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# Developmental Students' Perception of a First Year Learning Community

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Dennell Smith

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Walden University  
2015

Abstract

Developmental Students' Perception of a First Year Learning Community

by

Dennell Smith

MSW, University of California Berkeley, 2006

MA, California State University Sacramento, 2000

BA, California State University, Stanislaus, 1996

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

October 2015

## Abstract

This project study was an evaluation of a first year learning community program for community college students enrolled in developmental coursework at a community college in California. The program had never been evaluated. The evaluation used learning community students' and faculty members' perception as a basis for evaluation, specifically concentrating on areas that promoted student success and areas that needed further refinement. Only former program participants and the program faculty members were eligible for the study. Of the 78 eligible participants, responses from 51 students and the 2 faculty members were collected. The theoretical framework was grounded in Tinto's work with learning communities. Data for the evaluation were collected using surveys with open-ended questions as well as interviews with faculty. The qualitative analysis required theme identification using key words from the surveys and interviews. The results from the study indicated that the learning community provided a social support for student learning that was considered a strength for the program but that various elements of programming such as class scheduling and policies were considered areas needing improvement. The project evaluation resulted in an administrative evaluation report. The findings may be incorporated as recommendations for program improvements and documentation of best practices at the community college. The implication for positive social change is that other community colleges may be able to use the recommendations generated in the report to improve their learning community programs so that their students might be encouraged to persist towards degree completion.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my greatest supporter in life, my wife Maisha. Without your energy, support, encouragement, and commitment, I would have possibly given up on some of my dreams long ago. There are several people I have to give credit to for believing in my academic potential and professional goals: Dr. Richard Navies (Berkeley High School), Dr. David West (College of San Mateo), Professor Richard Lueveno (California State University, Stanislaus), Dr. Cedric Robinson (University of California, Santa Barbara), Dr. Forrest Davis (California State University, Sacramento), and Dr. Betty Taylor (University of San Francisco). There are many others that I may have forgotten their names, but not the sentiment behind their positive intentions.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **Introduction**

Historically, the role of the community college is to provide open access to a collegiate education, vocational training, and opportunities for lifelong learning (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The open admissions policy at the community college also means that students who may be academically underprepared may be enrolled with hopes to complete an associate's degree and/or certificate or to transfer to a 4-year university (Cox, 2009; McIntosh & Rouse, 2009). However, there are a number of students for whom this aspiration is a difficult endeavor. Students who are lacking college level skills in English or mathematics are at a disadvantage in the college classroom and face challenges in completing their goals. These students are less likely to persist or be retained at the community college (Illofsky, 2008). To address this issue, some community colleges have implemented learning community programs for students enrolled in remedial coursework to provide additional academic and student services assistance to help the students accomplish their academic goals (Visher, Schneider, Wathington, & Collado, 2010).

### **Definition of the Problem**

Bay Community College (BCC is a pseudonym for a community college in California) uses a learning community program to assist students who are enrolled in remedial English courses. The first year learning community program at BCC was designed to provide support to basic skills students in the form of developmental counseling services and cohort classes comprised of the orientation to counseling courses

and remedial English courses (BCC Accreditation Self Study, 2006). The goal of the first year learning community program was to increase the retention and persistence rates of first year learning community students towards their individual educational goals.

The problem that prompted this study focused on student and faculty perceptions of program effectiveness. BCC reviews all academic support programs on a rotating basis as needed for the accreditation requirements. There was a general campus sentiment that the first year learning community program helped the participants and was valued by students and faculty. However, there was no written documentation or evidence that supported this view. While many community college campuses use similar learning community programs, there were no standardized evaluations for program effectiveness for community college learning communities, particularly from the perspective of program students and faculty. The intent of this project study was to conduct a qualitative program evaluation that explored and examined the perceptions of the students and faculty of the first year learning community at BCC.

## **Rationale**

### **Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level**

BCC had an increase in the enrollment of students who were in need of remediation in basic skills for reading and writing. Between July 2007 and December 2008, 54.05% of students who took the English assessment were placed into developmental English (BCC Accreditation Self Study, 2006). According to the California Community College Chancellor's Office (2008), the completion rate for all

students attending BCC was 26%, with the percentage of basic skills students being much less, and the transfer rate for the same year was even lower at 19%.

Community colleges face challenges in retaining students enrolled in basic skills coursework (Center for Student Success, 2007). BCC has been challenged with the retention and persistence of students who are placed into developmental courses for several years. The college conducted a focus group with developmental students for their accreditation study. According to the results of the focus group, developmental students faced challenges such as being the first in their families to attend college, having poor study skills, being single parents, or lacking reliable transportation (BCC Accreditation Self Study, 2006). Results of a campus-based survey indicated that a majority of students were not aware of the campus resources that could help them overcome those educational obstacles (BCC Accreditation Self Study, 2006). This lack of knowledge or communication hinders the students' ability to access these resources effectively.

To bridge this gap in student knowledge of campus resources and promote retention and persistence for developmental students, the college recommended that students participate in the first year learning community. The first year program consists of two major components, both of which fit into the transfer of learning model described by Caffarella and Vella (2010). The first year learning community program consists of coursework (a college orientation course and developmental courses) and academic counseling sessions. Each component was integrated and designed to enhance the other aspect of the program. The first year learning community program counseling sessions enhanced the academic component by providing early intervention for students at risk for

failing. In addition, the first year learning community counselor helped students understand the courses that were required for completion of their educational objective. The first year learning community course instructor, who was also the program counselor, emphasized the importance of the counseling sessions by requiring students to make counseling appointments during the semester as part of their participation grade.

The first year learning community program allowed students to take their first year of courses in a learning community. The literature on student retention suggested that learning communities serve to help students persevere through their initial year of college (Visher, Schneider, Wathington, & Collado, 2010). Students had the opportunity to learn in depth about the variety of college resources available to them. Participants also had a chance to ask questions and bring up any concerns or problems to the counselor during the length of the academic term.

### **Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature**

Retention and persistence of students who are enrolled in remedial English courses has been both a local and national problem (Crawford & Jervis, 2011; Crisp, 2010; Illowsky, 2008). The California Community College system is the largest and most diverse publicly funded higher education systems within the state. During 2010-2011, 388,236 students graduated from high school in the state of California (California Postsecondary Education Commission Report, 2011). However, the California Community Colleges served over 500,000 full-time students each term in 2010 (California Postsecondary Education Commission Report, 2011).



The dilemma for the colleges was that more than half of entering students test into remedial level English courses because they are not prepared for collegiate level courses upon entering the college. Approximately 40% of students enrolled in remedial coursework did not pass (CPEC, 2011). The lack of persistence and degree completion has numerous implications for California and the nation. Many colleges have instituted programs such as the first year experience learning community program to address students' lack of preparedness (Andrade, 2007).

