FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES IN A DEVELOPMENTAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

by

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A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of Humboldt State University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
In Education
May 2008
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DEVELOPMENTAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

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A variety of developmental studies programs exist on community college campuses nationwide designed to assist students who begin college lacking the skills necessary to be successful. Learning communities have been used as a curricular structure to help support students’ intellectual, personal, and social growth while they are in college. This study investigated first-year college experiences, from the student perspective, as members of a learning community which featured support services and linked developmental English and learning success courses in a rural northern California community college. Participants included a cohort of first-year college students \((N=53)\) affected by educational, social or economic disadvantages and receiving services from Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS). A mixed method research design was used including pre- and post-test data collected from the Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory (CSI), a locally developed survey, and focus groups. Major findings suggest that establishing relationships and being able to respond to needed academic or personal support were the most helpful aspects of the EOPS Learning Community. Overall satisfaction with the learning community experience was correlated with student satisfaction with one of the two courses. Differences were also found between learning community completers and
non-completers, as those students who completed the courses rated their desire to finish college, family emotional support, intellectual interests, and study habits significantly higher than those students who did not complete.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like extend a sincere thank you to my committee chair, Eric Van Duzer. You have helped me through this entire process, and especially in making sense of some very complicated data. Thank you for all you have taught me. I have learned so much from you and believe it or not, statistics are actually fun. I would like to thank Ann Diver-Stamnes for keeping me grounded. No matter what the circumstances, as “Queen of APA”, your patience with crazy formatting and attention to detail has saved me. I appreciate the countless hours you have spent in helping me complete this project. I would also like to thank Keith Snow-Flamer for encouraging me to finish in a timely manner. You have inspired me to continue my education beyond what I thought was possible. Thank you for seeing in me what I often forget. Even though she wasn’t on my committee, I would like to thank Cathleen Rafferty for all her guidance through this process, especially in my moments of panic. You all have such an amazing work ethic and I sincerely appreciate all the time and energy you have invested in me.

Without the support of Cheryl Tucker and Melissa Green, none of this would be possible. I appreciate you allowing me the flexibility to continue working full time while pursuing my Master’s degree. I love what I do, and you both made getting this degree a reality. I appreciate the support and continued encouragement from all my friends and family, especially Jennifer Bailey, Jerry Phillips, and my EOPS “family”. Thanks for letting me explain, even though you probably had no clue what I was talking about.
Finally, I want to thank my amazing husband, Brian Hall. You have always supported everything I’ve done, with this three-year journey of a Master’s degree as no exception. Your love, patience, and hugs through the laughter and tears make it all worth it. I promise that I will never say again, “I’m almost done.” I love you.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities have been struggling to meet the needs of a growing number of students who begin higher education with limited academic skills. The number of these so-called remedial students has grown over the years so that today it is estimated that nearly four in ten students enter college underprepared, needing some form of developmental education (Tinto, 1998). In some institutions, remedial students now make up a majority of the entering student body; many require remediation in virtually every academic skill area. In some cases, students enter college with no more than sixth-grade skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. The result is that many institutions are required to invest substantial resources in remedial education, now more commonly referred to as developmental education, to help these students acquire the skills they need to succeed in college.

Institutions of higher education face several challenges in attempting to meet the developmental needs of underprepared students. When budgets are constrained, as they are now, it becomes more difficult to address the criticisms of cost and effectiveness for resources to assist developmental education students. The role of remediation in higher education is the subject of ongoing debate. The debate centers around a variety of questions, including, for example, whether remediation should be encouraged because it expands educational opportunities to underprepared students, or whether it should be discouraged because remediation should not occur at the
university level (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). While the debate continues as to where remediation is best addressed, almost universal consensus exists among community colleges that serving underprepared students is an important part of the community college mission (Oudenhoven, 2002).

Past and present efforts have typically served to isolate and, in some cases, marginalize underprepared students in stand-alone courses for which no college credit can be earned (Tinto, 1998). A limited but growing number of institutions are pursuing alternative approaches to address the educational needs of these students. One way to address the negative impact of remediation and improve retention is through the use of learning communities that address the social and academic needs of underprepared students who require developmental education (Gablenick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Hill, 1985; Tinto, 1998).

Given the scope of the problem, some institutions have come to the conclusion that one of the most effective and efficient ways to address remediation is the establishment of programs that develop a sense of community. It should be noted that the growing popularity of learning communities reflects the now widespread recognition of the importance of student’s involvement in their education. The relationship between student involvement and student attainment is strong (Astin, 1987, 1993; Boyer, 1987; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1998). The more students are involved in the social and academic life of an institution, the more likely they are to learn and persist. Regardless of how we choose to define success in college – whether it is a statistical measure of persistence and retention or gains in
critical thinking and writing abilities, evidence now suggests that creating learning communities on campuses leads to greater success in college (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Although extensive research exists on the various learning community models, limited research exists on underprepared student experiences in a developmental learning community model. This study will examine first-year students’ perceptions of a learning community that links a remedial basic skills English course with a college success study-skills course in a rural northern California community college. The research examines the following main question: What are students’ perceptions of their first-year college experience as members in a developmental learning community? The next several paragraphs will include a description of Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), the program that supports the learning community in this study, and provide operational definitions of terms that will be used throughout this research.

Students in this study were eligible for and receive services from Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), a state-funded program that assists students who are educationally and economically disadvantaged. EOPS was established in 1969 as a social reform program of the California Community Colleges. The program's initiating legislation is governed by the California Education Code which encouraged the state's community colleges to develop programs and services to meet the unique educational needs of students handicapped by language, social, and economic disadvantages, including programs and service
Definitions of learning communities are evolving. For the purpose of this study, the most basic form of learning communities is represented by the co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together as a cohort (Tinto, 1998). In some cases, students enroll together in two courses, most typically a course in writing or math with a course in selected literature or study skills. According to Shapiro & Levine (1999), learning community initiatives share basic characteristics such as:

- organizing students and faculty into smaller groups,
- encouraging integration of the curriculum,
- helping students establish academic and social support networks,
- providing a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of college,
- bringing faculty together in more meaningful ways,
- focusing faculty and students on learning outcomes,
- providing a setting for community-based delivery of academic support programs, and
- offering a critical lens for examining the first-year experience.

In this particular study, the terms learning community or linked classes are used interchangeably and include the two individual courses listed below:
• English 350 – Reading and writing skills: A pre-collegiate, competency-based course emphasizing the acquisition and integration of basic academic reading and writing skills. Students develop reading strategies necessary for simple academic reading and write extended formal paragraphs and basic expository essays. The lab component of the course is scheduled in the Writing Center where students practice basic reading and writing skills and receive essential tutorial support in reading strategies, writing, and sentence skills. This is a remedial course that serves as a prerequisite for advancing in the English course sequence and does not count towards an associate degree.

• General Studies 150 – Learning success: An introduction to the academic and personal skills needed to succeed in college and beyond. Students learn how to manage time and classroom dynamics; improve reading, note-taking, and test-taking skills; establish an educational plan; generate critical responses to what they read, see, and hear; and are introduced to the basic technology required to find, evaluate, and use information of all kinds.

For the purposes of this study, retention, persistence, and success are defined in alignment with the definitions created by The Center for Student Success and Research and Planning Group of California (2007). Retention rate is defined as the percentage of students who completed a course. This number is institutionally reported as the number of students enrolled at census date and the number of students enrolled at the end of the term for any particular course section. Those students who stop attending class and do not formally withdraw from their courses
are counted as retained. In other words, a distinction is made between the students who stopped attending the class which resulted in a failing grade versus those students who completed the course and earned a substandard grade (D or F grade notation) or were absent on the last day.

Persistence rate is defined as students continuing from one term to the next term. In this study, if students enrolled in at least one course for the next semester, they are considered as having persisted.

Finally, success is defined as students succeeding in the course with an A, B, or C grade notation. For purposes of this study, I have defined success rate as those students who completed at least one of the two learning community courses with a C grade or better.

The following section will provide the framework and organization of the succeeding chapters. The review of literature begins with a brief historical perspective of the development of the community college system and the changing demographics of the students served. The current student population is examined including descriptions of academic and social risk factors that necessitate remediation in basic skills. Having described the system and students, the evolution of developmental studies programs is discussed, as well as components of those programs designed to assist underprepared students. Learning communities, or linked courses that provide basic skills in reading, writing, and study skills for developmental students, are examined.
The methodology chapter includes a description of the treatment which explains the structure, focus, and pedagogy of the learning community model in this study, as well as the criteria for which students were selected to participate. The mixed methods research approach is described along with the various qualitative and quantitative instruments used. The data collection process included the use of the Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory (CSI), a locally developed survey instrument, institutional data, and focus group interventions.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods are integrated in the results chapter organized by the study’s research questions. The analysis chapter provides an interpretation of the results and ways in which those results answer the original research questions. The final chapter concludes with a short summary of the main points of the research, a discussion of the limitations, and implications for future research.

The next chapter will provide the foundation for understanding this research in the context of the current supporting literature.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Today, nearly half of entering community college students are underprepared and lack the competencies needed to succeed in standard college courses (McCabe, 2003). The growing need for remediation is a large and complex issue for community colleges.

This review of the literature begins with a historical perspective of the community college system: how it began, who it served, and how it has changed over time. The community college student population is examined including descriptions of academic and social risk factors that necessitate remediation in basic skills. The evolution of developmental studies programs is discussed, as well as components of those programs that have demonstrated success in assisting underprepared students. In particular, the use of learning communities, or linked courses that provide basic skills in reading, writing, and study skills for developmental students will be examined. The review concludes with research questions specific to this study.

Historical Overview of the Community College System

In the 1800s, elite and affluent families pushed for the creation of colleges and universities that would mold their young men into cultivated and elegant gentleman (Diener, 1986). This curriculum effectively prepared the young male citizen for responsible leadership in government and in the professions of law,
medicine, and the ministry (Diener, 1986). Trends such as urbanization and industrialization resulted in changes in society, creating an increased need for trained workers to operate the nation’s expanding industries (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Diener, 1986). The public began to perceive schooling as an essential avenue of upward mobility and as a contributor to the community’s wealth (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). With its emphasis on agriculture and the mechanical arts, the Morrill Act of 1862, often referred to as the Land Grant Act, expanded access to public higher education, introduced new types of courses and included students from social strata previously excluded from higher education (Vaughan, 2000).

Following World War II, society demanded greater access for all citizens to higher education, opportunity for technical and job skill training, and availability of transfer preparation programs and community services for adults (Diener, 1986). In 1944, the U.S. Congress passed the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act, otherwise known as the GI Bill, to provide financial assistance for veterans of World War II who wished to pursue higher education (Vaughan, 2000). The GI Bill represented the federal government’s first attempt to provide student aid on a large scale, helping to break down the economic and social barriers to attending college (Vaughan, 2000).

The 1947 President’s Commission on Higher Education for American Democracy recommended the establishment of public community colleges that would charge little or no tuition, serve as cultural centers for the community, offer technical and general education, and be locally controlled (Vaughan, 2000).
commission’s report also popularized the term community colleges because of the
colleges’ now expanded functions, and this influenced the new term’s use throughout

It was not until the 1960s that society, as a result of both various social
movements and the availability of student-based financial aid, came to believe that
education beyond high school was a right and not just a privilege (Vaughan, 1985).
This resulted in new students for the first time entering higher education who came
from the lower quartile of their high school graduating class and from the lower
socioeconomic segments of society (Vaughan, 1985). Access through this open door
policy became the hallmark of the community college.

