
Insights from a Learning Community Program for Developmental Reading Students: Developing a Conceptual Model

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This two-year case study summarizes the views of students, instructors, and administrators toward a learning community program that served first-year developmental reading students at a public two-year college. One-on-one interviews and focus groups revealed that semester-long learning communities helped students overcome obstacles toward academic success by providing students with opportunities to: (a) seek help on campus, (b) develop time management skills, and (c) obtain career guidance. Research participants reported that the program (a) eased students' transition to college-level courses, (b) fostered a sense of community, (c) boosted academic confidence, (d) improved attitudes toward reading, and (e) increased student persistence. Using a grounded theory approach, a conceptual model is proposed for understanding how learning communities may shape the trajectories of developmental students.

Keywords: learning community, developmental reading, student persistence, warming up

Learning communities “... link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll a common cohort of students” (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004, p. 20). When effective, learning communities feature an integrated curriculum, a shared sense of community, and collaboration that fosters an environment that promotes learning and academic success (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Learning communities have become increasingly common in recent years as institutions seek to improve performance on accountability metrics such as retention and graduation rates.

Research suggests that learning communities at two-year colleges sometimes positively influence student success, but not as consistently—or to the same degree—as at four-year counterparts (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Notably, there are relatively few studies that have investigated learning

communities for *developmental* students at two-year colleges, and fewer still for *developmental reading* students. The U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, and What Works Clearinghouse (ED, IES, & WWC, 2014) identified six studies that used experimental or quasi-experimental designs to examine linked-course learning communities involving developmental education; while three of these studies were conducted at the same institution (Bloom & Sommo, 2005; Scrivener et al., 2008; Sommo, Mayer, Rudd, & Cullinan, 2012), the others were not (Weiss, Visher, & Wathington, 2010; Weissman, Cullinan, Cerna, Safran, & Richman, 2012; Weissman et al., 2011). Five student outcomes were evaluated: academic achievement was measured in two of the six studies; degree attainment was included in one study; and later postsecondary enrollment, credit accumulation, and progress in developmental education were addressed in each of the six. Although those in a learning community scored more favorably on each of the five outcomes (than those not in a program), no group difference was large enough to be considered substantively important (ED et al., 2014). Further, Weiss et al. (2010) was the only study of the six with a learning community that included a developmental reading course. However, there were no significant advantages to learning community participation with respect to end-of-semester grade point average, later postsecondary enrollment, credit accumulation, or progress in developmental education. Finally, students in the developmental reading community did not increase their reading grades vis-à-vis those not in the program.

This case study addresses this gap in the literature by analyzing a learning community program for developmental reading students at a public two-year college. The investigators sought to understand whether students, instructors, and administrators believed that the semester-long program made a difference for students and if so, which specific avenues appeared to lead to positive outcomes (both proximal and more distal). A grounded theory approach to data analysis (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) enabled the investigators to develop a conceptual model of how learning communities may shape college trajectories for developmental reading students.

Several theories and constructs were used as an orienting framework for this study: (a) student departure theory, (b) student involvement theory, (c) cultural, social, and economic capital, and (d) “warming up” versus “cooling out.” The concept of social integration is a critical aspect of student departure theory (Tinto, 1993), and this theory is most often used to explain why learning communities should benefit students. Student involvement theory (Astin, 1999) was harnessed to examine which types

of involvement were required or fostered by the program, and how these involvements may contribute to student success. Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital were important to understand the obstacles that developmental students face, particularly for literacy. Finally, the constructs of "warming up" (Deil-Amen, 2006) and "cooling out" (Clark, 1960) were used to consider how the program might impact collegiate or career aspirations for students; while these have been applied to community college settings, the authors are not aware of a study that specifically examines them in the context of learning communities. This study was guided by a novel composite theoretical framework and is notable since discussions of learning communities seldom invoke educational theories explicitly to understand *how* they shape students' experiences.

This research studies linked-course learning communities for developmental reading students between fall 2014 and fall 2016 at a public two-year college. Aims of the study were to:

- Assess views of processes and effects associated with the learning community from multiple vantage points (students, instructors, administrators), with particular attention to students' voices, which are often minimized or lost in research on educational reform (Ingersoll, 2003; Taines, 2012).
- Illuminate obstacles to the success experienced by students, and whether a learning community developed to meet their needs might help to lessen these obstacles.
- Develop a conceptual model of how learning communities may shape students' outcomes.
- Uncover insights that might prove useful for improving programs elsewhere.

