carried out a systematic, multi-institutional, longitudinal four-year study of the impact of learning communities, and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them, on the success of academically under-prepared, predominantly low-income students. The students were enrolled in 13 two-year and six

four-year colleges in California, Florida, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington. These institutions were selected, with the help of an advisory board of national experts, from a sample of more than 40 institutions that we identified as having effective developmental-learning community programs.

In each of the 19 institutions, we sampled all students in the learning-community classrooms and a comparison group of students who took the same subjects and were as academically similar to the learning-community students as possible. Our final sample of 5,729 students consisted of 2,615 students in learning communities and 3,114 students in comparison classrooms.

On each campus, we surveyed both groups of students using a variant of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) to ascertain their patterns of academic and social engagement, perceptions, and academic plans. We used both institutional data files and data from the National Student Clearinghouse to track their performance over three years and their persistence over two years. The combined data were analyzed with cross-tabular and multivariate regression techniques to determine the independent effects of participation in a learning community on subsequent persistence, controlling for student attributes (e.g. gender, ethnicity, parents educational level). For three two-year and two four-year institutions we also employed case-study techniques and longitudinal interviews to learn how these students made sense of their experiences.

We found that academically under-prepared students in the learning communities were significantly more engaged in a variety of activities than similar students on their campuses, including in classroom work and in activities involving their faculty and

classmates in and outside of class. Simply put, students in the learning communities were more academically and socially engaged. At the same time, they perceived themselves as having experienced significantly more encouragement, support, and intellectual gain than did similar students not enrolled in those programs. Not surprisingly, we found that students in the learning-community programs were more apt to persist to the following academic year than their institutional peers: The average difference in persistence between learning-community and comparison-group students in the four-year institutions was nearly 10 percent, and in the two-year colleges it was slightly more than five percent (although on some campuses it was as high as 15 percent).

What might explain these results? The students we interviewed described a number of aspects of learning communities that they believed accounted for their success.

A Safe Place to Learn

Learning-community students talked about their programs as safe places to learn, places where they were free to express themselves and learn from one another. Many students explained that in the past they were afraid to speak in class and participate fully in the learning process, especially in high school. The learning-community experience was different because people got to know each other, trusted and respected each other, took risks, and really participated. In reflecting on his experience, one student observed:

We are sort of a community. In this environment you become more confident, you become more alive, you become more responsible for your own opinions—and you aren't afraid to speak your views, you aren't afraid to speak up.

This was particularly important for students whose first language was not English. ESL students emphasized how scared and anxious they were and how participation in the collaborative environment of the learning community helped them overcome their fear. As one student recalled, “When I came here I was so scared. I was afraid of everything because of language. Now I am not afraid.” Another student noted:

Being the same classes, it's comforting. You are scared and maybe somebody speaks much better than you and writes better, so you feel more comfortable seeing the same faces every day, and you communicate more and more often, little by little. ... I got the confidence from seeing the same faces. ... I'm not afraid of saying anything now, but I was.

Being in the same classroom several times a day increased students' comfort level in speaking and providing feedback on each other's writing. That engagement with their peers was further heightened by the faculty's use of pedagogies that required students to work together.

A Supportive Place to Learn

Students also talked about their programs as places where they were supported and validated. They spoke of the help they received from faculty, other students, and the structured activities of their learning communities. In speaking of a faculty member, one ESL student said:

In the beginning, I was not confident in my writing. But you know, she came up to me and said, “I don't want you to be discouraged. I am here to help you, and when you see the results later on, you'll realize that, ‘okay, you know, I can do this!’”

Peer support, whose importance was noted by Triesman in his study of cooperative groups in college calculus, arose through use of the collaborative pedagogy that characterized many of the communities. In reflecting on the impact of those activities, one student said:

We motivate each other, and we keep each other on track. Cherry and I are in these classes together, so we usually are doing our homework together. We have discussions, sometimes heated discussions, on a lot of different topics. When we get back to class we know what we want to talk about, ask about, what we want to present. So it helps to have friends to help you with essays, readings, discussion topics.

Students spoke about how this collaboration helped them to feel less alone, more confident in their ability to succeed in college, and more supported in their studies.

Their experiences also demonstrated how teaching and learning roles can move between peers and instructors when students are encouraged to take more responsibility for their learning and see their peers and themselves as sources of knowledge. One student described how the faculty created these norms:

What's nice also is that they [the faculty] will sometimes sit in on each other's class. That I found was very cool. ... She would not sit there as a teacher; she would sit there as a student. She would take the opportunity to learn. ... And it was very nice, like we were just there to learn.

Many of the learning communities also served as conduits to an array of campus support services. Typically this involved linking courses to a new-student seminar or having a counselor assigned to the learning community who reinforced critical habits and skills

essential to success. This was often achieved by incorporating tutoring and study groups into the weekly schedules.

Reflecting on a guidance-and-counseling course that was part of the learning community, one student explained:

You got a sense, the feeling that they really wanted to get you off on the right foot for your college life. ... They really offered you a lot of resources, not just within reading and writing and English, but they would bring in the counselors and bring in outside people. ... It was really showing us that there are resources out there helping us and really supporting students.