The 1960s and the 1970s were decades when access was the primary goal.
Community colleges were successful if they enrolled more students each year
regardless of why those students came and what happened to them after they enrolled
(Richardson, 1988). Student aid legislation continued through the 1970s which made
it possible for those students who could profit from an education to have the
financial resources to do so (Vaughan, 1985). The community college has served
millions of students who probably would not have attended college were it not for
federally funded student aid programs (Richardson, 1988).

In summary, the era of open access saw the construction of hundreds of new
two-year institutions and state initiatives – nontraditional institutions for
nontraditional students. Community colleges have had to balance very different
functions: transfer, remediation, vocational training, and community services. The
evolution of this system is a direct reflection of the changing demographics of the students who enrolled in community colleges. The following section will address the characteristics of community college students and their impact on institutional policies and practices.

*Community College Students*

In the early 1960s, research about community college students provided a fairly well-developed set of characteristics. On average, they had graduated from high school with a low C GPA or below, were deficient in some basic skills (particularly in language and mathematics), had poor study habits, were weakly motivated, had little or no home support to encourage continuing school, had unrealistic and ill-defined goals, were from homes with few advantages and minimal standards of living, and were first in their family to attend college (McGrath & Spear, 1991). Well into the 1970s, the profile of the nontraditional student who largely populated community colleges had not changed. Most were European Americans from blue-collar families while substantial numbers of the rest were members of ethnic minority groups (Rouche & Roueche, 1993). Most students had parents who never attended college. Many of these students had not been successful in high school studies, and they were more likely to plan on entering community colleges or vocational schools than four-year colleges or universities (Roueche & Roueche, 1993). These characteristics are still relevant today for much of the community college student population (Ender, Chand, & Thornton, 1996).
The community college system now serves a more diverse and larger population of students than ever before (Tovar, 2003). Today’s community college students vary in terms of sex, age, ethnicity, religion, disability, family history of college attendance, academic intentions, academic preparation, motivation levels, economic backgrounds, learning styles, part-time versus full-time enrollment status, commitments and obligations outside the college, and English-speaking ability (Ender, Chand, & Thornton, 1996). These characteristics have been used with this population to determine which students may be at-risk for academic failure or are underprepared for college-level courses.

In its 1990 report, Serving Underprepared Students, the League for Innovation in the Community College noted that while a disproportionate percentage of these students were minorities, especially in the urban areas, there remained incredible diversity within the category of high-risk: high school graduates, returning adults, high school dropouts, illiterate adults, immigrants, and students with limited English proficiency.

Students who are considered at-risk for failure in higher education are more likely than their peers to display any number of other characteristics such as low academic self-concept, unrealistic grade and career expectations, unfocused career objectives, extrinsic motivation, external locus of control, low self-efficacy, inadequate study skills for college success, a belief that learning is memorizing, and a history of passive learning (Ender & Wilkie, 2000). At-risk students may be those who have made poor choices or decisions that negatively impacted their academic
performance, adult students who return to higher education after an extended absence, or students with academic or physical limitations not identified before enrolling in higher education (Walsh, 2003).

A distinction should be made between an at-risk and an underprepared student. The term at-risk pertains to students whose academic, social, and economic conditions lead to higher rates of failure if there are no appropriate interventions (Roueche & Roueche, 1993). Underprepared is used to describe a student who enters higher education without the necessary skills, knowledge, motivation, and/or the academic ability to take on college-level curriculum (Young, 2002).

The at-risk students at the community college are not only underprepared for college but often also work thirty or more hours each week, have little if any support from key family members, are first-generation college attendees, have what some have described as “failure expectations,” and often have little academic success as they begin their postsecondary experience (Roueche & Roueche, 1993, p. 1).

Due to a variety of social, demographic, and educational factors, higher education can expect major increases in the number of students who are underprepared for the schooling that is required for success in twenty-first century society (McCabe & Day, 1998). The following section will elaborate on the need for remediation at the community college.

The Need for Remediation

Approximately half of entering community college students test as academically deficient and require remediation in at least one subject area to enroll
in a college-level course or degree program (McCabe & Day, 1998). Over the past two decades this figure has not changed, and educational trends suggest it will not decline anytime soon (McCabe & Day, 1998).

There has never been a time in U.S. educational history when all students who enrolled in college were adequately prepared, all courses offered at a higher education institution were college-level, and the transition for students between high school and college was smooth (Phipps, 1998). Given the open door philosophy of educational access and the wide range of student skill levels, the community college became known for the development of remedial education: basic computation, composition, and reading classes to help students meet their ultimate goals (Diener, 1986). Many educators and researchers have reached the conclusion that remediation is one of the most important and pressing educational, social, and economic issues in the United States today (Oudenhoven, 2002).

The role of remediation in higher education is the subject of ongoing debate. The debate centers around a variety of questions, including, for example, whether remediation should be encouraged because it expands educational opportunities to underprepared students, or whether it should be discouraged because remediation should not occur at the university level (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). Open-door admissions policies, affordable tuition, convenient locations, an emphasis on teaching and learning, and a welcoming attitude make community colleges a logical starting place for many of these students (Oudenhoven, 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report Remedial Education at
Higher Education Institutions in Fall 1995 (1996) indicated that 100% of community colleges offered remediation, and 41% of community college freshman enrolled in at least one pre-collegiate course.

The policies and practices specific to remedial education implemented by the colleges to help students reach college-preparedness are quite varied (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.). Some institutions have locally mandated policies specific to remediation, while others have their policies mandated by the state (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.)

In summary, many students arriving on community college campuses today need a wide range of student-centered support in order to be successful (Williams, 2002). Programs are needed that provide comprehensive academic support services, including advising and basic skills assessment, study skills development and tutoring support, career exploration, and financial assistance (Williams, 2002). The keys to responding to the diverse needs of students are to first understand what those include, then to design creative and flexible programs that address these needs. The following section will discuss the evolution of developmental studies programs and highlight components of those programs that have demonstrated successful in assisting underprepared students.

Community College Programs

In the United States, remediation and developmental programs have been an integral part of higher education (Phipps, 1998). Formal remediation began at Harvard College in the 17th century, where tutors in Greek and Latin were provided
for underprepared students, and increased throughout the middle of the 20th century with the establishment of the G.I. Bill (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). As early as the mid-1800s, U.S. colleges and universities admitted large numbers of underprepared students (Boylan, 1994). For example, the number of underprepared students admitted to the University of Wisconsin in 1849 was so large that an entire college preparatory division had to be established to serve them (Brier, 1985). College preparatory programs became so important for student success that they were widely replicated throughout higher education (Boylan, 1994).

One of the most recent and comprehensive reviews of the literature on the area of basic skills comes from The Center for Student Success and Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges titled Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community Colleges (2007). This research has identified a consistent set of elements that characterize effective developmental education programs. These elements can be organized under the broad categories of organizational and administrative practices, program components, staff development, and instructional practices.

According to the best practices literature, strong developmental programs should include: 1) an effective program evaluation tied to student-centered goals; 2) a comprehensive approach that views students holistically, with both cognitive and affective needs; 3) a centralized or coordinated collection of services with regular communication of its program mission, goals, and objectives; 4) an institutional commitment to professional development of a qualified staff; 5) mandatory
assessment and placement of underprepared students; 6) consistent, systematic program evaluation with the data used for program improvement; and lastly, 7) strong institutional support with a full integration of the program into the life of the institution (McCabe, 2003).

A prominent trend in developmental education has been the integrated program, combining instruction in reading, writing, and math with counseling, tutoring, study skills seminars, and a variety of special interventions (Cohen & Brawer, 1996).

The traditional so-called three R model of developmental education, which has focused on placement of students in mandatory courses in reading, writing, and mathematics, is still in place in many institutions but is now often complimented by other service delivery models (Commander, Stratton, Callahan, & Smith, 1996; McDade, 2002; Simpson, Hynd, Nist, & Burrell, 1997).

Institutions are exploring alternative methods for assessment, placement, and instruction. Instead of stand-alone courses in reading and study strategies, some developmental educators are implementing supplemental instruction or paired, linked, or adjunct courses (Commander & Smith, 1995; Dimon, 1981). These groups of courses function like some forms of learning communities. First-year students jointly enroll in a course in reading and study strategies, taught by a developmental educator and using a first-year core curriculum course such as biology (Blinn & Sisco, 1996), psychology (Bullock, Madden, & Harter, 1987), or sociology (Resnick, 1993). Developmental educators are also becoming more
involved in implementing programs for writing across the curriculum (Wilcox & Jensen, 2000).

A strong argument exists in favor of programs that offer “concurrent development of learning strategies” (Arendale, 1998, p. 31). “The professional literature suggests that students need to make direct applications of these skills…or they will be unable to transfer them for use in other classes. Offering traditional study skills classes that are isolated from course content is not in step with the research” (Arendale, 1998, p. 31).

Much of the criticism of remedial education today stems from the high costs and limited success of past efforts to assist students who require developmental education, efforts which have typically served to isolate and in some cases marginalize those students in stand-alone courses for which no college credit can be earned (Tinto, 1998). However, alternatives do exist. A limited but growing number of institutions are pursuing different ways of addressing the educational needs of developmental students and have done so with reportedly greater success than has been the case typical of past efforts (Tinto, 1998). One of these alternatives is the adaptation of learning communities to the needs of students who require developmental education assistance (Gabenick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Hill, 1985).

Responding to the needs of students who require developmental education assistance is no simple matter. Developmental studies programs are currently as varied in their practices as the population of students they serve. The common
threads that run through some of the best programs are institutional support, coordinated services, emphasis on personal development, and—of greatest importance—committed faculty and staff. Learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them is an alternative to the current practice of stand-alone remediation. The next section will focus on the organizational structure and practice of learning communities.

**Learning Communities**

The term learning community is currently applied in different ways across diverse contexts. In higher education, it may be used to describe individual classrooms, curricular learning communities, living-learning communities, on-line learning communities, or faculty learning communities (Laufgraben, 2005). Curricular learning communities are defined as a variety of approaches that link or cluster classes during a given term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, that enroll a common cohort of students. This represents an intentional restructuring of students’ time, credit, and learning experiences to build community among students, among students and their teachers, and among disciplines (Macgregor, Smith, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2001).

The concept of the learning community has had many advocates at different times and places, and a number of learning community models have been defined (Hill, 1985; Matthews, 1986; Smith, 1991). More recent examples exist under various names such as freshman interest groups (FIGs) (Tinto & Goodsell, 1993; Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993), federated learning communities (FLCs)
(Matthews, 1986), coordinated studies (Matthews, 1986; Tinto & Russo, 1994; Tinto, Russo, & Kadel, 1994), learning clusters (Helfgott, 1975; Koehnline, 1975; Matthews, 1986), tandem classes (Helfgott, 1975), integrated curriculum (Garafolo & LoPresti, 1986), Higher Education Learning Package (HELP Program) (Luvaas-Briggs, 1984), and, more commonly, linked or paired courses (Eanes & Tutchings, 1990; Gammill, Hansen, & Tinkler, 1992; Smoke & Haas, 1995; Sorensen, 1988).