Method

Program Characteristics

The learning community program was designed by the college for those deemed to need developmental reading education (those scoring between 38 and 42 on the Computer-adapted Placement Assessment and Support Services [COMPASS] Exam). Students who scored below 38 on this placement exam started their education in a continuing education program and transferred to the college once they scored 38 or higher. The program sought to enhance students': (a) reading skills, (b) academic self-confidence, (c) attitudes about reading, (d) sense of community in the classroom and the broader campus, and (e) persistence into the subsequent semester. Learning communities were of the linked-course va-

riety over a single semester, with courses scheduled back-to-back on the same day (First-Year Experiences [FYE] first and Reading second). FYE taught strategies to promote success in college and emphasized academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills. Class sizes for the learning communities were capped at 24. Participation in a learning community was optional, and two communities were offered each semester. Each learning community was taught by two instructors, who were reportedly selected based on scheduling needs. Key features of the learning community included coordinated teaching across the linked courses, an integrated curriculum (e.g., shared topical motifs and assignments), and specialized training for instructors.

Data Collection

Near the end of the fall 2014 semester, one-on-one interviews were conducted with the two learning community instructors and two focus groups consisting of 27 of the 35 students who persisted in the two learning communities. Students who dropped out were not interviewed. Instructors were asked about their teaching practices, benefits or complications with integrating teaching across the linked courses, and their likes/dislikes about the program. During spring 2015, two more focus groups were held with another 18 learning community students who were about to complete their semester in the program. Finally, one-on-one interviews were carried out with the two instructors and four program/college administrators during spring 2016, and with seven learning community students during fall 2016; interviews asked about strengths/weaknesses of the program and perceptions of how students performed postprogram (two to three semesters after students exited their learning community). The 2016 interviews were conducted as students neared graduation, and thus might yield information about more distal impacts of learning community experiences. Table 1 summarizes sample sizes for each role (student, instructor, or administrator) within the learning community program by semester.

Table 1. *Sample Sizes by Semester for Roles Within the Learning Community Program*

Semester	Sample Size for Role
Fall 2014	Two focus groups with students (<i>n</i> = 27 total) One-on-one interviews with instructors (<i>n</i> = 2)
Spring 2015	Two focus groups with students (<i>n</i> = 18 total)
Spring 2016	One-on-one interviews with instructors (<i>n</i> = 2) and program/college administrators (<i>n</i> = 4)
Fall 2016	One-on-one interviews with students (<i>n</i> = 7)

Analysis and Reporting

Thematic analysis was used to both describe and interpret data (Boyatzis, 1998). Sensitizing concepts were used to develop certain themes (Blumer, 1954, p. 7), while others were identified via the constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). A grounded theory approach (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) was used to develop a conceptual model of how learning communities appeared to shape the experiences and educational trajectories of students. Pseudonyms were used when quoting study participants.

Results

Obstacles for Developmental Students

Primary obstacles that emerged for students while pursuing their academic goals included the following themes: (a) low academic and social confidence, (b) family responsibilities, (c) demands from paid work, (d) difficulties with accessing and using computer technologies, and (e) difficulties in choosing a career.

Low Academic and Social Confidence

Most students interviewed were apprehensive about beginning college with a developmental course. Dana offered, “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.” Some students felt shame; they feared being labeled as “less than” by their instructors and/or peers. Dana’s comment suggested that the program helped to “normalize” the experience. It was apparent to the authors that the program was designed to reduce stigma, e.g., not widely advertising that the learning community was tailored to developmental students and holding a “graduation” ceremony for program completers. Even when they knew the correct answers, students expressed little confidence in their academic abilities. Dana explained,

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 ... there was a worksheet that I was doing ... I kept just writing it, erasing it, writing it, erasing it ...

Students talked about low social confidence when interacting with instructors and peers. For example, Erin said that “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.” Low confidence may prevent students from seeking help from peers and/or instructors when they need it most. In addition, developmental students may hold different types of cultural capital than those held by faculty and staff, which may partly explain the students' reticence in both the academic and social realms. Bourdieu (1986) defined cultural capital as dress, mannerisms, skills, and knowledge that is dominant within the institution. Low levels of academic and/or social confidence can ultimately hinder social integration and involvement, two factors that have been shown to be critical in student persistence (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1993).