### **Definitions**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were considered:

*Basic skills:* Having English or Math skills below college level (Illowsky, 2008).

*Developmental coursework:* Precollege classes that do not count towards transfer credit or towards the degree but are required before enrolling in college level English or math (Goldstein & Perin, 2008).

*Learning communities:* Cohort of students enrolled in two or more thematically linked courses (Visher et al., 2010).

*Persistence:* A student's continued progress toward their academic goal (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2004).

*Remedial coursework:* Interchangeable with basic skills coursework or developmental coursework.

*Retention:* Measurement of students reenrolling at same college or university each term until academic goal is achieved (Craig & Ward, 2008).

### **Significance**

The evaluation of the BCC first year learning community program provided an opportunity to learn about the key aspects of the program that may assist the basic skills of students towards retention and persistence. This study was significant because there is an increased number of students entering the community college system lacking the academic preparation in English and/or math necessary to complete the associate's degree, a certificate, or requirements to transfer to a 4-year university. College leaders wanted to identify effective programs and services that would provide the necessary support for developmental students (McMclenney & Waiwaiole, 2005). The findings of this study can assist administrators in making decisions about structural or funding changes with the first year learning community program. In addition, the results may be useful for informing other first year learning community programs that assist basic skills students at 2-year colleges of effective program practices.

### **Guiding/Research Question**

Past research involving learning communities has centered on Tinto's (1997) foundational work on learning communities, which focuses on student involvement in campus activities and persistence. Various aspects of learning communities have been studied such as those for specialized populations, thematic interests, ethnic grouping, and athletics. However, there was a lack of research regarding learning communities at community colleges and even fewer that addressed developmental students enrolled in learning communities at the community college level.

There was a gap in the literature that specifically addressed program effectiveness for community college basic skills students participating in a first year learning community. Few studies documented best practices for first year learning communities specifically serving basic skills students at community colleges. There was also a lack of recently published peer reviewed studies pertaining to the effectiveness or perceptions of remedial students participating in learning communities.

The BCC first year learning community has not had a program evaluation that incorporates the perceptions of students and faculty participating in the program. Previous assessments were program reviews that focused on whether students completed the yearlong program. There was no report to ascertain if the students or faculty members perceived the program as successful or if they believed that changes should be made to improve effectiveness.

The qualitative program evaluation provided a basis for determining whether the BCC learning community for first year developmental students was effective in promoting student retention and student academic performance for participants enrolled in the program. The program evaluation assessed the orientation to college course, the developmental English course, and the student support services associated with the first year learning community program. The overarching question that this study addresses was as follows: What learning community factors influence first year learning community students at Bay Community College? This program evaluation was guided by the following research questions:

1. According to students and faculty, what are the perceived strengths of the first year learning community program?
2. According to students and faculty, what are the perceived needs of the first year learning community program?
3. How effective is the first year learning community program's orientation to college course?
4. How effective is the first year learning community program's developmental English course?
5. How effective is the first year learning community program in connecting students with institutional support services?

### **Review of the Literature**

To better understand the context of the first year learning community, a review of literature was conducted for the key concepts for this study. Important themes concerning learning communities and developmental students include seminal work by Tinto (1997) who has been credited with producing much of the foundational research on collegiate learning communities, progress of basic skills students, research exploring factors for retention and persistence, and studies for best practices for learning communities. Using the databases such as ProQuest, EBSCO, and ERIC that were available through the Walden University library, saturation of the literature review was reached through a systematic search of research related to college and higher education using the terms *basic skills, developmental education, retention, persistence, learning community, cohort*

*learning*, and *community college*. The literature review was organized according to the following topics of basic skills, retention, persistence, and learning communities.

### **Historical Context for Learning Communities**

The concept of learning community has historical underpinnings in the work of Dewey and Meiklejohn (Minkler, 2002). In particular, the philosophical views of Dewey focused on the purpose of education and the ideals of a democratic society contributed to the learning community model. His later work on student centered learning and active learning was also significant. Dewey believed that the education process needed to facilitate democracy by encouraging inquiry and student interaction (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). The notion of democracy in education required a collaborative approach rather than an authoritative one. Learning in a democratic environment meant that students needed to be able to interact with the teacher and peers (Minkler, 2002).

Meiklejohn has been credited with implementing the first learning community within an educational institution in the 1920s (Minkler, 2002). The premise of the initial learning community focused on curriculum integration and working cooperatively among students in the classrooms as well as faculty across disciplines (Smith et al., 2004). During the 1960s, the learning community model became popularized. A former student under Meiklejohn was recognized for bringing the learning community model to the forefront of higher education when he established such a program at the University of California, Berkeley (Smith et al., 2004). Over the following 20 years, various forms of the learning community model emerged in colleges and universities across the United

States (Fogerty et al., 2003). The connection between the early thinking and present day learning communities is the value placed on collaboration and student interaction.

Current research on learning communities conducted by Tinto and others indicated that the student interaction enhances learning and promotes retention (Engstrom & Tinto, 2007).

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study was informed by Tinto's (1997) model for learning communities and persistence. Tinto asserted that student retention could be improved through student participation in learning communities. Within this framework, students were more successful because they were actively engaged in the learning process and became invested in their small learning communities such that they continued with their studies and were therefore less likely to drop out of college (Tinto, 1997). A core aspect of the learning community model that Tinto proposed was the concept of student integration, which was the level of engagement the student had with the faculty, other students, and the campus. The level of integration had been attributed to retention and persistence. Learning communities facilitated student integration by setting up a structure in which students could become integrated into the college by providing opportunities for active engagement in the classroom and the campus environment (Tinto, 2006). These learning communities were typically yearlong cohort groups that included the teaching of college success strategies within the program or course curriculum. This model was appropriate for this study because a learning community was evaluated in this project.

## **Basic Skills**

Community colleges are inundated with underprepared students needing remediation because of the open enrollment admissions policies (Levin & Calcagno, 2008; Levin, Cox, Cerven, & Haberler, 2010). New students usually take assessment tests for English and math before enrolling in classes. More than half of the students who complete an assessment need to take remedial classes in English and/or math (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). These developmental courses are considered precollege classes that do not count towards transfer credit or towards the degree but are required before enrolling in a college level English or math course (Goldstein & Perin, 2008).