Learning communities are certainly not a new trend or best practice fad. They have strong roots in the work of John Dewey, Alexander Meiklejohn’s Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin, Joseph Tussman’s experience at Berkeley, the innovation of Patrick Hill at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and the vision of the founding faculty of The Evergreen State College in Washington State (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Dewey advocated for learning environments characterized by cooperative and collaborative approaches to learning, and he defined education as an ongoing process of reorganization, reconstruction, and transformation (Laufgraben, 2005). Meiklejohn and Tussman’s efforts are early examples of undergraduate learning communities that offered an alternative to the fragmented and incoherent curriculum students typically experienced (Laufgraben, 2005).

In the past fifteen years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of campuses initiating learning communities in higher education in efforts to promote student success (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Ewell, 1997; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Learning communities as a curricular structure can support students’
intellectual, personal, and social growth while they are in college (Laufgraben, 2005). The types of teaching and academic behaviors that have a positive impact on student development include frequent student-faculty interaction, frequent student-student interaction, and time devoted to studying, tutoring, co-operative learning, and giving class presentations (Astin, 1993).

The growing popularity of learning communities reflects the now widespread recognition of the importance of involvement to student education (Tinto, 1998). Student involvement or integration is important to student attainment (Astin, 1987, 1983; Boyer, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993). In other words, the more students are involved in the social and academic life of an institution, the more likely they are to learn and persist (Tinto, 1998).

Participation in learning communities has a positive impact on student achievement and retention (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993). Researchers at the University of Missouri-Columbia studied students’ academic records to determine if participation in freshman interest groups (FIGs) was associated with higher levels of academic achievement and persistence (Laufgraben, 2005). Before and after controlling for entering ability, freshman students in the FIG cohort earned a higher mean grade point average than non-participants. A longitudinal retention study for the same group demonstrated a 12% higher retention rate for FIG members after three years (Student Life Studies Abstracts, 1996).

Learning communities help first-year students adapt more quickly to the college classroom environment (Laufgraben, 2005). They are more likely to
participate in class discussions, raise questions, and seek and instructor’s assistance than non-participants (Laufgraben, 2005). They report greater satisfaction with their classes and teachers and are also more likely to participate in a range of academic and social activities (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993). An end-of-year survey conducted by the Russell Scholar’s Program at the University of Southern Maine revealed that program participants spent more time participating in organized activities and talking informally with other students than non-participants do (Johnson & King, 1996). At the University of Wisconsin, first-year students in the Bradley Learning Community reported greater satisfaction with the first year and greater participation in the university’s opening of the school year activities than non-participants (Brower, 1997).

First-year students value the interdisciplinary nature of learning community courses, the emphasis on the development of certain academic and interpersonal skills, and the interactions between teachers and students (Avens & Zelley, 1992: Reumann-Moore et al., 1997).

Conclusion

In its earliest formation, junior colleges were a product of advanced high schools with large enrollment and universities advocating for the removal of the first two years of general education (Vaughan, 2000). The community college system has since evolved and adapted to the community it serves by balancing very different roles: transfer preparation, remediation, vocational training, as well as community services. Community colleges now serve a more diverse and larger population of
students than ever before (Tovar, 2003). This creates a variety of challenges for institutions of higher education, including higher demands for remediation. Many students begin college as underprepared, lacking the skills necessary to be successful in college-level courses (McCabe & Day, 1998). A variety of developmental studies programs exist on community college campuses nationwide, designed to assist the underprepared student population. These programs are widely diverse in the level and types of services and support offered. Common characteristics of effective developmental programs include: institutional support, coordinated services, emphasis on personal development, and committed faculty and staff. Incorporating similar characteristics, learning communities are an approach to curricular reform that departs from the traditional pattern of instruction (i.e., instructors teaching separate classes in separate subjects to separate groups of students).

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding, from the student’s perspective, of the effectiveness of a developmental learning community program. The research in this study seeks to answer two basic questions regarding the program. First, does the program make a difference? Second, if it does, how does it do so? More specifically, the following research questions will be addressed:

- What are students’ perceptions of their first year college experience as members of the learning community?
- What positive and negative aspects of the learning community courses are most prominent?
• How do students’ academic motivation, educational stress, and receptivity to institutional support change over the course of the semester?

• What differences exist between students who complete the learning community courses and those students who do not complete?

The next chapter will explore the methodology used to study first-year students’ experiences in a developmental learning community at a rural community college in Northern California.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Description of the Treatment

The learning community in this study includes linked courses offered to Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) students who complete the two courses as a cohort. The two linked courses are: 1) English 350 Reading and Writing Skills (Engl 350), a developmental, pre-collegiate, basic academic reading and writing skills lecture and lab course for six units and, 2) General Studies 150 Learning Success (GS 150), a college success, learning and study skills course for three units.

During new student orientation, all EOPS students receive a book bag, a yearly schedule planner, binder, and basic school supplies. All EOPS students are required to have three contacts with a counselor during the semester at which time they develop a student educational plan which includes all the necessary requirements for them to reach their educational objectives. The learning community students receive all the same materials and abide by the same eligibility requirements as other EOPS students. In addition to sharing enrollment in the two courses, learning community students attend a specific orientation, receive additional school supplies (i.e., flash drive, accordion folder, and special note-taking paper) and have an assigned counselor who works closely with the faculty to monitor students’ progress and
contact students when necessary. The counselor provides additional educational and personal support specific to students enrolled in the learning community courses.

Students are identified for the learning community using two criteria: 1) they meet EOPS eligibility requirements and 2) were assessed into English 350, a remedial course from the college’s standard math and English placement instrument, Accuplacer 2.0 online. EOPS students are affected by language, social, or economic disadvantages. These students were advised to enroll in the learning community courses during individual appointments with EOPS counseling staff or during the required new student orientations.

Participants

Two groups of participants were involved in the research project. The first group of students had completed English 350 and GS 150 in previous semesters and participated in the development and validation of the instruments used in the study. Some of the participants in this group were also involved in one of the three focus groups. To select these participants, an institutional report was used to identify all active EOPS students as of September 27, 2007, who had completed the two courses described above. These students were first contacted by mail, and then a follow-up phone call asked for their participation. Of the 82 possible students (27 males and 55 females), a convenience sample of eight agreed to participate (two male and six female).

The second group included the cohort of all first-year students enrolled in two sections of the learning community’s core courses in fall 2007. Of the fifty-three
who started the semester (14 males and 39 females), twenty-four (4 males and 20 females) completed. This level is comparable to normal attrition rates seen in other sections of the same courses. The population that persisted through fourteen weeks was asked to participate in this study.

*Instrumentation*

Mixed research methods served as the basis for data collection. Quantitative data were gathered from three primary sources: the Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory (CSI), institutional data, and a survey that I developed. Qualitative data were gathered from the focus groups and from open-ended items on the survey instrument. The relationships between the chosen research methods and the research questions are identified in the following descriptions.

The CSI Form B (2006 version) is used to identify strengths and needs of new students. This online inventory asks students to respond to key items related to their academic motivation and receptivity to assistance. The reports detail areas of strength and challenge, including specific recommendations for connecting students with campus programs and services that can foster their success. The CSI was used as a pre- and post-test to measure any changes in academic motivation, educational stress, or receptivity to institutional help occurring over the course of the semester.

The locally constructed survey instrument served as one of the main sources of data collection. The development of the survey and the validation process consisted of the following components: development of language and range of content from the first focus group composed of EOPS students previously enrolled in
the courses, a verbal protocol or talk-aloud process to evaluate validity and clarify language, and a face validity process.

The first focus group included a convenience sample of EOPS students (N = 8) who completed the English 350 and GS 150 courses. (See the description of group one in the Participants section). Based on the original research questions, the objectives of this focus group were to understand the following: 1) student perceptions on what it means to be successful in college; 2) student understanding of the terms learning community or linked classes; 3) student experiences, both positive and negative; and 4) student opinions on ways to improve upon the program. Their responses and feedback on significant issues during their first year of college allowed me to refine the survey instrument by incorporating student language, increasing the range of opinions, and adding important survey items that had been missed.

This first focus group (N = 8) was facilitated on a Friday afternoon and lasted approximately ninety minutes. The EOPS program offered pizza and salad as an incentive for participation. As was true for all student input, a written consent form was used notifying students that their participation was voluntary and confidential, and that their responses would be recorded. The consent forms were read and signed by each participant prior to beginning the session.

Several students who had previously completed the program, who did not participate in the focus group, were later asked to participate in a talk-aloud protocol of the survey instrument. Four students were individually interviewed and asked to
think aloud while completing the survey. These students signed a written consent form, and their responses were audio recorded. This feedback also contributed to the refinement of the survey. The terminology used in the scales, the distinction between the two courses that make up the learning community, and the need to address emotional or personal support represent examples of how the survey was refined from the first focus group and talk-aloud protocol process.

Evaluating the instrument’s face validity served as another step in the validation process. The survey was distributed to all learning community constituents for feedback. The most recent version of the survey instrument was e-mailed to learning community faculty and counselors, administrators, thesis committee members, and staff in the institutional research department. These experts were asked to provide suggestions for improvement within two weeks.

A variety of revisions to the survey resulted from information gathered during the first focus group, verbal protocol, and face validity processes. Revisions, such as adding items related to the English curriculum, adjusting Likert scaling and question format, and changing open-ended questions to a quantitative scale resulted from the process. The survey instrument included both qualitative and quantitative items used to gather student perceptions of the effectiveness of the program as well as their experiences in the learning community. The final survey resulted in thirty-three items with five major scales, five open-ended questions, and basic demographic information. The survey addressed the following questions with both qualitative and quantitative methods: 1) has the learning community helped you establish
relationships, set goals, identify campus support, and prepare for college work; and 2) what were most helpful and least helpful with the English and general studies course content?

I administered the survey to those students present in the classroom of both sections of GS 150 two weeks prior to the end of the semester ($N = 28$). Neither the GS 150 instructor nor any other outside constituents were present at the time the survey was distributed and collected. Students were told to be honest in their feedback and that their responses were completely confidential. They read, signed, and separated the consent form on the front of the survey packet. When they returned the completed survey, students were asked to place the signed consent form in one box and the survey in another box face down. The consent form is included as Appendix A. The learning community survey instrument is included as Appendix B.

The final stage of data collection included focus groups with students who were completing the fall 2007 learning community courses. This step allowed for clarification and further analysis of the results from the survey instrument. Beyond information provided on the survey, the focus group allowed students to explain their experiences in terms of what worked for them in the learning community courses, what did not work for them, and how the program could be improved for future students.

Participants in these focus groups were recruited in the following manner. A flyer was distributed to all students present in the English class asking for
participation in a focus group. Each English instructor distributed the flyers and encouraged students to participate in the focus groups to help us improve the program and explained that participation is voluntary. The day before the focus group, I called each student enrolled in the courses and encouraged their participation. The focus groups were conducted following the survey described above. A professional focus group facilitator was hired by the EOPS program to moderate the two focus groups with the current learning community students. In collaboration, the professional moderator and I developed a discussion guide to explore several of the study’s research questions: what currently works in the linked courses, what does not work, and how can the learning community be improved? A total of two focus groups, including students from each of the two fall 2007 sections of linked courses, were conducted the week before final exams. Each session lasted approximately 1¼ hours. A total of eleven students (one male, ten females) participated in the two focus groups (3 in group 1 at 10:00 AM, and 8 in group 2 at 11:30 AM). The focus groups were audio recorded and later transcribed.