Family Responsibilities

A majority of students noted that familial duties interfered with their schooling.

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.

Role overload or “trying to do too many things at once to meet the demands of both work and life,” (Schulte, 2014, p. 22) was apparent in students' accounts as they felt physically, mentally, and emotionally drained from conflicting demands of roles, including that of caregiver to a child or aging parent. Schulte's (2014) concept of “time confetti” seems apropos here in that students' harried schedules became splintered into slivers of time that were not amenable to in-depth thinking and complex course projects.

Demands from Paid Work

All students interviewed held full- or part-time paid jobs. Four students interviewed worked approximately 20 hours per week, while the others worked over 30. A majority discussed how long work hours impinged on their academic effort. Felicity said, “I'm working full time. ... I have another job. ... What's really changed also ... is my sleep schedule ... working third shift ... not motivated ... always tired.”

Difficulties with Accessing and Using Computer Technologies

Students mentioned difficulties with computer technologies needed for educational activities, something that was echoed by their instructors. For instance, “I didn’t even know how to get on the internet when I started my first semester,” Erin stated. Also, course management systems were often used at this college to access learning materials and submit assignments.

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

Gina mentioned having reliable internet access when asked what advice she would give to incoming students.

Other obstacles faced by students may exacerbate technology challenges. For example, a majority of students interviewed worked, which made it difficult to visit campus computer labs that were open only during school hours. Further, students did not live on campus. They may have been unwilling (or lacked the resources) to drive long distances to complete or submit assignments online.

Difficulties with Choosing a Career

Six of the seven students in one-on-one interviews reported challenges in choosing a career, and even those who had selected one often changed it prior to graduation. Ultimately, selecting a career became a source of stress for these students.

Learning Communities and Overcoming Obstacles

Participants believed that the learning communities helped students overcome obstacles by providing students with opportunities to: (a) seek help from peers, instructors, and campus staff, (b) develop time management skills, and (c) receive career guidance.

Seek Help

All students interviewed discussed seeking help as a way of negotiating their obstacles, and instructors and administrators also talked at length about how students sought help. Notably, all students who exhibited a lack of confidence also said that their self-confidence improved because of their instructors, peers, and/or classes associated with the program. Like-

wise, a majority of instructors and administrators noted how students' confidence increased throughout the program. Sources of help stemmed largely from peers, instructors, and resources at the college. Students discussed how their willingness to seek help constituted a change in their behavior for the better. Gina offered, "...now if I don't have that [a dictionary] available, I don't mind asking a teacher— 'Hey, what does this mean?'" Further, students gave credit to the program for this transformation.

Dana: [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 ...

Although students stated that they received the most help from instructors, peers were also a major source of aid. 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 an indication of the close-knit community in the program. Gina also stated "Reading and FYE helped me. Before I would have never reached out and done group projects or even thought about asking classmates for help." As such, students experienced social integration, a key component for student persistence in Tinto's (1993) student departure theory. Dana discussed how she felt like a mother to some of the "kids" and she encouraged them to do their work.

Dana: 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.

Last, a majority of students talked of campus resources as a means to overcome or minimize obstacles, although instructors did not believe that students took enough advantage of these resources. Students discussed using the writing center, learning center, and tutors.

Erin: I'm ... bad at math, [FYE instructor] helped me get the tutor. ... I 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.

Thus, interactions with peers, instructors, and campus resources helped developmental students enhance their confidence, acquire social and cultural capital, and prevent "cooling out" of their aspirations.

Develop Time Management Skills

Time management was another mechanism by which students reported that they navigated obstacles. Time management was considered both a skill for studying and something to apply to their lives more generally. Time management also helped with managing role conflicts for students; students provided numerous examples wherein they made sacrifices so that they could be more focused on academics. For instance, five interviewed students testified to working fewer hours or quitting their job as a way of coping with time demands. Dana described how a class activity on time management allowed her to realize that she was overworked.

Dana: 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 was always either in pain or stressed.

Dana grasped there was little time in her schedule for college. Consequently, she stopped work and spoke with her husband about helping more around the house.