Basic skills coursework has strengths and weaknesses. Students who successfully completed remedial classes had higher academic achievement in transfer level coursework than students who did not take the developmental classes (Crane, McKay, & Poziemski, 2002; Crews & Aragon, 2007; Kolajo, 2004). Students who took developmental coursework and successfully completed the curriculum could have academic outcomes similar to peers who did not need remediation (Bahr, 2008; Crews & Aragan, 2004; Kolajo, 2004; Southard & Clay, 2004). However, students who needed to enroll in primarily developmental classes were less likely to graduate (Hoyt, 1999; Plucker, Wongsarnpigoon, & Houser, 2006). Additionally, community colleges have had to increase the time and resources spent on students enrolled in remedial or developmental education courses to improve retention and help students reach their academic goals (Bettinger & Long, 2009).

A study of the Los Angeles County community district quantified the costs of remedial education. Researchers found that students who needed the most remediation paid more in tuition and fees as well as spent more time in school (Melguizo, Hagedorn, & Cypers, 2008). Students enrolled in an average of 2.6 developmental English classes and 2.81 developmental math classes during the course of their community college education. These courses resulted in a \$3,000 increase in cost when compared to students who did not have to complete developmental coursework. Remedial classes also translated to additional time spent at community college in that students required nearly 5 years to complete their academic goals.

Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006) sought to characterize the students who enrolled in the remedial courses so that resources and intervention could later be directed to the appropriate population. The researchers used data accumulated from the National Educational Longitudinal Study conducted by the United States Department of Education. Their findings indicated that 28% of college students enrolled in remedial math courses and 18% enrolled in remedial English coursework (Attewell et al., 2006). In addition, they found that students in public colleges were more likely to enroll in basic skill courses than those in private colleges. Another noteworthy finding of their study was that students attending community colleges were more likely to enroll in developmental courses than students enrolled in 4-year colleges were.

Wilmer (2008) proposed an evidence-based model for program components that promoted student success for remedial students. The model included placing students in a learning community that included a student success class, student support services such



as tutoring, and access to a counselor or advisor who assisted the students with personal and academic development. Wilmer found that these aspects provided a support and intervention system for students who were underprepared. Other researchers linked the cause of students who were academically underprepared for college and in need of basic skills remediation primarily with deficiencies in their high school preparation (Adam, 2009; Allen & Robbins, 2010; Campbell 2009; Kreysa, 2006; Wang, 2009).

### **Retention**

Over the past decade, considerable research has been conducted to determine ways to increase the retention rates of students in higher education. Each of these studies not only demonstrated that improving retention was possible but that it could also be achieved in a variety of ways. Colleges that have increased their campus retention rates have employed thematic based programs such as those focused on careers, incorporated faculty based outreach and advising, implemented learning communities, and developed incentive based programs. Administrators and faculty can design programs and services that help students build their individual capacities for success based on the attributes of successful first year students.

For instance, in a recent study, Nitecki (2011) found that thematic programs could improve retention rates. The researcher examined students enrolled in a community college who joined one of the two career focused programs that had higher retention rates than students in the general student population. Nitecki conducted a series of interviews with faculty and students and determined that program attributes such as faculty advising within the program and a program culture that was considered supportive led to the

higher retention rates. McArthur (2005) had a similar finding for a study conducted at a community college. In a study on campus based retention, the researcher found that an academic department that relied on the outreach efforts of faculty to advise students had higher retention rates for affiliated students than the student population not affiliated with the department. Students responded that the connection with the department faculty was a major factor in their retention.

Retention has also been supported using learning communities. Research conducted by Hotchkiss, Moore, and Pitts (2006) at a 4-year university found that retention improved for at-risk students enrolled in a learning community program. Students who participated in the learning community during their first year of college were more likely to be enrolled at the college one year after completing the program. The researchers at Chesapeake College found that using an incentive-based program could increase retention (Midcap, Seitzer, Holliday, Childs, & Bowser, 2008). Chesapeake's program was aimed at first year students at the community college. It included academic planning, career and academic workshops, and student activities.

In response to this increased focus on retention, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) developed a list of best practices and benchmarks to help institutions in their efforts to retain students (Oriano-Darnell, 2010). According to CCCSE, colleges promoting retention should provide students with clear academic plans, support systems, meaningful learning experiences, and adequate academic foundations for underprepared students. A community college in Florida used these elements as a basis for their institutional model for retention and student success to gain reaccreditation

(Fontana et al., 2006). These strategies were effective towards preventing students from dropping out because these interventions were used simultaneously. For instance, students were given academic plans that delineated which course to take to accomplish their goals. They were provided academic and social support so that the students were connected to learning resources in addition to the faculty and staff associated with those resources. Students were also given learning experiences that engaged them in and outside of the classroom (Oriano-Darnell, 2010). The combination of these strategies encouraged students to stay in school.

Caison (2005) examined specific causes for students withdrawing from college and found that the students most likely to drop out needed academic and social support. Craig and Ward (2008) studied student and institutional factors that contributed to retention at a public community college. Based on their findings, academic performance and credit earned were factors that related to retention that could be addressed with academic and career advising and academic interventions.

Lau (2003) proposed many of these same strategies in an examination of institutional practices that promoted retention. The researcher described the different institutional programs that were essential in helping first year students to persist through their first year of college. In order for student retention programs to work, faculty, staff, managers, student government members, and individual students must make a commitment and take responsibility for student success on campus. Academic support, collaborative learning, and academic advising are among the specific recommendations for improving retention. Similar to Oriano-Darnell's (2010) findings, Lau's

recommendations promoted students' engagement in the classroom, assistance with coursework, and advising to provide a plan for graduation. Lau (2003) indicated that academic support in the form of learning centers and freshmen year programs helped students with retention by offering tutoring, helped with learning deficiencies and disabilities, and gave guidance on balancing school with other obligations. Collaborative learning allowed students to be engaged and actively involved in the learning process. Advising gave direction to students on requirements necessary to graduate. Lau's model indicated that students who had access to these components were more likely to be retained and graduate.

Following the same approach, Braxton, Brier, and Steele (2007) formulated seven guidelines that colleges should follow to support retention. Their findings were based on retention studies at various colleges as well as policies and procedures proven effective. Among the guidelines included using academic advisors to engage students in career exploration in order to promote educational goals, paying attention to individual student needs, and developing programs to facilitate student success such as orientation courses that were similar to those listed in the CCCSE best practices. The career exploration aspect helped students identify and focus on their goals and provided guidance on how to pursue a career by completing a specific sequence of courses. By addressing the needs of students, colleges demonstrated their commitment to the student, respect for student needs, and an understanding that the student is an integral part of the campus. Further, the researchers indicated that student success programs were significant because they helped students learn campus norms, requirements, and available resources.