**Analysis Methods**

Due to the mixed methods research design, both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed in this study. The qualitative content, which included data from the focus groups and from the open-ended items on the survey, were coded and investigated using both primary and axial coding/analysis. Quantitative data from the survey instrument, institutional databases, and the CSI were analyzed using
descriptive statistics, Pierson r correlations, independent and paired sample t tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA).

The qualitative data analysis began by reviewing the focus group transcripts and open-ended survey items. Similar pieces of data were categorized into major groups which included common themes, ideas, and statements in response to the focus group discussion guide and open-ended survey items. In an attempt to mitigate biases, the focus group moderator and I independently analyzed the data. This analysis resulted in an organizational framework with which themes evolved into a basic coding system. An example of one of the major codes is described below.

The term *success* is used throughout the literature, in the course curriculum, and particularly as a benefit of various learning community models. In an attempt to determine how students define success, one open-ended question on the survey was, “What does it mean for you to be successful in college?” Student responses were organized thematically. An example of the coding for this item includes a dictionary definition, an exemplar, and borderline definitions as follows:

**UNDER** = an understanding.

**Dictionary definition:** ability to grasp meaning. To have an understanding represents the ability to perceive and explain the meaning or the nature of somebody or something.

**Exemplar:** a personal, intrinsic reward, beyond the scope of knowledge or learning a particular skill set. For example, students replied, “to learn something that will at
least make me a better person” or “to be successful in college means to take everything that I can from it (experiences in college) and apply them to the real world.”

**Borderline:** “understanding” does not represent the same as “learning”. Learning is used to define the knowledge gained from the course curriculum, whereas understanding represents an intrinsic, personal gain that can be applied outside of the classroom and college environment. This example represents one of the major coding systems used for the qualitative data analysis in this study.

Several statistical procedures were used to analyze the quantitative data portion of this research. Pre- and post-test data from the Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory (CSI) were analyzed for differences occurring over the course of the semester using paired $t$ tests and an analysis of variance (ANOVA). Appendix C illustrates the composition of the various CSI scales. Characteristics identified from the CSI of those students who did not complete the learning community courses in comparison to those who did were also analyzed using independent two-sample $t$ tests and ANOVA.

Basic descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation were used to report each survey item. Pierson r correlations were used to examine theorized relations between survey items and/or student characteristics. These procedures were administered using version 15 of the Minitab statistical software system.

The next chapter will report the results based on the previously described methodology organized by the research questions.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This chapter presents both qualitative and quantitative results, organized by the study’s research questions. Qualitative data include content analysis from open-ended survey items and focus groups. Quantitative results include pre and post-test ratings from the Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory (CSI) and data from a locally developed survey.

Students’ Perceptions of their Learning Community Experiences

This section will illustrate students’ perceptions of their overall first-year college experience as well as perceptions specific to features of the learning community program.

Several themes emerged from the focus groups that relate to students’ overall first year college experiences as members of the learning community. The most prevalent comments regarding positive experiences were associated with the support students received from a variety of campus resources such as Extended Opportunity Program & Services (EOPS), career counseling, and Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPS). Many of the negative experiences students reported were not academic related, but rather issues related to interpersonal or family situations.

An exercise that asked students participating in the end-of-the-semester focus groups to rate their first year college experience on a continuum from a very good

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1 Due to the small sample size (N=11), focus group findings are not reported in percentages or number of respondents.
experience to a very bad one, resulted in a discussion about EOPS and the positive role it played in these students’ lives. As mentioned earlier in the description of the EOPS program, students enrolled in the EOPS learning community receive additional counseling and individual support. The practical and emotional support received from EOPS counselors and other staff was referred to as critical to students’ overall positive experiences in their first year of college.

Students reported being pleasantly surprised by and grateful for the extensive range and depth of support offered by EOPS, including:

- financial support, especially the book vouchers;
- emotional support, which helps students through difficult personal issues and has helped keep more than one student from dropping out; and
- practical support with assignments, setting schedules, and finding resources on campus.

Comments such as “EOPS are there to help you. They are there to do what they can for you because they want to see you succeed too” were common. Some students indicated that they had discovered valued features of the EOPS program such as the student who happily discovered that EOPS support is ongoing. “I had no idea it was going to be an ongoing process kind of thing. I thought it was just something for new students to kinda help you get in, get registered, and get set up. I had no idea it was going to be an ongoing thing, which is really cool.”

EOPS students often face financial challenges and students reported that they valued the material support associated with the learning community which was
reflected in comments such as “not only do they provide us with information, but also actual physical stuff, like school supplies, backpacks, binders, all of our books.” Another student added, “I couldn’t have been able to afford all that stuff, and I know a lot of people are in similar situations.”

These EOPS students also expressed the importance of other campus support that they accessed through the learning community. One student commented “that’s what amazes me, is that a college can offer such a wide range of help for so many things. It’s very open-minded up here.” Students mentioned a variety of services including career counseling and assistance from Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPS). As the following quotes illustrate, the career center is praised for offering non-judging assistance with academic and career planning. DSPS was praised for their support of a wide range of students, including students dealing with learning disabilities, recovering from drug or alcohol addictions, and suffering from depression or anxiety. Students discussed their experiences with campus support services with statements such as this one related to academic counseling:

I was very scared to come to college, actually. I mean going back to school is kind of a big step. I was thinking about going to (another college), and the counselors…just kind of look at you like “you don’t know what you want to do in your life? Really? Well, we can’t help you.” They are actually kind of rude in a way. And at (this college), they are just so open if you don’t know what you want to do, if you are undecided. That’s like totally OK. That was
such a turn on for me (about this college), ’cause I was so undecided and the counselors were just really easy with that.

This comment related to DSPS:

(DSPS) is great. When I first started I thought “oh, a disability is someone in a wheelchair.” But there is such a wide range, and there is not one description for a disability…I’m a recovering addict, and they consider addiction as a disability which I think is great. It’s so open…I get help there for depression and anxiety.

Most negative experiences reported by students participating in the focus groups were related to juggling family and school obligations, personal issues, and issues with teaching staff as illustrated by one of the students who reported that she/he “had financial problems, housing problems, and problems with one of my teachers, which made me not want to do the work in the class.”

Students’ perceptions regarding features of the learning community program as gathered from the focus groups and from quantitative items on the survey instrument raised a variety of issues.

I was interested in how students perceived their being selected for the EOPS learning community. The focus group transcripts revealed that many students were unclear about how they ended up in the linked classes, although most seemed to understand that EOPS played a part in their enrollment. Some students believed they were automatically enrolled because of their English placement, or that the GS class was mandatory for students enrolled in English 350 as illustrated by comments such
as, “(At EOPS) I filled out paperwork and stuff, and then I got put into the linked
classes because I was eligible for English 350. So then you have to take this GS
class with it.” (Moderator: “So it was automatic?”) “Yeah.” In other words, they did
not realize they had a choice, that enrollment in the learning community was
voluntary. Others recalled that the linked classes were recommended as beneficial
by an EOPS counselor, as illustrated by this student’s comment:

I came to the (EOPS) orientation and I sat down with (my counselor) and she
fixed my schedule. That’s when she informed me that I had to be linked.
That the learning success course was required and it had to be linked to my
English. She sat there and explained that it was a course to (me) and we’d
benefit from it. That (the students would) benefit from it, but it is an extra
required course that is linked to our English.

The survey allowed for more specific information regarding their overall
perceptions of the program. The survey was administered during both class sessions
of GS 150 in week fourteen of the fall 2007 semester (N=28) and included both
open-ended and Likert-scale items. It should be noted that by administering the
survey two weeks before the end of the semester, responses reflect attitudes and
perceptions of students who persisted.

The survey instrument included five items related to students’ perceptions of
the overall helpfulness of the EOPS Learning Community as illustrated in Table 4.1.
Table 4.1.

*Student Ratings of the Overall Helpfulness of Features of the Learning Community*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent would you agree or disagree that participating in the EOPS Learning Community has helped you…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare for college work</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify areas of academic or personal support</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish relationships</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify learning strategies</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish personal, career, or academic goals</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Values are on a 5-point scale (1=disagree, 5=agree).

A strong correlation exists between students’ satisfaction with the learning community and their overall ratings of the helpfulness of the program’s features, \( r(26) = 0.53, p < .01 \). As noted in the table above, establishing relationships was rated as the most helpful aspect of the EOPS learning community \( M = 4.43 \). This attribute was also highlighted in the focus group discussion. Students recognize that a learning community consists of the same cohort of people enrolled in each of the two classes. Comments suggest that this is a major benefit of the linked courses because seeing familiar faces is reassuring to students who do not know anyone on campus as illustrated by one student’s remark,
I walked into English and I didn’t know anybody. I sat in the back of the class, I thought I’d never talk to anybody and I’ve done a complete turnaround. It was really nice, because once I went to English and started meeting people in English, I went to my learning success and I knew that I would feel comfortable.

Students also suggested that the learning community made it easier to make friends and establish relationships as illustrated with this comment, “I think we got more close, because we went from one class to another together.” The relationships that developed from the learning community encouraged students to support one another with class assignments. For example, students knew they could reach out to anyone in their English class for help with a GS assignment as reported by this student,

For me, having the same people in the classes was kinda nice, because now that I do talk to people in the classes, I can say “hey, did you do this? Are you getting this? I’m not understanding it.” They’ll help me with this or I’ll help them with that.

Two activities that occurred early in the GS classes that students reported as particularly helpful in breaking the ice and helping them get to know each other include the following.

• Establishing small study groups known as triads in which, with the instructor’s guidance, students group themselves in pairs or triads based on similar interests and proximity to each other. It was mentioned that
new triads should have been created after students drop out, as some students were left with no support when their triad partners dropped out.

- The use of the name game on the first class session was helpful. This is a class activity in which students stand in a circle, state their name and the name of the person who went before them until all students have participated.

As illustrated by one student who described the process of developing the study groups,

(In GS) We have…these things called triad groups and in our GS 150 class we get together with three people and exchanged numbers and emails and stuff like that. That kind of gave us somebody to call in case we needed something. But then we were also in the English class together, too, so it’s always the same people so we can call them if we had trouble in the English class too, and so that was nice for everyone to have.

Another student reported, “It kind of broke the barrier.”

Several students reported their surprise to discover that the learning community instructors had open-door policies that encouraged students to visit them for help outside of classroom hours. Students claimed that the assistance provided during office hours was critical to the success of those who needed more help than could be provided during class time, as illustrated by this student:

She (the teacher) said “come see me, you know I want you to come see me. And I’ll sit down and I’ll walk you though every single question.” And it
wasn’t until she actually said that and I took her up on it that I started getting everything she was teaching in class, because of her one-on-one assistance.

Students described another benefit to the open-door office hours in that it humanized the teachers. Students were able to see a softer side to their teachers that benefited the teacher/student relationship as illustrated by one student’s comment:

It wasn’t until I started meeting the instructors and actually sitting down and talking with them, and realized that they are down to earth people too. That they’re not just like “here, learn this, and I’m not going to help you at all”, you can go to their offices and get help.