Obtain Career Guidance

Lastly, there was evidence that the program, particularly FYE and instructors, helped students choose a career. Well-defined career goals have been linked to student persistence (Hull-Blanks et al., 2005). In focus groups and one-on-one interviews, students demonstrated that they valued their time in 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 [a university],” declared Erin. Students were motivated to graduate as evident from Erin’s comments. All students interviewed planned to proceed to a four-year university for a bachelor’s degree, and all interviewees expressed little doubt they would be successful in achieving their college goals.

Reported Benefits of the Learning Communities

The qualitative data analysis suggests that the program may have achieved its general goals to foster student persistence, heighten a sense of community, and bolster students’ academic and social confidence. Further, students perceived cognitive gains in annotation, finding the main idea, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and improved attitudes toward reading.

Students engaged in frequent peer learning and cooperative activities, which dovetails with Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano (2011) and Park, Cerven, Nations, and Nielsen (2013), who argue that the classroom is a vital opportunity for students to get integrated into college life. Students referred to their classmates as “friends,” “family members,” or “study partners.” 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 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.” Gina also described how her interactions with classmates influenced her: “They [classmates] would be all so eager and excited to do something, made me want to be that way too.” Students identified a variety of cooperative learning opportunities that were beneficial, including presentations, discussions, projects, a scavenger hunt, thematic fairs, and a book club. Students believed that these helped them by easing social integration, guiding future course selection, and exposing them to diverse viewpoints.

Students interviewed also reported frequent and positive relations with their instructors, both inside and out of class. Students liked their instructors and found them approachable, caring, and encouraging, using words such as “parent,” “family,” “friend,” “coach,” “adviser,” and “mentor” to describe them. Any pressure from instructors was couched in beneficial terms: “They pushed us to do well so we would do well ... our next semester and all throughout the rest of our college,” said Bethany. An objective of the program was that interactions would extend beyond the classroom, and several students reported talking with their program instructors in subsequent semesters.

Students often credited peers and instructors with being the most beneficial aspect of the program, a finding not inconsistent with those of Wathington, Pretlow, and Mitchell (2010), who found that developmental learning communities were associated with a more supportive classroom climate. Small class sizes and frequent, positive interactions with peers and instructors may enhance students’ sense of belonging and integration during the first semester of college, which may bode well for student persistence (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

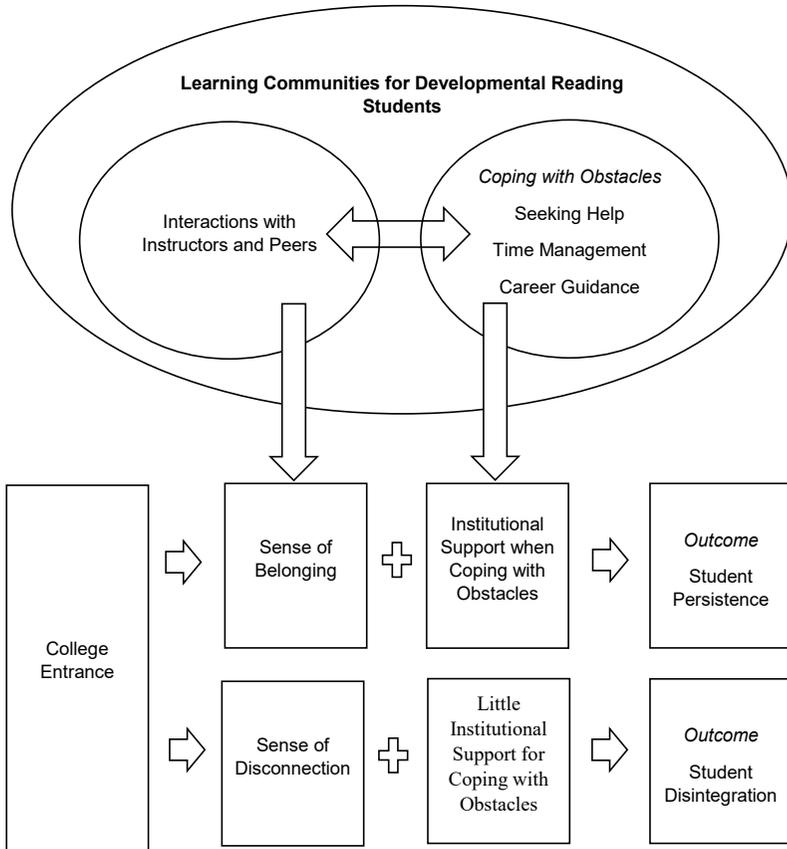
Discussion

A conceptual model is presented in Figure 1 for how the learning communities in this case study may have shaped potential trajectories of de-