Veenstra's (2009) strategic plan also outlined similar strategies for improving student retention. In addition to using support systems, the author suggested that colleges actively recruit students to retention programs by identifying students early in their college careers as potential students in need of extra support. The key feature of this model was to look at students' specific demographics and assess the students' need for assistance based on specific criteria. Family educational and economic background, high school achievement, and performance on college entrance exams were used to determine if a student was at risk for dropping out after the first year. Students who had family backgrounds with limited education may not have had sufficient support from family. Their family may not have provided enough encouragement or understood the requirements necessary for college success, thus putting the student at risk for dropping out. Those students with lower high school achievement or lower scores on college entrance exams may be less prepared academically and drop out due to inability to perform academically. Students from lower economic background may drop out when financial needs are not met. Veenstra's plan included identifying these factors so that interventions towards retention can be implemented early in the student's academic career.

Ficke and Ficke (2008) conducted a study that focused on student traits to predict student retention and persistence during their first year of college. Successful first year student attributes were identified. The predictors included developmental education background, use of support services programs, and receiving financial aid. Students who lacked developmental skills or lacked financial support were more likely to drop out.

Ficke and Ficke (2008) found that those students who participated in support services programs were more likely to be retained. Poor developmental skills affected the students' ability to perform adequately in the classroom. Without remediation, these students struggled with reading, writing, and/or math in any class that required these skills. In particular, the researchers determined that college level reading and comprehension were crucial for reading textbooks. Furthermore, financial aid helped students balance the need to work to pay for necessities and the need to study and attend class. Those who work more decreased time allocated toward school. Therefore, student support services provided access to academic, career, and social resources. When these aspects are missing, students dropped out because they were unable to meet the demands of the college environment (Ficke & Ficke, 2008).

### **Persistence**

At the community colleges, persistence is a significant issue for students enrolled in developmental courses. For example, Conway (2009) studied persistence at a large, urban community college in which more than half of the students needed remediation. Persistence was found to be a positively correlated for those students who reached basic skills proficiency (p. 326). Similarly, at a different metropolitan community college, Hawley and Harris (2005) determined that the amount of developmental coursework needed negatively correlated with persistence. In addition, Crisp and Nora (2010) found that the lack of mathematics preparation contributed to lower persistence.

Persistence towards graduation or transfer is difficult to track among community college students because these students frequently change schools or educational

objectives and systemic tracking of students does not occur once they transfer from the institution (Goel & L'heureux, 2003). Andrade (2007) was able to compile data about student outcomes for nearly 20 learning communities. Trends in the data indicated that learning communities that included study skills and mentoring components increased persistence for student participants. Andrade discovered that study skills helped students improve academically so that they could pass their classes and continue to the next level of classes in the sequence. Moreover, mentoring allowed students to learn skills and expectations from students or faculty that the students were paired with. The students used the skills and knowledge gained from mentoring to help them stay on track with their academic goals (Andrade, 2007).

To improve persistence, colleges must implement strategies and programs before the student experiences difficulties (McJunkin, 2005). The researcher found a variety of programs at 12 different institutions that focused on early intervention for persistence. Some of the persistence strategies included early academic advising, requiring orientation courses, mentoring, and redesigning vocational programs to account for remedial classes. There were examples that intervention strategies were effective. Goodman and Pascarella (2006) found that persistence was higher for students who participated in the First Year Seminar. Likewise, orientation courses and learning communities at community colleges were also effective in promoting persistence (Derby & Smith, 2004; Barnes & Piland, 2010).

McClenney and Waiwaiole (2005) identified effective strategies for community colleges that have improved persistence. Successful tactics used at the community

colleges included incorporating educational case management with a counselor or advisor and required student success courses. The counseling component helped students with persistence by working with students early in their academic career to identify barriers and creating plans to overcome them. The use of counseling also fostered a relationship so that the students sought guidance when issues arose. The student success courses gave students the skills they needed to be academically successful. The course topics included study skills, exam prep, and time management.

Another study conducted by Settle (2011) showed that student integration into the campus environment and student relationships with faculty were significant in persistence. Students who were active in campus activities or felt like they were a part of the campus community were more likely to persist. In addition, students who were able to establish regular contact with faculty outside the classroom had higher persistence rates. Other researchers have also identified faculty interaction and social integration as key factors for persistence. In Barnett's study (2011), faculty interactions with community college students that included mentoring, additional academic help, and an interest in the students' goal and background directly influenced their students' academic experience and their intent to persist. Students with fewer of these opportunities for interactions were less likely to persist.

Cofer and Somers's (2001) study focused on the effects of financial aid on persistence. They found that access to financial support resources such as financial aid and employment opportunities influenced persistence rates of community college students. Students who struggled financially were less likely to persist. The researchers



also found nonfinancial variables that positively influenced persistence such as being older than 30 years of age, being a student who lived with parents, being a full time student, and attending a public college.

### **Best Practices in Learning Communities**

Many of the best practices and strategies towards improving student retention have been incorporated into collaborative cohorts or learning communities. While the specifics of learning community structures are varied, the overall concept of the learning community has been generally accepted. Tinto (1997) defined a learning community as a cohort of students taking at least two courses together that were often organized around a theme and promoted collaborative learning experiences. Cohorts used in most learning communities consisted of 10 to 25 students (Maher, 2005). The most common goals of learning communities were to promote retention and increase student success (Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood, & Wright-Porter, 2011).

For instance, Noble, Flynn, Lee, and Hilton (2007) evaluated a first year program that included an orientation, advising, group activities, and tutoring. Their analysis of the program determined that participants had higher grade point averages and that the program students were more integrated into the campus community. In a different study, campuses that created learning communities intended to increase retention for first year students and included advising, an orientation, tutoring, and developmental coursework found that retention for participants was higher than expected (Cutright 2006).

Learning communities have also been used to improved academic outcomes for targeted groups of students such as those who need to complete remedial coursework

before taking college courses. Barnes and Piland (2010) investigated a learning community for students taking remedial English at a community college. Participating in the learning community improved participants' grades. They also found a positive relationship between the developmental writing courses and retention. Richburg-Hayes, Visser, and Bloom (2008) discovered increases for the number of courses completed and number of credits earned for participants of a learning community for developmental English.

Students participating in these communities on average had higher grade point averages. In the Noble et al. (2007) study, program participants had GPAs 0.15 to 0.025 points higher than nonparticipants did. Jamelske (2008) examined the effects of a learning community on GPA. The author found that participating in a learning community increased GPAs for students. Neither study examined which aspects of the program contributed to the higher grade point averages. In Rocconi's study (2010), analysis of the components of a learning community determined that the coursework offered in the program was not a strong contributor to student academic achievement but rather the social support and activities provided within the learning community directly affected educational improvements. Effectiveness of the learning communities has been attributed to their ability to set appropriate expectations for students, provide advice and support from faculty, create opportunities for active involvement, and engage students in learning (Tinto, 1999).