The learning communities, in providing students access to other support services, also aligned and coordinated those services. In this way, they magnified the effects of their support on student success.

Belonging in College

Learning communities heightened students' sense of themselves as learners and increased their confidence in their ability to succeed. When we asked students, two years after their learning community experience, what they had learned from it, they spoke of becoming more aware of their needs and responsibilities as learners and themselves as college students. They felt that they *belonged* in college and had the ability to succeed. As one student said, "When I went through the program, it changed the whole perspective because I wasn't an individual in a class. I was part of a class; I was part of a college." Another spoke about her deep sense of validation as a learner: "I think I have gotten smarter since I have been here. I can feel it."

Students reported that their commitment and motivation to pursue their studies increased because of the validation they received through the mastery of key skills. As one ESL student said, “I can write. I can speak. I speak more. I understand more. I feel more confident and before I was ashamed. Now I feel very good.” Another we interviewed three years after participating reflected:

They have every single thing you need. They bend over backwards to make these programs. I hold the learning community at a higher level because I know what a dramatic impact it's been on me. It has turned my life around ... making me feel so comfortable in college and making me want to do better.

These students' reflections shed light on the many ways in which their involvement in learning communities eradicated fears and anxieties, developed their sense of belonging, increased their confidence in their abilities, enhanced their self-esteem, and reinforced their belief that they were on the “right track.” These students remind us that it is not enough to be competent in class; students also have to *believe in* their competence.

It is noteworthy that not one student identified him or herself as a “developmental” student. They described themselves as having to take some non-credit bearing courses that they came to understand and value as fundamental to their future success. The courses embedded in curricular learning communities helped create the feelings that they belonged in college and that the faculty and the college believed in their ability to succeed. These stories were consistent across diverse learning-community models, thanks to a responsive pedagogy and caring faculty, advisors, and peers—all of whom fostered serious intellectual community.

Learning Deeply, Making Connections

Finally, students spoke of the ways in which the integrated, linked curriculum of the learning communities enabled them not only to learn more but to learn better. In reflecting on the importance of curricular links, one student said:

The relationship in classes between accounting and ESL is helping a lot, because the accounting professor is teaching us to answer questions in complete sentences—to write better. And they [the teachers] are in touch with each other. And we are more motivated to learn vocabulary because it is accounting vocabulary—something we want to learn about. I am learning accounting better by learning the accounting language.

Another student noted:

I'll read in class and not just read and analyze it; we would actually run with it in the writing class and then actually get to apply what we analyzed in our reading class. It doesn't feel like you're taking two completely off-the-wall classes.

Faculty worked together to construct a seamless learning environment where course content was integrated. Students found this approach a more efficient and easier way to learn.

A particularly effective linkage was that of a basic-skill course such as writing to a content course such as history or sociology. Such links enabled students to acquire the basic skills they needed in courses that were typically non-credit bearing, while also successfully participating in credit-bearing courses. As a result, they believed they made more substantial progress in both basic skills and content knowledge than would have been possible without those ties. They also valued earning college credits while developing their

skills. Making progress toward a certificate or degree, even if by small steps, validated their standing as “real” college students and further motivated them to continue their studies.

It is not surprising, then, that the survey data revealed that students in the learning communities were more engaged in their studies, perceived themselves as having more support, and were more successful than similar students not in such programs. The structure of the learning communities, the values of caring and support that infused them, and the connections they provided to other support services all fostered participants’ sense of themselves as learners while giving them the knowledge and skills to succeed in college.

Conclusion

Access without support is not opportunity. That institutions do not intentionally exclude students from college does not mean that they are including them as fully valued members of the institution and providing them with support that enables students to translate access into success. Too often our conversations about access ignore the fact that without support many students, especially those who are poor or academically under-prepared, are unlikely to succeed. Little wonder then that our gains in access have not closed the gap in four-year degree completion among low-income and high-income students.

Student success requires institutional investment in structured and carefully aligned activities directed toward their success. It is not simply a matter of adding more basic-skills courses but of restructuring those that are already offered. Learning communities are not the only way to do so. But our research leaves us convinced that when fully implemented, they provide a particularly powerful tool in our efforts to promote student achievement, in

particular that of students who enter college academically under-prepared. They open up the possibility of learning for those who have not done so easily in the past.

But effective learning communities, like those we studied, require more than simple co-registration in courses that are left unchanged in the process—what Barbara Leigh Smith refers to as “learning communities lite.” To be effective, learning communities require that faculty and staff change the way they work and, in some cases, think. They have to collaborate in constructing coherent places of learning where students are connected not only to each other and the faculty but also to other support services on campus. Institutions have to take seriously the notion that the failure of students to thrive in college lies not just in the students but also in the ways they construct the environments in which they ask students to learn. Institutions have to believe that all students, not just some, have the ability to succeed under the right set of conditions—and that it is their responsibility to construct those conditions.

Institutions need to avoid the tendency to place developmental-education programs and the academically under-prepared students they serve at the margins of institutional life. They have to stop taking an “add-on” approach to institutional innovation that marginalizes successful efforts, constrains their ability to expand, and limits their effectiveness. Until institutions take these steps, they will continue to struggle to translate increased access into real opportunity

Resources

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