Although several positive aspects were reported, some students in the focus groups mentioned that the drop-one, drop-both policy of the linked courses was a negative aspect of the program. Several students perceived this policy as a drawback, particularly those who found the material too challenging or disliked the teacher, as mentioned by one student, “(They should) make it easier to drop and not have it affect your other class.” They appreciated that the cohort of students remained the same in both classes, but several students felt that the policy tied their hands and forced them to stay against their wishes. Some stayed in one course only to be allowed to stay in the other, but would have dropped if they had been permitted. Some were glad they were forced to stay, while others wish they had been allowed to drop. One student noted,

I didn’t like the class. I hated the teacher. I didn’t want to do the work. I was behind in the class, and I couldn’t stand (the instructor), so I wanted to
drop her class before it was too late. But then they told me that if I dropped
the class I had to drop (the other) class, but I really liked (that instructor). So,
then I said, “well, I guess I’ll just stick with it.”

**Most and Least Helpful Aspects of the Learning Community Courses**

This section includes both quantitative and qualitative data that illustrate
students’ experiences and perceptions of English (Engl 350) and General Studies
(GS 150) linked courses as part of the EOPS Learning Community.

The locally developed survey instrument included seven items related to
student perceptions of the helpfulness of the English 350 course. Table 4.2 below
illustrates student ratings of the specific learning outcomes from the English 350
course. As expected in a pre-collegiate English course, improving writing skills,
understanding the writing process, and utilizing the support of the Writing Center
were rated as the most helpful. All variables related to the English 350 course
content were rated above average. An ANOVA was used to measure the differences
between items on the English 350 outcomes scale. There was a significant
difference, $F(6, 189) = 2.35, p \leq .05$, between items on this scale. Development of
writing skills and processes were rated more highly, adjusting to the academic
demands of college and improving confidence were rated as the least helpful
outcomes in the English 350 course.
Table 4.2

*Student Ratings on the Helpfulness of English 350 Learning Outcomes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent would you agree or disagree that English 350 has helped you…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve reading skills</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve writing skills</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjust to the academic demands of college</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand that writing is a process</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize support of the Writing Center</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve academic confidence</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognize that reading is a process</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Values are reported using a 5-point scale (1=disagree, 5=agree).

The survey included two open-ended items to address what students perceived as most helpful and least helpful in the English 350 course. Fifty-four percent of students found that developing their writing skills and understanding the necessary steps, structure, and process of writing an essay were most helpful in the English 350 course content. In response to this item, one student said, “I now know how to write the correct outline of an essay. I have gained confidence in my essay writing.” Twenty-nine percent of students felt that the instructor’s support, passion for the subject, and commitment to their success were most helpful. The English instructor’s support was also reported as a positive aspect in the focus group. One
student said, “She (the English instructor) was very supportive of everything.”

Another student commented, “She was not afraid to help you.” And, “(The English teacher) was very encouraging and easy to talk to with any concerns.”

In response to the open-ended question as to what was least helpful, 43% of participants wrote in the word “nothing” as a least helpful aspect of the English 350 course. Three students said that “It was all very helpful.” One student said the pre-writing was least helpful, while only two other students identified the reading response journals as least helpful.

Students also responded to eleven content questions in the GS 150 course. Table 4.3 illustrates the mean scores for each of the GS 150 learning outcomes. Improving note-taking and test-taking strategies were rated as the most helpful, while improving writing skills and confidence levels were rated as least helpful. No statistically significant differences emerged between elements on the GS 150 scale. A strong correlation exists between satisfaction with the learning community program as a whole and the overall helpfulness of the GS 150 course, \( r(26) = 0.70, p \leq .001 \).
Table 4.3

*Student Ratings on the Helpfulness of GS 150 Learning Outcomes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent would you agree or disagree that GS 150 has helped you…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop study skills</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage time</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve reading skills</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve writing skills</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use test taking strategies</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish educational goals</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve note taking strategies</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjust to the academic demands of college</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address stress management</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve confidence level</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deal with the emotional demands of college</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Values are reported on a 5-point scale (1=disagree, 5=agree).

Several themes emerged from the open-ended survey items relevant to the GS 150 course. The areas cited as most helpful in the GS 150 course content were the textbooks, the instructor, time management skills, goal setting, and overall adjustment to college life. Eighteen percent of students rated the textbooks, both October Sky and the Learning Success text, as most helpful. Fourteen percent of
students rated the instructor, her teaching style, and motivation as most helpful, and, 11% of students equally rated time management, goal setting, and college adjustment as most helpful in the GS 150 course content.

The areas cited in response to the open-ended survey questions as least helpful with the GS 150 course content included the workload, the instructor, and relevance of the course to students’ lives. The majority of students (29%) indicated “nothing” as least helpful. Eighteen percent cited the workload of GS 150, either alone or in combination with the English course, as least helpful. Eleven percent of students cited the instructor as being least helpful. One student wrote, “The whole class seemed overwhelming and I felt I was not prepared for it because (the instructor) teaches Honor’s classes and teaches GS 150 like we are at that level already.” Some students (11%) felt the course content was not relevant to their lives or that they already understood the skills taught in the course. One student stated that “willpower, stamina, and all that because I already had it” was least helpful in the GS 150 course content.

The focus group transcripts suggest that not only were students confused about the voluntary nature of the learning community, many were also unclear what to expect from GS 150. Most did not understand what they had signed up for, as illustrated by this comment, “I was completely confused by the whole thing.” Another student reported, “I was confused too, but it was all…to help me. So I was all for it. I was just confused on what exactly the GS 150 was. I was kind of confused until I actually got into the class on what it was exactly.” Some were
surprised that it was a real class with its own textbook and assignments, and not as easy as they expected, as illustrated by this comment “I was expecting it (GS 150) to be more of a fluff class.” Some students expected a study-hall type class that would provide support for other class assignments, as illustrated by this student’s comment:

I was under the impression that the whole reason for the GS was to help me with my English. I’m horrible in English. I don’t even know what a verb is. I don’t know anything. And they’re like, “It’s going to help you.” And I thought, “cool, maybe I can go in there and they can help me with all my papers and this and that.” And then I get the textbook for it and think, “wait a minute, this is a whole other class.” And I was thinking, “oh my god what am I doing.” I don’t get it. I don’t understand.

The focus groups allowed for themes to overlap and expand on the responses from the survey. For students, “linked” seems to mean “GS 150,” and most of the focus group discussion of linked classes revolved around students’ experiences with GS 150. Student opinions on GS 150 were highly polarized with both positive comments (“I think it prepares us for the next two years…”) and negative ones (“I didn’t understand anything the instructor was saying”). Some felt that the GS 150 course content had given them the foundation for college success, while others felt it was too challenging.

Those who felt the course content to be helpful expressed their appreciation for help with skills not taught in other courses, such as time management skills, study skills, and test-taking strategies, as described by this student, “It (GS 150)
gives you your options, like options for help in that class. I don’t think in a normal class you would talk about your options or your resources to get help.” Another student added a similar response, “(GS150) tells you what other classes probably wouldn’t. What finals week is like. How they grade papers. Things you otherwise would have to learn on your own.” The course content of GS 150 included the introduction to other resources on campus to help ensure student success, as reported by this student, “GS helped us with using campus resources. Using your counselors, using your instructors.” Some students reported their enthusiasm about the information and skills they acquired in GS 150. They would like to see an expansion of the GS 150 course or a similar general studies course linked with a math class. One student noted, “I wish you guys had something like this for math.” Another student suggested that GS 150 be offered to students outside of EOPS and for those who place in higher-level English courses, “They should offer GS 150 for other classes.” (Moderator: “What other classes?”) “A math class.” Another student added, “For whoever wants to take it. They should make (GS 150) open for whoever’s interested.”

The positive aspects reported about the high expectations of GS 150 prepared students for future college-level courses, and the expectations pushed students to develop critical thinking skills essential for college-level courses. Students who viewed the high expectations set forth in GS 150 as a positive aspect of the course said things such as, “I just think her whole goal was to like prepare us for the harder classes. I think she did a good job of that.” Another student mentioned, “She wants
to make us work. To strive. She puts the bar up here because she wants us to try to reach that bar.” While another student agreed, “Yeah, because she wants you to know where you are headed.”

Focus group transcripts revealed that some students struggled with the high expectations placed on them in GS 150. Some felt the course was simply too challenging for students like themselves, as reported by one student who needed help from her mother: “I had to have my mom read (the questions she gave us in assignments) and rephrase them for me to even answer (the question).” The negative aspects of setting high expectations were that some students struggled to follow the lectures and the assignments because of vocabulary words they did not understand or metaphorical language. To some, the instructor seemed to be speaking “Chinese” or an “encrypted” language, as one student reported, “the first three GS classes were like encrypted. I didn’t even understand anything the instructor was saying. I was like, who is this woman, what is she saying, and I don’t get any of it.” Others feel that “honor’s level” expectations were too high for this student population, that it overwhelmed and demoralized them, as illustrated with this comment: “She teaches it like it’s an honors class, and I’m not an honor student. I just feel like she expects us to do honor’s work, when I’m not an honor’s student yet, and who knows if I will be”.
Students’ Academic Motivation, Educational Stress, and Receptivity to Institutional Support

The College Student Inventory (CSI) was in part used to identify specific areas of academic difficulty, educational stress, and receptivity to institutional support that helped predict and address the causes of students dropping out. Results in this section are organized by pre- and post-test results on the major scales and subscales related to academic motivation, general coping, and receptivity to institutional support. The CSI was also used as a pre- and post-test instrument to measure changes occurring in students over the course of the semester.

The CSI was administered during the GS 150 class period at week two and week fifteen as a pre-test/post-test instrument. Fifty-three students participated in the CSI pre-test during week two, and twenty-four students participated in the CSI post-test during week fifteen.

Table 4.4 illustrates student ratings on scales associated with their academic motivation and general coping skills in their first-year college experience.

A paired sample T-Test was used to measure pre- and post- CSI scores on the summary scales to determine significance. Changes in verbal confidence was the only significant difference, $t(23) = -4.52, p < .001$, indicating that students improve their verbal confidence over the course of the semester.
Table 4.4

*Paired T-Test Results on Pre- and Post CSI Summary Scales (N = 24)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Pre-Test Mean (M)</th>
<th>Pre-Test SD (SD)</th>
<th>Post-Test Mean (M)</th>
<th>Post-Test SD (SD)</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward Educators</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>-1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Closure</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to Finish College</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Emotional Support</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Interests</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion Tolerance</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>-0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Financial Security</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Habits</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Confidence</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>-4.52***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p ≤ .05  ** p ≤ .01  *** p ≤ .001

*Note.* Values are on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all true, 7 = completely true).

An analysis of variance was used to measure if one of the items was rated significantly higher or lower than the others within each scale. There was a significant difference in ratings for the CSI scales, \( F(8, 423) = 9.89, p \leq .001 \), with students rating their sense of financial security lower than other items.

Students’ receptivity ratings on several areas of institutional support are illustrated in Table 4.5. An example of the items included in the receptivity to
academic assistance scale include statements such as, “I would like to receive some help in improving my study habits” and “I would like to receive some individual help in improving my writing skills” and “I would like to receive some tutoring in one or more of my courses.”