At Northern Michigan University, researchers conducted a study to examine the success of its learning communities (Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999). The researchers of

this study found that learning communities provided an effective way to improve student performance and retention when one of the learning community courses included a freshman year seminar that focused on student success strategies and campus resources (Soldner et al., 1999). The findings highlighted results of nearly 700 participants in the university's first year learning community. When compared to participants who did not participate in a learning community, the researchers found significant differences in that 88% of learning community students achieved good academic standing after their first semester compared to 77% for nonparticipants. In addition, second year retention for learning community students was 73% compared to 67% for nonparticipants. Soldner et al. (1999) attributed success of the learning community program to its structure that allowed students to establish relationships with faculty, which functioned as an early intervention strategy.

In a study conducted by Smith (2010), results for basic skills students and English as Second Language (ESL) students participating in learning communities indicated that students experienced positive learning outcomes when compared to nonlearning community participants. The investigation included nearly 3,000 students enrolled in 13 community colleges throughout the United States. Specifically, Smith found that being a member of a learning community significantly contributed to positive learning outcomes with 71% of learning community students experiencing positive learning outcomes versus 68% for the nonparticipants. Further, the data showed that there was a slight difference in the level of support in which 68% of learning community students felt supported while 66% of nonparticipants felt supported.

Similarly, research conducted at a Midwestern university found that students who participated in a learning community were more involved with on campus activities and had higher persistence rates than nonparticipants (Gordon, Young, & Kalianov, 2001). The difference in grade point averages was considered significant with the mean GPA for learning community students at 2.62 and nonparticipants at 2.39. The positive trend continues for persistence with 82% of learning community students continuing to the next year of college while 78% of nonlearning community students persisting. Lastly, a greater percentage of learning community participants reported being engaged in a variety of on-campus activities compared to the general student population (Gordon, Young, & Kalianov, 2001).

Research conducted by Harris (2006) followed a cohort of 39 students. The results of the research indicated that the students who participated in the cohort felt a sense of community and had an increase in the retention rates. Harris proposed that there was a “cohort retention effect” in which the perception of community among students contributed to the retention of those students.

A common feature of learning community programs were the success courses designed specifically for first year students. These types of courses were alternatively labeled as Freshman Experience or Seminar. Davig and Spain (2004) conducted an empirical study that concluded that the most useful topics towards promoting student retention and persistence for the freshman experience courses included academic advising, study skills, and cohort activities. In a similar study by Schnell and Doetkott (2003), students who participated in a freshman seminar were tracked over a span of 4

years. The results of their study showed that students who took the seminar had higher retention rates than those who did not.

The organization formally known as Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (officially renamed as MDRC) has conducted numerous studies in education each year. One study conducted by MDRC in 2006 evaluated learning community programs at six different community colleges in five states. These learning communities were short programs lasting 1 semester rather than the entire academic year. The emphasis for five of the programs was students enrolled in developmental education classes. The researchers employed a randomized design involving nearly 7,000 students, half of which enrolled in a learning community at one of the campuses. The results were that learning communities conducted for only 1 semester did not improve persistence rates for students participating in the programs. Those programs with a shorter duration influenced persistence by including additional student service components in their program (Visher et al., 2010).

In an attempt to document best practices, Smith and MacGregor (2009) examined programs at institutions known for their successful learning communities. They found that these learning communities were primarily focused on first year students. Secondly, the curricular themes tended to focus on basic skills, major related cohorts, and special populations such as minority or honor students. The best practices for the programs included collaborative and student centered learning, creating a sense of community, having dedicated faculty, and gaining institutional support. The identified

best practices for the core curriculum consisted of active learning, reflection and assessment, diversity, integration, and community.

The existing literature illustrates a pattern of benefits in retention and student outcomes for students participating in learning communities. There was a significant amount of literature regarding various aspects of learning communities for professional groupings, K through 12 settings, and university level rather than the community college settings. However, to align the literature to the scope of this project, studies that primarily focused on residential learning communities, those that were specific to the science and math themes, and those not aimed towards first year students were not reviewed for this study. Additionally, much of the research for learning communities was conducted in the late 1990s, and many of these studies were not used in this literature review.

### **Implications**

The faculty and administrators have tried to address the issues of remedial college student retention and persistence with intervention programs and creating services that specifically address the needs of these students. The findings of this program evaluation have been compiled as a report and submitted to campus stakeholders. One implication of positive results regarding the program was that the study provided evidence for program effectiveness. Faculty members who have expressed discontent about the increased focus on remedial programs have data about the usefulness and effectiveness of the program. While this study does not produce the extensive quantitative data that some faculty members desired, it demonstrated whether participating students and program faculty members believed the program was beneficial. Additionally, results will be used as

feedback for the faculty in terms of course enhancements and recognition of effective program components. Determinations for expanding the learning community program to include additional students may be another outcome of this study.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to conduct a qualitative program evaluation for the BCC first year learning community using student and faculty surveys and interviews with faculty members. The problem underlying this study was that community colleges with students enrolled in developmental coursework have difficulties with persistence and retention of these students. Prior research indicated that learning community models improved retention and persistence for basic skills students. The remainder of this project consists of three sections. Section 2 provided details for the methodology of the qualitative program evaluation for the first year learning community. In Section 3, I describe the program evaluation project and discuss the implementation plan. Finally, Section 4 includes a reflection about the project and the learning process.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Introduction**

The research design for this project was a qualitative program evaluation. The purpose of this evaluation was to determine program effectiveness in promoting student retention and student academic persistence for developmental students enrolled in the program. The qualitative aspect was significant because it allowed for incorporation of student and faculty perceptions, which was derived from student-constructed responses and in depth responses from the faculty interviews. Such responses helped ensure that the true sentiment about the program was reflected (Merriam, 2009).

In general, program evaluations are aligned to accountability (Alkin, 2012). In this study, I examined the perceived strengths and needs of the first year learning community program by evaluating the orientation to college course, the developmental English curriculum, and the students' use of the institutional support services of the learning community program. The program evaluation was useful since the findings can assist the learning community coordinator in making decisions for improvement of the individual program components (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). Further, the feedback attained from the program evaluation can provide evidence for program effectiveness (Spaulding, 2008).

Specifically, this study was a summative program evaluation. Summative evaluations provide information that can be used for assessment at the conclusion of a program (Briggs & Coleman, 2007). Tinto (2006) suggested that institutions conduct evaluations as a method of program self-assessment and as a way of informing program



policy decisions. This type of evaluation helps determine the value of the results at the end of a program (Caffarella & Vella, 2010). Data collected from the students reflected their experiences after they had completed the program rather than during the program. By waiting until the conclusion of the program, participants had the opportunity to provide their feedback in context of their entire experience as students in the program.

A formative evaluation would not be useful in this study because it is intended to provide program feedback while the program is being conducted so that changes can be implemented immediately (Spaulding, 2008). No data were collected during the program administration because the program coordinator would not have been able to make significant changes during the term. This type of evaluation would not have addressed the research questions.

