Learning Communities for Academically Under-Prepared Students

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Complicated issues face higher education in 2005: assessment and accountability, ever-rising costs and the number and quality of the pool of students, the relevance and content of general education. No issue is more important to the future of higher education and the nation than the fundamental issue of access: which students from which high schools deserve access to which colleges and universities? Currently approximately 98% of colleges and universities offer pre-collegiate courses in reading, writing, and mathematics providing most eligible students a place in higher education. Legislative and public pressure to reduce the number of students with basic skills needs admitted to the state university systems in Minnesota, California, and Texas, for example, suggests access soon may be more limited. The decision of state universities to welcome all qualified students will be influenced by our ability to prepare adequately those students who have demonstrated their academic potential but require some basic skills development.

The Pathways to College Success Project was designed to study the academic paths taken by students with basic skills or developmental course requirements in order to understand what strategies support student success and what policies, practices, and conditions impede success. The study is comprised of three parts:

1. A longitudinal study of nineteen two and four-year colleges that have implemented learning communities for academically under-prepared students,

2. A longitudinal survey of over 6,000 learning community and comparison group students tracked over two years, and

3. Case studies built from two years of interviews with learning community students who are required to take developmental courses.

Prior research confirms the efficacy of learning communities as a learning environment for student with developmental needs. There seem to be three complementary reasons for academically under-prepared students’ academic success in learning communities. Learning communities support students’ needs to learn; learning communities help academic and student affairs professionals collaborate

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1 See appendix A for a list of participating institutions

2 http://pathways.syr.edu

on student success; and learning communities connect ideas and skills in an integrating structure that improves the quality of learning for all students.4

The goals for the Pathways to Academic Success Project can be summarized as:

• Document the impact of learning communities on the educational attainment of academically under-prepared students in two and four-year institutions.
• Understand the ways in which learning communities can support the academic success of academically under-prepared students.

Why CSUEB? East Bay’s freshman learning communities provide a rare research opportunity among American universities because they link developmental composition classes with baccalaureate level classes. Students with basic skills needs and those who have demonstrated college-level skills in math and writing work together in their clusters, unlike most universities utilizing learning communities.

Methods and data collection: Part one of the Pathways to Academic Success Project follows freshmen who matriculated in fall 2003 at CSUEB and the other 18 study-site campuses for a period of six years. The results, still three years from completion, will allow us to describe students’ varied paths through the university and which paths lead to graduation in six years.

The second part of the study involved interviewing a sample of CSUEB freshmen over a two year period. The students participated in individual interviews and focus groups each quarter of their freshman and sophomore years. This enabled us to gather information about the influence of CSUEB’s learning community program over an extended period of time that included the two years in which most students make the decision to stay in college or leave. This portion of the study is close to completion and while we are still analyzing many hours of interview data collected from CSUEB students, we are confident in making the observations below based on our repeated conversations with students over a two year period.

The students: CSUEB’s students who participated in the Pathways Project are a very diverse group. We began with 53 student participants who were enrolled in nine different clusters. As a whole, they see securing a college degree as a way to obtain a better life. They are ethnically and racially diverse and most are from low socioeconomic backgrounds. For students for whom English is not a first language, they understand that learning English is the key to a better life in the US. Native speakers in basic skills courses describe their high schools as lacking a serious academic atmosphere and acknowledge their weak academic backgrounds. Their high schools did not help them acquire appropriate study habits; their friends did not take academics seriously. Some students were fortunate to find bridge programs, select counselors or particular teachers who taught them about college and encouraged their dreams.

California State University, East Bay data to date

Most of the students we interviewed at CSUEB valued participating in the learning communities. As they moved to the end of their second year, they typically voiced the following views in consistent and

pronounced ways. Primarily, they appreciated having a clear structure to complete their requirements. While initially a few chafed at the strict set of courses and time schedules in the clusters, over time they recognized and valued clear benefits from the learning communities.

1. The value of developmental and support courses: All students interviewed were required to take some developmental courses; most needed to take at least two terms of basic skills coursework. Although at first they resented being in "remedial" classes, they came to see the developmental courses as foundational and rather than seeing themselves as "developmental education" students, they saw themselves as having basic skill requirements to fulfill. That is, they viewed themselves as under-prepared, not under-developed. The experiences they had, particularly in their composition and General Studies courses, provided strong validation for their academic abilities and potential. They felt special, more comfortable at the university and more confident about their ability to succeed after completing their basic skill courses than at the start of their freshman year. In fact, the interviews uncovered a sense among the students that when they were taking their baccalaureate-level composition classes they were more prepared and had stronger writing skills than their peers who did not have to take any developmental classes.

Although students tended to say they did not need their GS classes, when they talked about how they had changed as students over their first two years, they referred to the foundation provided by GS: discovering how they learn, developing time and stress management strategies and study skills, for example. They identified the General Studies class as the place they received solid academic advising.

2. The importance of composition and General Studies faculty: The composition and General Studies faculty were particularly important in supporting the students' sense of belonging to the university and their increasing confidence. Students emphasized that having the same instructor throughout their developmental composition classes and their General Studies courses was a powerful positive influence. The English and/or General Studies faculty often played critical support roles in promoting students' success by acting as liaison between the student and other cluster faculty and between students and the university's support services and bureaucracy. The faculty put in place structures to help students prepare for their other cluster classes by helping them plan their course work and by expecting high quality work. For example, composition faculty required draft papers and participation in peer and faculty reviews sessions. GS faculty advocated for study guides in cluster classes, created discussion or study groups, required students to make presentations on current class topics using PowerPoint, etc.