Table 4.5

*Paired T-Test Results on Pre- and Post CSI Receptivity Scales*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post-Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Assistance</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Counseling</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Guidance</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Counseling</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p ≤ .05  ** p ≤ .01  *** p ≤ .001

*Note.* Values are on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all true, 7 = completely true).

One-way ANOVA was used to determine if there were significant differences amongst the sub-scale ratings that make up the overall receptivity scales (academic assistance, career counseling, financial guidance, and personal counseling). There was a significant difference between the four receptivity scales, $F(3, 188) = 33.36, p ≤ .001$. Receptivity to academic assistance and career counseling were rated significantly higher than receptivity to personal counseling.
There was a significant effect with receptivity to academic assistance, $F(5, 282) = 6.14, p < .001$. Students rated that receiving some instruction in the most effective ways to take college exams as most helpful, while indicating less receptivity to tutoring in one or more courses and to receptivity to training to improve reading skills.

In the receptivity to career counseling sub-scale, questions related to talking about qualifications needed for certain occupations and getting help in selecting an educational plan that will prepare for a good job were rated higher $F(4, 235) = 4.79, p < .001$ than other items.

In the receptivity to financial guidance sub-scale, students rated the question related to talking to someone about getting a scholarship as significantly more true than the other items $F(3, 188) = 22.46, p < .001$. Talking to someone about getting a loan was rated as less true than other items. As might be predicted, for those students who completed the program, a negative correlation was found between students’ receptivity to financial guidance and their sense of financial security scale, $r(22) = -0.48, p < .001$.

In the receptivity to personal counseling sub-scale, students rated that talking to a counselor about their general attitude toward school significantly more true, $F(5, 282) = 3.47, p < .05$ than the other items in this scale.

*Differences in Learning Community Completers and Non-Completers*

Data were analyzed to determine if differences exist between students who persist and complete the learning community courses and those who do not. Table
4.6 illustrates the results of the two-sample $t$ tests which were run to analyze the differences in mean scores on the CSI pre-test for these two groups of students (completers versus non-completers). No significant differences were found between completers and non-completers in the receptivity to institutional support scales.
Table 4.6

Two-Sample T-Test Results for Completers and Non-Completers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Completers</th>
<th>Non-Completers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N = 24)</td>
<td>(N = 29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude Towards Educators</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Closure</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to Finish College</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Emotional Support</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Interests</td>
<td>4.31</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion Tolerance</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Financial Security</td>
<td>3.60</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Habits</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Confidence</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p ≤ .05    ** p ≤ .01    *** p ≤ .001

Note. Values are on a 7-point scale (1= not at all true, 7 = completely true).

Institutional data related to persistence and retention was collected on the non-completer group. The numbers indicate that twenty-nine students were not
retained in the learning community (i.e., withdrew or stopped attending) from week two through week fifteen. From the CSI non-completer group (N=29), sixteen students enrolled in the next semester. Even though these students did not complete the learning community courses in the semester addressed by this study, they are considered as having persisted because they enrolled in courses the following semester.

According to additional institutional data and EOPS documentation on the twenty-nine students who did not complete the CSI post test, the reasons for non-completion are explained as follows:

- nine left due to personal or family issues,
- eight were not prepared for college-level work and/or responsibilities,
- three moved to other class sections (either ESL or lower level English courses not part of the learning community program),
- three left due to medical issues,
- three left due to financial concerns, and
- three left for unknown reasons.

Of the twenty-nine students who did not complete the CSI post-test, four actually completed the semester but were not present in the GS class the day the CSI post-test was administered, and therefore they were not used in the analysis.

This chapter presented the results drawn from a variety of qualitative and quantitative data to help explore the study’s research questions. The next section will provide an analysis and interpretation of the results.
CHAPTER FIVE
ANALYSIS

This chapter presents an analysis of the results and the ways in which those results address the original research questions. The discussion is organized by the themes that emerged from the data.

*Students’ Perceptions of their Learning Community Experience*

The goal of this study was to identify students’ perceptions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the EOPS Learning Community experience. The results and analysis will help me to develop a more effective program that better fosters student success in their first year of college. The following sections will focus on three major themes related to students’ perceptions of the learning community program. First, experiences related to the structure of the program (i.e., two linked courses) such as the drop-one/drop-both policy, teacher collaboration, and the relationships developed among students are discussed. Second, the importance of external support systems such as counseling, tutoring, EOPS, and other resources is explored. Third, students’ experiences with the specific courses within the learning community are examined.

*Linkage*

Linking the English and the study skills courses is a key feature of the learning community. While the students report a variety of benefits from this arrangement, some aspects of the linkage were identified as areas of concern. For
example, students reported that the drop-one, drop-both policy was a drawback, particularly among those who found the course material too challenging in one of the classes, or who disliked either one of the teachers. The data from both the open-ended survey questions and the focus groups make it clear that while students appreciate that their cohort remains the same in both classes, some felt the policy forced them to stay enrolled in a class they did not like. In this way, the drop-one, drop-both policy seems to boost enrollment in both courses as students’ comments suggest that attrition would have been higher in one of the courses if it were not for the policy. While it is possible that the drop-one drop-both policy boosts enrollment, it is also possible that this policy results in some students dropping both classes when they would have stayed in at least one or the other without the restriction. Additional discussion of this policy is presented as an area for future research later in this chapter. Given the benefits of the linkage discussed below, the study’s results suggest that careful staffing and responsiveness to students’ concerns are needed to ensure that the pair of classes meet the needs of the students and that the linkage is successful.

According to Astin (1993), Director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, frequent student-faculty interaction and frequent student-student interaction have a significant effect on student development. The lack of a personal support system is one of the factors used to identify students who may be at-risk for academic failure in community colleges. When students have little or no support to encourage continuing their education, they are less likely to be successful (McGrath
& Spear, 1991; Rouche & Rouche, 1993). Therefore, developing mechanisms that create support systems are critical to a successful program.

Teacher collaboration between English 350 and GS 150 and instructional support offered during office hours were reported by students as important benefits of the linkage associated with the learning community. The English and GS instructors met on a weekly basis to collaborate on class and homework assignments, as well as discuss students’ progress, attendance, and any other areas of concern. Students liked that their teachers compared notes on student performance and needs as described by this student,

> I think that the teachers know exactly what we’re doing at all times. To be honest, they kinda understand, they talk every Friday so they kinda know. I wanted to go tell my English teacher that I got an A- on my mid-term, and she’s like ‘I already know.’ They already have you in their head and they know how to help you out.

It appears this collaboration helps ensure that linked courses provide a supportive educational experience that promotes student success.

Several students reported their surprise to discover that the learning community instructors had open-door policies that encouraged students to visit them for help outside of classroom hours. Students claimed that teachers were willing to give extensive one-on-one support to them during office hours, as illustrated by this student’s comment, “She (instructor) will sit down with us for an hour every day if we want it and work it out.” Another benefit of the student-faculty interaction is that
meeting with the instructors outside of class helps humanize the teachers, as illustrated by this student’s comment, “It wasn’t until I started meeting the instructors and actually sitting down and talking to them, and realize they were down to earth people too.” Students were able to see a softer side of their instructors that benefited their relationship.

During the course of this study, the counselors and staff also met with the instructors on a bi-weekly basis and initiated contact with students who expressed a need for personal or academic counseling. Students reported that they benefited when support services such as academic advising, personal counseling, and career planning were incorporated into the course curriculum and overall learning experience. This reflects findings in the literature that support an integrated experience with both support services and academic content (Tinto, 1998).

Early in the semester, certain practices are built into the learning community model that help to foster supportive relationships among students and instructors. During orientation students have an opportunity to interact with each other and with their instructors. In the first week of classes, they continue building relationships with class activities such as forming study groups or triads. According to the data, students were well positioned to help each other with assignments from each class, as illustrated by this student’s comment, “We have these things called triad groups in our GS class…that kind of gave us somebody to call in case we needed something. But then we were also in English class together, too, so it’s always the same people so we can call them if we had trouble in English class…”
Students discussed their perceptions of the supportive environment created by the collaboration among learning community instructors, staff, and students as noted in comments such as:

I’m feeling like there’s a lot of support here. Between the instructors, like learning and meeting the instructors, the EOPS community, learning and meeting new people, friends, and very supportive people. I was going to drop out my first week of class, and it was just talking to people here in my classes that helped me stay.

In the survey item addressing overall helpfulness of learning community features, students rated establishing relationships as the most helpful ($M = 4.43, SD = 1.03$). The data suggest that the linked structure of this learning community model helped students develop supportive relationships with each other, faculty, and staff.

The CSI pre- and post-test data reinforces the conclusion that support systems were important factors in students’ success. Although no significant differences were found between completers and non-completers in receptivity to institutional support, students who did not complete the learning community rated their level of family emotional support significantly lower than those students who completed the semester. While family support is beyond the influence of the program, given the data, it appears that the EOPS Learning Community program can provide an alternative support system for many students which may increase the likelihood of their success in their first year of college.
In addition to the relationships built in part through the course linkage, students also find it helpful that the curriculum is linked, such that learning in one class reinforces learning in the other. One student reported, “There was just a lot of similarities in what we were learning and when we were learning. Like in English for example, I read an article on multiple intelligence theory and then shortly after that we did a chapter in the GS class on that.” A number of students mentioned experiencing the benefits of a closely linked curriculum in writing essays, reading strategies, and adapting to college-level courses. Overall, the cohort approach in which the learning community’s courses offer a linked curriculum, common student body, and ongoing communication and collaboration amongst instructors and college support staff, appears to be a significant factor in the success of students in their first year.

The next section will elaborate on students’ receptivity to institutional support and their perceptions of the value of external campus resources.

*Institutional Support Systems*

As described above, one of the basic goals of a learning community is to help students establish academic and social support networks and to provide a setting for delivery of campus support (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). An important part of building a supportive network involves helping students connect with campus resources that can provide critical services such as personal or academic counseling, tutoring, access to basic health care, and disability accommodations. Institutional support is
imperative for the development and continued growth of a strong developmental education program (McCabe, 2003).

Certain themes arose from the focus group data that did not directly address the research questions. For example, the focus groups were not designed to elicit student opinions about EOPS. However, one of the unexpected findings was that EOPS support was perhaps the most important factor to student satisfaction and success in their first year of college. EOPS support includes financial assistance with book vouchers and free supplies, personal counseling, academic planning, as well as making connections to other campus resources.

Introducing students to the range of services available from EOPS is an explicit part of the learning community coursework. On the survey, students rated that helping them identify areas of academic or personal support as the second most helpful item ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.92$) of the EOPS Learning Community. Although all students have access to campus support services, the learning community students may have become more aware of, and receptive to, this support through the GS course curriculum as well as the frequent interactions they had with faculty, counselors, and staff who recommended or provided the support as needed.