Goal-based evaluations are used to determine if the stated program goals are being met (Spaulding, 2008). The first year learning community program has target goals related to transfer rates and retention rates. However, goal-based evaluations were not used because access to significant institutional data would have been required to evaluate the program goals and I would not have had the ability to gather the data. The evaluation of the learning community's program goals were beyond the scope of this study.

Outcome based evaluations are used to determine if change has occurred or if the benefits of the program have occurred (Spaulding, 2008). This type of evaluation would not have used perceptions of students and faculty, which was a critical part of this study. Longitudinal quantitative data would have been needed to determine if the program increased retention and increased academic performance for developmental students.

Case study methodology was also considered for this project. The summative program evaluation model was the better choice for this study because the case study methodology is designed to collect detailed, in depth information about a program over an extended period of time (Merriam, 2009). Greater information about the program can be collected using case study methodology, but the focus of this project study was limited to the perceptions of the students and faculty as it related to strengths and weaknesses of the program. Data such as the researcher's observations of classroom interactions would have been collected for a case study but would not have been relevant to this study's research questions. While a case study methodology can provide useful information about the program, the detailed observations and data that would have been gathered would not have been suitable for this study.

The summative evaluation method was most appropriate for this investigation because the data gathered produced first year learning community student participants and faculty member responses that summarized their perceptions and experiences of the program (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The overall goal of this program evaluation was to use the student participant and faculty member responses to identify areas of effectiveness and areas for improvement for the first year learning community.

### **Participants**

This study involved perceptions of students who have participated in the first year learning community and the faculty members who teach in the program; the study participants consisted of these students and faculty members. I used a purposeful sample because the study participants needed to be students and faculty of the learning

community program. A purposeful sample is a nonrandom sample that is selected because it provides specific insight of the problem within a particular setting (Merriam, 2009). Only students who had participated in the program and faculty members who teach courses for the first year learning community would have been able to provide the necessary information for this program evaluation. Since this program evaluation used a nonrandom sample, the results may not be generalizable to other settings or populations (Lichtman, 2012). No assumptions can be made regarding the strengths or areas for improvement identified in this learning community program that may be the same as those at another community college.

I emailed the first year learning community faculty and sought access to the student participants by contacting the same first year learning community faculty members. The researcher-participant relationship with student participants was limited to email contact. Only students who had participated in the learning community program were contacted via email to request their voluntary participation in the project study. For faculty members, the researcher-participant working relationship involved contact initially by email, phone calls to confirm interview time, and eventually through an in-person interview.

The first year learning community program at BCC accepts approximately 25 to 30 students each academic year into the yearlong cohort. The first year learning community faculty maintained a contact list of former participants that contained email addresses for former first year learning community students who completed the program within the last 3 years. There were potentially 78 former first year learning community

program students who were eligible to participate in this study. To solicit student participants, an email invitation was sent to all 78 students using SurveyMonkey. The invitation included the purpose of the study, information about confidentiality, and informed consent (Appendix B). The surveys used an electronic format so that students could submit their responses online (Appendix E). There were two faculty members who taught the first year learning community courses. The two faculty members also received the email invitation through SurveyMonkey that included the purpose of the study, information about confidentiality, and informed consent, along with a request for an interview (Appendices C and D). The faculty surveys were also available in an electronic format (Appendix F).

The electronic surveys sent to students and faculty used Survey Monkey, a web-based survey application. This online tool allowed me to send the surveys via an emailed link and collected the results anonymously from participants. Surveys completed with SurveyMonkey did not indicate which students replied, only how many.

Measures were taken to ensure that participants were treated ethically and their rights were protected. Before the study, participants were provided with an informed consent form along with a way to contact me if there were questions or further concerns. None of the participants from this project contacted me. The confidentiality of the participants in the study was maintained since no names were used, email addresses were not retained, any identifying information of individual participants was coded, and the college name was changed or omitted as necessary in the study. All research data were stored in a secure location and electronic documents had password-protected files.

Research data audiotapes of interview data will be stored then destroyed after 1 year.

There were no ethical concerns, as anticipated since the study did not affect participants emotionally or physically. Further, the study had no impact on participants' employment or academic standing. I had no relationship with the college or with the participants.

### **Data Collection**

The data generated for this study were collected from student surveys, faculty surveys, and faculty interviews. Responses from 51 students and the two faculty members were collected. The primary purpose of the survey was to gather students' and program faculty members' perceptions about the learning community. The open-ended questions for the survey consisted of questions such as how helpful the program was, what aspects of the program were favorite and least favorite, and what should be changed to make the program better (Appendix E). Respondents were allowed to respond with a minimum of one-word answers to the open-ended questions.

The first 10 questions of the survey were used to help characterize the respondents as a group. Student surveys provided demographic data that included gender, age, ethnicity, and self-reported GPA in addition to questions about the program. Students participants were primarily female, aged 18 to older than 46, many identified with an underrepresented minority group, and most attended college full time (see Table 1). These students were primarily first year students without children, indicated that English was their primary language, and intended to transfer to a 4-year university. Faculty surveys provided descriptive information that included gender, number of years teaching with the first year learning community program, and other courses taught. The

faculty members who participated in this project were women who had at least 15 years of experience teaching for the learning community program and taught courses in their academic departments that were not part of the learning community program.

Table 1

*Student Demographics*

<b>Gender</b>	
Male	27.5%
Female	72.5%
<b>Age</b>	
16-21	58.8%
22-25	25.5%
26-30	7.8%
30-35	0.0%
36-40	2.0%
40-45	3.9%
46+	2.0%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
African American	33.3%
Asian	2.0%
Latino	33.3%
Native American	3.9%
Pacific Islander	3.9%
Caucasian	9.8%
Other	13.7%
<b>Attending school</b>	
Full-time	72.5%
Part-time	27.5%

The survey requests were sent out midsummer. I allowed 10 weeks for surveys to be returned by students. Reminder emails were sent to students after 3 weeks and 6 weeks. The data collected using SurveyMonkey were exported into an Excel spreadsheet in which responses for each question were listed under the question (Appendix H). The program faculty member interviews were facilitated after the survey requests were emailed. Responses for faculty interviews were transcribed and exact word phrases were selected to reflect the response for each question (Appendix I). Once all of the data from the surveys and interviews were organized into the spreadsheet, the responses were

reviewed for each question to verify that the response provided was appropriate for the question. There were no incoherent or inappropriate responses to any of the questions. The responses that students provided were retained with the original syntax and spelling, none of which detracted from comprehending the response.