3. The role of Communication classes: For students learning English as an additional language, their developmental classes and instructors were important to their sense of themselves as competent students. Their confidence in their ability to succeed at CSUEB was not solely a result of the developmental composition classes, however. They repeatedly identified their Communication course as essential to their developing competence as effective communicators in English. They valued the opportunity the Communication classes gave them to practice formal and conversational communication skills. Although the students initially dreaded taking a public speaking class, the data make it clear that
the earlier they took the class the more positive its impact. For these students the combination of speaking and writing instruction were key underpinnings of their academic identity and self esteem.

4. Learning about and from diversity: Many students told us they were learning a great deal about diversity in their learning community classes, particularly in General Studies and composition. They reported that they were increasingly comfortable getting to know peers who were different from them and that they were learning from the diverse perspectives and backgrounds their classmates shared. They felt that learning about and from diversity was both encouraged and validated in their classes.

5. Finding academic support: The data illuminate the importance of providing all freshmen with courses that (1) challenge their abilities, (2) give timely and regular feedback so that they can understand how to improve, and (3) supply the support to help them achieve their goals. The students identified their General Studies teachers and Linda Beebe, GE Program Coordinator and Advisor, as key academic supports. They highly valued the tutoring services provided by the Student Center for Academic Achievement. (The students noted that their composition and/or General Studies faculty were the ones to refer them to the SCAA for tutoring assistance.) EOP students commented repeatedly over the two years that their EOP counselor was invaluable to their success. The General Studies and English faculty connected students with other campus resources, most typically, the Career Development Center. It would be difficult to over-emphasize the importance of GS and composition faculty and GE office staff to students feeling validated for their choice to attend CSUEB and their confidence as students.

After the first year, however, students tended to become disconnected. They forgot the value of academic advising and were lost about how to get it. They began turning to their peers and when trouble arose, returned to Linda Beebe for help. Due to the prescribed nature of the two year learning community program, the students were on track to finish their general education requirements but they were becoming increasingly anxious about what was next—choosing classes, a major, careers, etc.

Students reported that they valued being in an academic environment that supported their goal of achieving a college degree. When library hours were cut, however, in their second year, many reported this as a significant problem. They had learned to use the library, its resources, its academic aura, and its space to support their learning. Many of these students came from homes where the demands of studying were not well understood or supported. They found the library a welcoming and supportive environment. These students felt the limitation of hours as a real loss and as an indication that the university did not understand how important having a safe and supportive place to study was to their academic success.

6. Connecting with campus life: Learning community faculty and student affairs staff need to find more effective ways to connect freshmen to student groups and activities on campus. We heard from the students that they remembered being encouraged to join a student group and participate in campus life in their General Studies classes where many interviewed student group members and gave reports on their missions and goals. However, in the first year most of the students were too focused on passing their courses to think about co-curricular activities. In their second year when they were ready to make those connections they no longer experienced the encouragement or support to act. They struggled with how to make these connections. Students who secured on-campus jobs, particularly in the library, commented on
the benefits of their experiences. These jobs increased their sense of belonging and reinforced their sense of purpose. Most students reported that they found such jobs through their peers, rather than through any systematic support from the campus. The university should consider ways to facilitate those connections late in the freshman year and continuing into the second year.

7. **Quality of instruction and connected learning**: The students consistently reported that they were helped to see connections among their science, humanities or social science courses through the efforts of their composition and General Studies faculty. Few “discipline” faculty provided the connections among ideas and issues of thematically integrated learning communities. The students who did not have composition or General Studies faculty assisting them struggled to articulate any connected learning experiences. These data suggest that ongoing faculty development is critical to the continued success and improvement of the freshman year experience for CSUEB students.

Through their General Studies classes students became savvy experts on pedagogy, how they learn best, and what conditions promote their learning. They developed a belief in the value of integrated learning experiences. Consequently, in our second year interviews, we listened to more critiques about “learning communities.” Most faculty in second year clusters failed to make links across the curriculum. The students, in interviews, would share ideas and opportunities for connecting courses that were lost by faculty choosing to ignore the identified learning community theme. Clearly these students had acquired an appreciation of a multidisciplinary lens to address critical issues and problems in society.

Students also talked about the benefits they experienced in small classes: the faculty seemed more approachable and they were able to get to know their peers. Smaller class size made participation in class discussions, activities, and learning easier.

8. **Connecting to CSUEB**: Many students we talked to in the first quarter of their college experience reported that they would probably transfer out of CSUEB. Their expectations for enjoying CSUEB were not high. However, by the end of two years, only one or two students were considering transferring and then because of changing career or major interests. Students were pleasantly surprised at how connected they felt, how much they valued the personal-ness of faculty and staff and how much they appreciated the small class sizes.

**Summary**: CSUEB’s learning communities are powerful learning environments that serve as a conduit to a web of critical academic and personal support services, with their composition and General Studies faculty busily weaving the web of connections. Students say their chances of graduation are better because of their freshman experiences and the connections the clusters help them make with other students, faculty and staff. They report that they appreciate CSUEB’s academic environment which they see as helping them complete their general education requirements and achieve a college degree. CSUEB’s program is a model for other four-year colleges seeking to create academic success for their students with basic skills needs. Their lives are complex and so are their journeys through college. CSUEB’s freshman learning communities provide students with the education, support, and validation they need on their varied pathways to graduation.