In both the open-ended survey items and the focus group discussions, students specifically expressed an appreciation for the assistance with career planning and goal setting provided through their Learning Community experience. One student summed up this experience for many in the program with the comment, “All of the classes and the experience have helped me decide my goal in life. I had
no clue when I first came here, but now I know.” Some students also appreciated the
support provided by Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPS). An exercise
was used in the focus groups that asked students to rate and explain their first-year
learning community experiences on a continuum from really good to really bad.
When asked what made their experience so positive, one student responded that “The
counselor in DSPS has helped me a lot…with inspirational sayings which I love.”
Accommodations were also mentioned as an important aspect, “They [DSPS]
provide you with like extra test taking time if you need it.” Given that the majority
of students (61%) who completed the courses are the first in their family to attend
college and have a variety of other characteristics which have been shown to affect
success and retention, it appears the learning community helped students benefit
from information, access to support services, and resources about which they may
have otherwise not known.

I expected students to become more receptive to institutional support over the
course of the semester. However, in the paired sample Student’s t tests for pre- and
post-test scores on the receptivity scales, the only significant difference found was
with receptivity to academic assistance, $t(23) = 2.57, p < .05$, and contrary to my
expectations, students were less receptive to academic assistance at the end of the
semester than at the beginning. Given students’ satisfaction with the learning
community program, ability to identify areas of academic or personal support,
increase in verbal confidence, and ability to set academic goals, one reason for this
unexpected outcome may be that students felt more confident in their academic
planning at the end of the term and were therefore less receptive to academic assistance.

**Courses**

Both the qualitative and quantitative data suggest that developing writing skills and improving verbal confidence were important outcomes of the learning community courses. A paired sample Student’s $t$ test was used to analyze the differences between the CSI pre- and post-test results. I expected certain aspects of students’ attitudes, knowledge, and skills, such as study habits, opinion tolerance, and decisions about career direction to change over the course of the semester. However, none of these scales showed a statistically significant difference ($\alpha \leq .05$) from pre-test to post-test.

Several changes were found between the pre and post-test in students’ verbal confidence which significantly increased for those who completed the learning community. Students’ ratings of their verbal confidence are the only aspect found to be significantly higher, $t(23) = 4.52, p \leq .01$ at the end of the semester as compared to the beginning. The sub-scales that make up the verbal confidence scale include ratings of students’ confidence in learning new vocabulary words, understanding the deeper meaning in reading, and writing a well-organized paper. The results from the CSI data were consistent with the survey data on the English 350 scale. The majority of students (54%) rated that improving their writing skills, understanding that writing is a process, and learning to use the support of the writing center were the most helpful aspects of the English 350 course. These improvements in verbal
confidence were also supported by the qualitative data from the open-ended survey items and the focus group discussion with comments such as, “I now know how to write the correct outline of an essay, I have gained confidence in my essay writing.”

In examining the survey results regarding student perceptions of the individual classes, a number of interesting and sometimes conflicting results were obtained. For example, students were polarized on the high academic expectations in GS 150. Some felt the course content was simply too challenging for students like themselves, while others appreciated the emphasis on developing critical thinking skills and the preparation for higher-level courses. Some students attribute the challenges created by the level of expectations more to the instructor’s teaching style than to the course content. In the comments on the survey, 14% of students rated the instructor, her teaching style and motivation, as the most helpful aspect of the GS 150 course content, while 11% cited the instructor as the least helpful aspect.

Some students were unclear on what to expect from the GS course. Some were surprised that it was a real class with its own textbook and assignments; others expected a study-hall type class that would provide support for other class assignments. Overall, the distribution of the students’ ratings of the course expectations are skewed to the left suggesting that while there were some difference in opinions, the instructor’s expectations were considered more positive than negative.

In general, students rated certain aspects of the English course as more helpful than similar aspects of the GS course. The survey instrument included scales
in which students rated the extent to which both the GS and English courses helped them with variables such as improving reading skills, improving writing skills, improving confidence level, and adjusting to the academic demands of college. As might be expected, students rated the English course as more helpful in improving reading skills than the GS course, \( t(27) = -2.71, p < .01 \). A significant difference was also found with English rated as more helpful than the GS course in improving writing skills, \( t(27) = -4.77, p < .001 \). In addition, I was somewhat surprised to find that the English course was rated as more helpful in improving students’ confidence level than the GS course, \( t(27) = -2.93, p < .01 \), given that the GS course curriculum is designed to foster the skills needed for academic success and confidence. There were no meaningful differences found between the English and GS courses with helpfulness in adjusting to the academic demands of college. Again, I expected the GS course to be rated higher than English on this item because the GS curriculum includes study skills, time and stress management, as well as other areas that support the adjustment to college. It is clear that students’ perceptions of the value of the courses in preparing them for their college experiences needs to be examined more thoroughly to determine why the course designed to explicitly address these issues appears less effective than the other which embeds the skills as part of a content curriculum.

In response to the open-ended question as to what was least helpful, 43% of participants wrote in the word “nothing” as a least helpful aspect of English 350 compared to 29% for the GS course. This response reflected the students’ overall
ratings of the two courses and the instructors’ approach to the material and students. The aspects rated as most helpful in the English course include developing writing skills and understanding the necessary steps and structure in writing a basic paragraph. Several students reported their appreciation for the English instructor’s support, passion, and commitment to their success.

A strong correlation was found with the average helpfulness of the GS course and students’ overall satisfaction with the EOPS Learning Community, \( r(26) = 0.70, p \leq .001 \). No significant correlation was found with the average helpfulness of the English course and students’ overall satisfaction with the EOPS Learning Community. This suggests that the experience and attitudes related to the GS course had a global effect on the students’ overall impressions of the Learning Community experience. Given both the quantitative and qualitative data, it is not surprising that the English course, which was consistently rated highly by the students, would not be correlated with the range of views about the overall experience.

Some students expressed a concern with the workload associated with the combination of both classes, especially within the GS course. Twelve semester units is equivalent to full-time enrollment, approximately a thirty-six hour time commitment. Enrollment in the learning community courses equal nine semester units or credits, which is a \( \frac{3}{4} \) time commitment. For some students, the time commitments in school along with other obligations were overwhelming. When asked on the survey which aspects of the GS 150 course were least helpful, one student said, “The whole class seemed overwhelming and I felt I was not prepared
for it…” Another student had a similar response, “In my opinion GS 150 and
English 350 should not be linked together because of the work overload.” Given
some students’ difficulty with the workload in one or both courses, student success
might be improved if expectations of students were emphasized during orientation
before classes begin and again during the first week.

Completers and Non-Completers

The data on students who did not complete the courses offers interesting
information about characteristics of students who may or may not be successful in a
learning community program. In the two-sample Student’s $t$ test analysis, non-
completers rated their desire to finish college lower than those who completed, $t(51) = -3.65, p < .001$. Study habits, $t(51) = -2.91, p < .01$, and intellectual interests, $t(51) = -2.67, p < .01$ of the non-completers were also rated significantly lower than those students who completed the learning community. Given that non-completers rated their desire to be in college, their study habits, and intellectual interests as less
important than those who completed the semester, it appears academic motivation is
an important characteristic of persistence in college.

As Ender & Wilkie (2000) demonstrated, students who are considered at-risk
for failure in higher education are more likely than their peers to display any number
of characteristics such as low academic self-concept, unrealistic grade and career
expectations, unfocused career objectives, extrinsic motivation, external locus of
control, low self-efficacy, inadequate study skills for college success, a belief that
learning is memorizing, and a history of passive learning. It makes sense that if
students begin their first-year of college with little motivation they are less likely to be successful. The lack of motivation may compound the issues related to study habits and intellectual interests. Students may arrive on college campuses with poor study habits, but if they are not motivated to improve upon those, it appears they are more likely to leave. The data suggest that students who are less motivated are also less likely to have strong intellectual interests. If their first semester of college coursework did not engage their interests, and they were not motivated to seek out campus support services and resources such as the career center, they were less likely to be successful in the current study.

Students who did not complete the learning community left for a variety of reasons. As noted above, the CSI data suggests that those students who did not complete the term rated their level of family emotional support significantly lower, $t(51) = -2.74, p < .01$, than the students who did complete the learning community. Life challenges such as balancing school with work, family and childcare obligations, and personal problems, were major issues reported by these students in exit interviews conducted by the EOPS staff. Roueche and Roueche’s (1993) research on at-risk students at the community college suggests that students are not only often underprepared for college but often also work thirty or more hours each week and have little if any support from key family members. Given the data presented on differences between completers and non-completers, the data support the conclusion that not having a strong support system which mitigates the
challenges which arise from the variety of demands on students while attending college can make academic challenges very difficult to overcome.

Of the twenty-nine students who did not take the CSI post-test (they were no longer attending class at week fifteen), sixteen students returned the next semester. Of the fifty-three total who took the CSI pre-test, thirty-eight enrolled in spring 2008 classes. So, even though some did not complete the semester in which they were enrolled in the learning community, they persisted into the next term.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The results of this research indicate that many features of the EOPS Learning Community worked well for first-year students and should be continued. Overall, students rated their satisfaction with the EOPS Learning Community (1 = very dissatisfied to 5 = very satisfied), relatively high ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.88$). Maintaining the same cohort of students in the two classes helped build a support system that in some cases compensated for the lack of a support system outside of the school. Students got to know one another quickly with classroom activities that promoted forming triads and study groups early in the semester. Collaboration between teachers and counselors on course content and student performance helped address problems effectively. The data suggested that office hours with one-on-one help from the instructors should be continued as well.

Among the most difficult issues raised by the data is the question of to what extent the courses should be linked and maintained with a drop-one, drop-both policy. Students seemed to benefit from and appreciate the consistency in the student population across the two linked classes. On the other hand, some students felt the policy was too restrictive. The policy kept students enrolled in a course they did not like or knew they would fail just so they could stay in the other course. While not part of this study, I have worked with students in other learning communities that had more flexible drop policies, which resulted in different
students in each class. The anecdotal data from my personal experiences suggest that relationships naturally developed among those students in both classes, while those students who are only in one class seem left out. However, it is impossible to fully understand the effects of the drop-one, drop-both policy without considering feedback from students who dropped the courses which was not available in this study.

The recruitment and enrollment process for the EOPS Learning Community could benefit from some improvements. It should be made clear to students that linked classes are 100% voluntary. Students would also benefit from clearer descriptions of the learning community courses. Students need to understand that GS 150 requires as much work as any other college class. A course description of exactly what students will learn could help, as could an opportunity to review the textbooks or hear from other students.

Understanding characteristics of those students who would be best supported by the learning community would assist in the recruitment process. The existing data with the completers and non-completers validated the importance of establishing a strong support network, as well as having the desire to finish college and motivation to improve study habits. These aspects need to be addressed during orientation and again early in the semester.

A number of unforeseen findings including the lack of expected change in some outcomes, the role of academic expectations, the interrelationships between academic goals, motivation, and study habits, and the critical role that support
services play in student success, provide useful information for strengthening the Learning Community model.

**Limitations**

In considering the findings of this research, with the exception of the CSI non-completer group data, it is important to keep in mind that these findings only included perceptions of students who remained enrolled in the learning community courses for the complete term and who chose to participate in the research. Considering that the students in this study were ones who completed the learning community courses, they may have had a more positive experience overall as compared to those students who dropped the courses, making it difficult if not impossible, to ascertain the degree to which selection bias has affected the results.

Due to the small sample size in the various methods of data collection (survey instrument $N = 28$; CSI pre-test $N = 53$; CSI post-test $N = 24$; focus groups $N = 11$), the results cannot be generalized to all first-year EOPS students at this particular institution. It is possible that having a larger sample size, including a broader range of ages and educational backgrounds, could have produced different results.