The student and faculty surveys were researcher constructed. I wrote questions that would gather information specific to the learning community program. The selection of a researcher-constructed instrument is appropriate when the instrument is intended to be customized for a particular population, setting, and program (Lodico et al., 2010). In similar program evaluation studies with learning communities, researcher constructed instruments were also used (Tinto, 2006). While there were instruments that were designed to gather student and faculty perception surrounding academic achievement and school involvement, none of the instruments reviewed were specific towards assessing perceptions of basic skills students and faculty participating in a learning community at a 2-year college. The instruments for this study were designed to elicit specific and useful information about program function from the students' and the faculty member's perspective. These instruments were reviewed by three learning community faculty who were not participating in the study to ensure content validity in that it accurately reflected the information that could be gathered about the program.

Questions 11 to 20 were multiple choice style items that required a response from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* with *no option* for neutral responses. Only one response was permitted for each question. Each question was a stand-alone item and was used to identify trends or themes. The multiple-choice items were similar to Likert type



scales. However, the response to the multiple-choice items in this survey were simply tallied for each question and the associated responses, with special measurements involved. These types of questions are used in qualitative studies to help provide additional context and evidence (Lodico et al., 2010).

The open-ended survey questions were divided into four sections. The general section had three questions about the best part of the program, the least favorite part of the program, and suggestions to make the program better. The next section contained five questions about the orientation to college course. Those questions were about the most important information learned in the course, least important information learned in the course, what should be changed, and whether the course influenced their choice of major or career. The section about the developmental English course also had five questions. Those questions were about the most important information learned, the least important information learned, what should be changed in the course, and whether reading or writing skills improved because of the course. The final section had three questions about the student support services associated with the learning community program. Those questions were about which student services were most helpful, how they learned about the student services, and if the learning community program was a factor in using the student services.

The semistructured interviews with the two program faculty members were conducted individually on 2 separate days and did not take longer than 1 hour for each person (Appendix G). The interview format was selected to allow for flexibility if additional information was needed from the program faculty member who was not part of

the script question. The interviews took place in a conference room at the community college during the summer break for the program faculty members.

The interview questions for the program faculty members were similar to the open-ended survey questions that the students received. Both program faculty members were asked the same set of 20 questions. The general section of the interview questions consisted of seven questions. The questions included collecting the program faculty members perspective on: the purpose of the program; how the program contributes to student success; what improvements should made to the program; funding sources; and professional development.

The next section of interview questions was used to gather information about the orientation to college course. The five questions involved their perspective on most and least valuable course content; what should be changed of the course; and whether the program faculty member believe the course influenced the students' major, career, or transfer decisions. The third section of the interview question focused on the English course. The program faculty members were asked questions about the most and least valuable course content; what should be changed of the course; and what strategies were used to improve students' reading and writing. The final section of the interview had question pertain the support services associated with the learning community. The three questions program faculty members provide their perspective on focused on campus resources available to program students; how the student services component was integrated into the learning community program; and how the program faculty knew that the services were being utilized by their students.

The interview was expected to be reliable because I conducted both interviews and followed the same interview format for each interview. Internal validity and accuracy was maintained by asking for clarification when necessary so that so that I could make sure that the data recorded reflected what the participant meant or intended to say (Merriam, 2009). In addition, audio recordings were made during the interviews to produce verbatim transcripts.

My role as the researcher did not affect data collection. There was no current professional relationship between myself and the First Year learning community program at Bay Community College. While I had a past professional relationship with the college as a part time faculty member more than 7 years ago, I did not teach for the learning community program or work with the program students. As a current faculty member for a community college working with students enrolled in developmental coursework, my bias was the belief that learning communities can be beneficial for students. This bias, however, did not affect how the data were collected since the survey responses were submitted without researcher input and the faculty interviews were transcribed and recorded. All research protocols were followed without influence of bias.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data analysis consisted of reading interview transcripts and the surveys multiple times to identify patterns or themes for each of the questions once all surveys and interviews were completed. The multiple choice sections were tallied by the SurveyMonkey software so that for every question a percentage for the number of ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’ was tallied using the student responses. Strongly agree and agree

responses ultimately tallied together as an affirmative response and strongly disagree and agree response were tallied together as a negative response. These responses were used to provide support for the themes and open-ended responses that were provided. The coding procedure for open-ended questions and interviews data followed a six-step thematic analysis procedure (Saldaña, 2009). First, all of the transcripts and surveys were read initially. Second, the student surveys were organized and analyzed separately from the faculty surveys and interview transcripts. Each of the three data sources were reviewed separately. Third, meaningful words and phrases were identified and used as codes. Next, a list was created that included all of the identified codes. The fifth step involved reviewing the data sources again to find specific quotes that supported the codes. Lastly, the codes were grouped into larger themes.

The responses were then compared to check for any similarities between student responses and the faculty responses. The themes were sorted into those categories that identified a strength of the program and those themes that identified a weakness or area of improvement for the program. The narrative sections were written using the identified themes. No specialized software was used for the data analysis. The codes and themes were organized in an Excel spreadsheet. The codes were selected based on the frequency of the word or phrase used in the surveys or interviews. An idea or concept that was repeated several times in a survey response or interview was used as a code. Table 2 provides a list of the codes and the associated themes used in this study that were discussed in the findings. Sequential participant numbers 1-51 were assigned to the student surveys as they were received by SurveyMonkey. The program faculty member

surveys and interview responses were labelled according to their discipline English (1<sup>st</sup> faculty member interviewed) or counseling (2<sup>nd</sup> faculty member interviewed).

Table 2

*Themes and Codes*

Theme	Codes
Social support	Teacher, instructor, help, family, friends, all/every student, support, group, community
Administrative issues	Field trips, rules, policies, strict, class scheduling, attendance, recruitment, funding, program activities, professional development
Transferring to 4-year college	Transfer, college, university, study skills, requirements, admission, education plan
Course changes	Assignments, curriculum, shared activities, links, campus activities
Improve English skills	Essays, reading, read better, comprehension, writing, write better, annotations, strategy, reinforced
Student support services	Campus services, tutoring, counseling, transfer center, counselor, campus services

### **Evidence of Quality**

Steps were taken to ensure credibility and accuracy of the data and findings.

Credibility was established by using triangulation to limit inconsistencies with the data (Glesne, 2011). Responses for each of the survey questions were compared to the other responses received for the same question. While students may have had a difference of opinion, no result was based solely on one student's perspective. Accuracy during the interviews was maintained by verifying with each faculty member during the interview that the responses that were recorded reflected what the individual wanted to convey by paraphrasing the program faculty members' response. I repeated back or paraphrased

their response to ensure the actual meaning was reflected without misunderstandings. A sample of the interview data are included in the appendix (Appendix J).