velopmental reading students based on a grounded theoretic analysis of reports from students, instructors, and administrators (Lanphier, 2019). From the first day of college, developmental students are vulnerable to drop out. This study indicates that developmental reading students often felt a sense of disconnection when starting college, and a majority who participated in one-on-one interviews reported that they did not feel supported by the college in general during their first semester (see the bottom of Figure 1). Also, instructors and administrators are professionals, and as such, often display middle-class (or higher) norms and expectations that are often imposed (whether intentionally or not) on students (Jack, 2016). Thus, feelings of disconnection and lack of institutional support may also stem from cultural mismatches in terms of what students bring with them to college vis-à-vis what is expected (Lehmann, 2007). The literature is clear that developmental students experience numerous obstacles, and when institutional support is lacking to help students cope with them, the additive load of feeling disconnected and experiencing unabated obstacles can lead to disintegration, including dropping out (Tinto, 1993).

In contrast, the learning communities for developmental reading students (top of Figure 1) appeared to increase students' sense of belonging after they entered college, both directly through increased interactions with instructors and peers, and indirectly through coping mechanisms that accrued from the learning communities (seeking help, developing time management skills and obtaining career advice). Learning communities also appeared to increase students' use of institutional support and resources directly through students' improved coping mechanisms, which were honed from repeated interactions with instructors and peers in the program. In turn, when students felt they belonged and tapped into institutional supports, they appeared to have a greater chance of persisting (middle of Figure 1). Whether the theoretic model in Figure 1 would apply to other developmental subjects is a question for future empirical study.

Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of How Learning Communities May Shape Trajectories of Developmental Reading Students.



In addition to the conceptual model shown in Figure 1, this study contributes to a theoretical understanding of learning communities by applying a novel combination of four existing theories and constructs toward a more comprehensive understanding. Consistent with Tinto's (1993) student departure theory and Astin's (1999) student involvement theory, increased interactions and involvement with peers, faculty, and campus staff/organizations stemming from learning community experiences appeared to play a key role in increasing students' social and academic integration. This study finds support for Tinto's (1993) argument that student involvement influences students' perceptions, and Miley and Berger (1997, p. 398) bring the argument full circle (as in Figure 1) by noting that "... forms of involvement do influence students' perceptions of institutional support and peer support. In turn, these perceptions of support appear to shape students' level of institutional commitment."

Findings also suggest that learning communities may assist developmental students in acquiring certain kinds of social and cultural capital that are important for success in college (Bourdieu, 1986). Interaction and involvement were key components of the program, as students expanded their social connections and thereby acquired social capital and forms of cultural capital, e.g., time management skills, how to seek help and resources, and career guidance. Consistent with research that has found “warming up” processes (Alexander, Bozick, & Entwisle, 2008; Deil-Amen, 2006), program instructors in this study were reported to contribute to students’ high aspirations on selected majors and desire for a four-year degree. Yet findings extended beyond college to include career aspirations, e.g., students sought jobs that would bring satisfaction and also pay well. Planning and establishing career goals are important for success, yet interviewed students lacked clear career goals when entering college. However, after the program, students “warmed up” career goals by making them more concrete. Similar to Nielsen (2015), this study did not find evidence of students being “cooled out” with respect to their aspirations.

Limitations

This study could not employ random assignment due to the way the program was implemented by the college. To ensure that the learning communities reached maximum capacity, advisors were encouraged to check for open spots in the linked courses and then encouraged students to participate if a spot was open. In order to understand the enrollment decision, focus groups were asked why they elected to enroll in the program. A majority reported that they were effectively placed into the program by their adviser (likely on a first-to-register basis). In addition, a group of developmental students who did not enroll in the program was recruited for comparison purposes, but none responded to a focus group invitation in fall 2014, and only one offered to be interviewed in fall 2016. Recruitment within the linked-course classrooms provides a structural explanation for the much higher cooperation rate for those in the program. Without random assignment and a comparison group, causal assertions about any learning community effects would be inappropriate. Instead, these findings should be viewed as suggestive, but may well yield authentic, practical, and theoretic insights into the operations of a learning community designed for developmental reading students.

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