In the initial development of the research questions, it seemed necessary to distinguish between the learning community program and the learning community courses. Even though attempts were made in the development of the survey and focus group discussion guide to exclude specific comments about the instructors, some students’ comments were specific to teaching styles. It appears that students
were not able or willing to distinguish between the course curriculum and the instructor’s teaching style.

One further limitation was that this study was conducted at a rural institution in which I am employed and continue to establish my career. As with any research, my knowledge of the institution, its students and faculty and my past experiences may have set up certain expectations or biases that affected data collection. Although I attempted to remain objective throughout the research process, my own judgments and biases may have inadvertently affected the analysis.

*Implications and Recommendations for Future Research*

As evaluation of the program continues in the future, it would be wise to conduct research among students who dropped the courses to ensure their issues are considered. For example, a small number of telephone interviews would likely yield very helpful additional insights, or confirmation of the themes that emerged from this research.

Within institutions of higher education, indicators such as retention, grade point average (GPA), and persistence are common measurements. A longitudinal study to follow learning community students over the course of one year or more could yield interesting data regarding persistence and retention. Therefore, in collaboration with the institutional research department at the College, institutional data should continue to be collected on retention, grade point average (GPA), and persistence for the students enrolled in the learning community and for a comparison population of EOPS students.
Another area of future research would be to expand the learning community or linked class options to other courses such as math and computers. The feasibility of creating a GS 150-type course for math courses, as well as an expansion to other levels of English should be explored.

While some students appreciated the challenge in GS 150, others felt the instructor’s “honors level” style may be too intimidating. Given students’ mixed responses regarding the GS 150 course content and the instructor’s teaching style, it appears that expectations, or the communication of expectations with this population of students, may need to be reevaluated. An analysis of the GS 150 course content and expectations may also be valuable in evaluating the comments made by some students.

Besides bi-weekly meetings with the learning community faculty and counselors, the data suggest that it might be valuable to develop a formal training program for faculty and staff who work with underprepared students in linked classes. This recommendation is supported by the literature related to the special needs and approaches required by underprepared, first generation, or other at-risk students. Training in diversity and sensitivity skill development when working with at-risk student populations, as well as training in academic standards including course outlines with student learning outcomes could also be beneficial.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

CONSENT TO ACT AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Please do your best to answer the survey questions completely and honestly. This survey has been written as part of a research project designed to gather more information about your experiences here at (the College). In particular, we are interested in your experiences in the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) learning community or linked courses. We will use your feedback to improve the services provided to students during their first year in college.

All students participating in this survey will remain anonymous by separating this consent form from the survey. Please do not put your name on the survey.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may decline to enter this study or may withdraw from it at any time without jeopardy. Students must be over the age of 18 to participate.

Any questions regarding this research may be directed to:

Sheila Hall
Assistant Director of EOPS
(707) 476-4155
(Researcher’s email address)

Eric Van Duzer
Department of Education
Humboldt State University
(707) 826-3726
evvl@humboldt.edu

By signing this consent form, you are providing consent to the researcher(s) to use the information you provide for statistical purposes.

Print Name ...........................................................................................................
Date .....................................................................................................................
Signature ...........................................................................................................
Student ID# (if applicable) ..................................................................................
**APPENDIX B**

*Note* Due to the margin requirements for this thesis, the questionnaire appears different than the original document.

**EOPS Learning Community Exit Questionnaire**  
**Fall 2007**

**Definitions:**
- GS 150 = General Studies or Learning Success course
- Engl 350 = English Reading & Writing Skills course
- Learning Community = the Engl 350 and GS 150 courses taken together or linked

1. What does it mean for you to be “successful” in college?

2. To what extent would you agree or disagree that participating in the EOPS Learning Community has helped you:
   - [ ] Disagree  [ ] Tend to Disagree  [ ] Neither Agree or Disagree  [ ] Tend to Agree  [ ] Agree
   
   a) prepare for college work
   
b) identify areas of academic or personal support on campus
   
c) establish relationships with peers, faculty, and staff that contribute to improved learning
   
d) identify formal learning strategies that meet personal learning needs
   
e) establish personal, career, or academic goals
3. To what extent would you rate your satisfaction level with the EOPS Learning Community?

1  2  3  4  5

Very dissatisfied  Neither  Very satisfied

4. Would you enroll in another learning community?

☐ No  ☐ Don’t know  ☐ Yes

5. To what extent would you agree or disagree that GS 150 has helped you:

a) develop study skills

b) manage time

c) improve reading skills

d) improve writing skills

e) use test taking strategies

f) establish educational goals

g) improve note-taking strategies

h) adjust to the academic demands of college

i) address stress management

If so, which subject areas would you like to see together?
6. What about the GS 150 course content have you found:

a) most helpful?

b) least helpful?

7. To what extent would you agree or disagree that English 350 has helped you:

a) improve reading skills

b) improve writing skills

c) adjust to the academic demands of college

d) understand that writing is a process that involves many steps

e) utilize the academic support of the Writing Center

f) improve academic confidence

g) recognize that reading is a process that involves many steps
8. What about the English 350 course content have you found:
   a) most helpful?
   b) least helpful?

Please complete the following demographic questions.

9. Your gender:
   ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other__________________

10. Age group:
    ☐ 18 - 25 ☐ 26 - 35 ☐ 35 - 50 ☐ Over 50

11. Are you the first person in your immediate family (parents, brothers or sisters) to attend college?
    ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don’t know

Thank you for your time in completing this survey. Please add any additional comments about your experiences or expectations about the college.
APPENDIX C

The Items Comprising the Scales of the CSI-Form B

**Attitude toward Educators**
11, 32, 88, 20, 54, 66
11. Most of my teachers have been very caring and dedicated.
32. The teachers I had in school respected me as a person and treated me fairly.
88. I like my teachers, and I feel they did a good job.
20. Most of the teachers I had in school were too opinionated and inflexible.
54. In my opinion, many teachers are more concerned about themselves than they are about their students.
66. Most teachers have a superior attitude that I find very annoying.

**Career Closure**
10, 53, 34, 77
10. I have found a potential career that strongly attracts me.
53. I have made a firm decision to enter a certain occupation and have begun planning my life around that decision.
34. I become very confused when I try to choose an occupation.
77. I am very confused about what occupation to pursue.

**Desire to Finish College**
25, 38, 51, 60, 16, 73, 85, 94
25. Of all the things I could do at this point in my life, going to college is definitely the most satisfying.
38. I am deeply committed to my educational goals, and I’m fully prepared to make the effort and sacrifices that will be needed to attain them.
51. I am very strongly dedicated to finishing college – no matter what obstacles get in my way.
60. I have a very strong desire to continue my education, and I am quite determined to finish a degree.
16. I dread the thought of going to school for several more years and there is a part of me that would like to give up the whole thing.
73. I wish that society did not put so much pressure on people to go to college, as I’d really rather be doing other things at this point in my life.
85. I can think of many things I would rather do than go to college.
94. I often wonder if a college education is really worth all the time, money, and effort that I’m being asked to spend on it.

Family Emotional Support
21, 65, 45, 87
21. When I was a child, my parents usually understood me, respected my judgment, and treated me in ways that helped me grow.
65. My family and I communicated very well when I was young, and we have a good understanding of each other’s point of view.
45. My family had one way of looking at me when I was a child, and they didn’t understand my feelings very well.
87. When I was a child, the other members of my family often said hurtful things that caused unpleasant feelings.

Intellectual Interests
31, 75, 12, 52
31. I get a great deal of personal satisfaction from reading.
75. Over the years, books have broadened my horizons and stimulated my imagination.
12. Books have never gotten me very excited.
52. I don’t enjoy reading serious books and articles, and I only do it when I have to.

Opinion Tolerance
15, 41, 63, 26, 81, 89
15. I get along well with people who disagree with my opinion openly.
41. I can feel comfortable with someone who thinks quite differently than I do on major social issues.
63. I find it easy to be friends with people whose political ideas differ sharply from my own.
26. When someone’s opinions strongly disagree with my own, I tend to develop unfriendly feelings and to avoid close contact with the person.
81. I feel uneasy and distrustful toward people whose way of thinking is quite dissimilar to my own.
89. Because they irritate me, I tend to stay away from people whose ideas are quite different from my own.

Receptivity to Academic Assistance (INTERESTS)
17, 28, 42, 58, 82, 99
17. I would like to receive some instruction in the most effective ways to take college exams.
28. I would like to receive some help in improving my study habits.
42. I would like to receive some individual help in improving my writing skills.
58. I would like to receive some individual help in improving my math skills.
82. I would like to receive tutoring in one or more of my courses.
99. I would like to receive some training to improve my reading skills.

Receptivity to Career Counseling (INTERESTS)
29, 44, 55, 70 98
29. I would like to talk with someone about the qualifications needed for certain occupations.
44. I would like some help selecting an educational plan that will prepare me to get a good job.
55. I would like to talk with someone about the salaries and future outlook for various occupations.
70. I would like some help selecting an occupation that is well suited to my interests and abilities.
98. I would like to talk with someone about the advantages and disadvantages of various occupations.

Receptivity to Financial Guidance
22, 47, 68, 92
22. I would like to talk to someone about getting a part time job during the regular school year.
47. I would like to talk with someone about getting a loan to help me through school.
68. I would like to talk with someone about getting a scholarship.
92. I would like to talk to someone about the opportunities available for summer employment.

Receptivity to Personal Counseling (INTERESTS)
19, 39, 46, 61, 84, 97
19. I would like to talk with a counselor about my general attitude toward school.
39. I would like to talk with a counselor about eliminating an unwanted habit (involving food, drugs, cigarettes, or alcohol, etc.)
46. I would like to talk with a counselor about some difficulties in my personal relationships or social life.
61. I would like to talk with a counselor about some family problems.
84. I would like to talk with a counselor about some emotional tensions that are bothering me.
97. I would like to talk with a counselor about some feelings of discouragement or unhappy thoughts that keep bothering me.

**Sense of Financial Security**

36, 59, 13, 79

36. I have the financial resources that I need to finish college.
59. I don’t have any financial problems that will interfere with my schoolwork.
13. I have financial problem that are very distracting and troublesome.
79. I am in a bad financial position, and the pressure to earn extra money will probably interfere with my studies.

**Study Habits**

18, 62, 78, 30, 40, 83

18. I take very careful notes during class, and I review them thoroughly before a test.
62. I study very hard for my courses, even those I don’t like.
78. I have developed a solid system of self-discipline, which helps me keep up with my schoolwork.
30. I have great difficulty concentrating on schoolwork, and I often get behind.
40. My studying is very irregular and unpredictable.
83. When I try to study, I usually get bored and quit after a few minutes.

**Verbal Confidence**

23, 57, 80, 49, 69, 90

23. I pick up new vocabulary words quickly, and I find it easy to use them in my speech and writing.
57. I am very good at figuring out the deeper meaning of a short story or novel.
80. I am capable of writing a very clear and well-organized paper.
49. I have difficulty organizing my ideas on a paper, and I tend to make a lot of punctuation and grammar mistakes.
69. Learning new vocabulary words is a slow and difficult process for me.
90. In English classes, I’ve had difficulty analyzing an author’s style and theme.