In addition, I checked for discrepancies by looking for data outliers that could not be triangulated. No discrepancies were found in faculty surveys or the interviews. If any discrepancies were discovered, they would have been resolved by meeting with the particular faculty member to get clarification on their response. The student surveys were also checked for discrepancies and none were found. The lack of discrepancies was expected because the Survey Monkey online tool required the participants to answer each question before proceeding to the next. Since the open-ended survey questions were typed responses, illegible responses were not an issue. There were a few misspelled words in some of the responses despite the ability for students to use the spell check feature. However, none of the typographical errors was significant enough to detract from the meaning of the response. A sample of student survey data are included in appendix H. Faculty survey sample data are included in appendix I.

There were no responses that were considered incoherent. All of the student and faculty responses appropriately addressed the question asked on the survey or in the interview. However, if a student response had been deemed incoherent, then that particular response would have been categorized as such and would not have been used for the coding and thematic analysis process.

## **Results**

A summative program evaluation was conducted to examine the perceptions of former learning community students and the program faculty members at Bay

Community College. Qualitative survey and program faculty member interview responses were evaluated to determine perceptions of the first year learning community program. The multiple choice style items required participants to agree or disagree to the provided statements. Questions that required a written response did not have a word minimum associated to the question. Therefore, students and faculty member could respond with one word up to a few sentences. During the data analysis process, one word response were considered along with sentence responses to the questions to identify common themes in the responses.

The guiding questions for this project were as follows:

1. According to students and faculty, what are the perceived strengths of the learning community program?
2. According to students and faculty, what are the perceived needs of the learning community program?
3. How effective is the learning community program's orientation to college course?
4. How effective is the learning community program's developmental English course?
5. How effective is the learning community program in connecting students with institutional support services?

## **Perceived Strengths of the Program**

The first guiding question was: according to students and faculty, what were the perceived strengths of the FYE program? To provide an answer to this question, the following questions from the survey and faculty member interviews were evaluated:

### *First Year Experience (FYE) Program Student Survey (Appendix E)*

-multiple-choice items: 12- 20

-open ended questions: 1, 4, 9, 11, 12, 13, 16

### *First Year Experience (FYE) Program Faculty Survey (Appendix F)*

-multiple-choice items: 6-15

### *Faculty Interviews (Appendix G)*

-interview questions: 2, 3, 5, 8, 13

A number of strengths of the learning community program were identified in the surveys and interviews (Table 3). Strengths included in the table were selected from the multiple choice style survey items in which 51% or more of the responses were agree or strongly agree. These strengths included students believing that the program helped them in a variety of ways such as becoming a better student, helping them to stay in college, and helping them progress towards their academic major or career goal. The program strengths may be attributed to the support that the students and faculty described.

The theme identified through the relevant survey questions and faculty member interview questions indicated that social support was important. The strengths of the program primarily centered on the theme of feeling supported in the learning community program. According to the students and faculty members, support was derived from the



instructors and through group/peer assistance. For instance, instructors support was identified by 32% of the students in their responses such as (#9) “teachers actually helpful and cared,” (#19) “teachers that care about you,” (#20) “teachers really wanted to help me do better,” and simply (#35) “support from instructors.”. One student (#32) summarized this instructor support by responding “the main thing I liked was [that] the teachers were so close to us. They made sure we were on top of our game.”. Other responses included (#1) “English teacher,” (#8) “amazing teachers,” (#10) “best instructors,” (#21) “the teachers,” and (#43) “professors.”.

Table 3

*Program Strengths*

Overall program strengths
Helps participants become better students
Helps participants stay in college
Helps participants progress towards academic and career goals
Participants like having cohort classes/Faculty like teaching cohort classes
Participants and faculty would recommend program to other students
Participants believe faculty were helpful/ Faculty believe that they were helpful to participants

*Note.* Responses from students’ surveys, faculty member surveys, and interviews with faculty members indicated that the strengths of the program were related to the social support students receive.

The support students received from the class as a group was also important since 47% of the students referenced their classmates. A sample of student responses included (#26) “there is always support from others,” (#2) “having other people to support me,” (#22) “everyone tried to help everyone succeed,” and (#30) “more people with expectations for me makes me do better.”. The learning community provided social support in terms a family like environment for 10% of students. Students described the support they received from the group as being like a family in statements such as (#17) “it was like a big family,” (#10) “best instructors, family environment,” (#16) “family environment because you are not overlooked or ignored,” and (#11) “class feels like family, all the help you ask for.”. The peer or friendship support was also significant for social support for 14% of students. Students responded (#4) “friends in class, fun,” (#14) “having lots of friends in the same class,” and (#27) “getting to know more students and working with them.”. A student summarized the significance of the group support as (#34) “feeling like I belong to a group, having a group of people who have big hearts, big goals and came from similar struggles as myself.”.

During their individual interviews, both program faculty members stated that the family like environment was a significant part of the learning community because it allows students “to relax” or “learn without being judged.”. The faculty for the English component described the classroom support as an environment that facilitated cooperative learning. The faculty for the counseling course described their support of students in terms of building a community like environment in the classroom so that

students can feel comfortable to ask for help and work with one another so that they “become involved in their learning.”.

Based on the responses to survey questions and the interviews, the overall strength of First Year learning community program focused on the social support student participants received in the program. Every student and both program faculty members cited one of the code words associated with the theme of social support (Table 2). Students believed the most significant aspect was that they benefitted from the support they received from other students in the program and from the program faculty members. According to the multiple choice style items, 96% of the student participants believed that the social support they received while part of the program cohort contributed to them becoming better students, 90% for staying in college, and 84% making progress towards their academic and career goals.

### **Perceived Needs of the Program**

The second guiding question was: according to students and faculty, what were the perceived needs of the FYE program? To provide an answer to this question, the following questions from the survey and faculty member interviews were evaluated:

#### *First Year Experience (FYE) Program Student Survey (Appendix E)*

-multiple-choice items: 11-13, 16, 20

-open ended questions: 2, 5, 6, 10, 11

#### *First Year Experience (FYE) Program Faculty Survey (Appendix F)*

-multiple-choice items: 7, 8, 11, 15

#### *Faculty Interviews (Appendix G)*

-interview questions: 4, 9, 10, 14, 15

There are several aspects of the program in which students and faculty believe there was a need for improvement. The areas for improvement for the learning community program were centered on the theme of administrative issues (Table 4). The areas for improvement included in the table were selected from the multiple choice style survey items in which 51% or more of the responses were disagree or strongly disagree. These administrative issues encompassed a variety of policy and structural concerns identified by students and faculty.

Students reported issues with required activities, difficulties with class scheduling, and other administrative issues. While some students enjoyed the mandatory field trips and campus-based activities, there were some students who believed that these components of the program needed revising. For example, students expressed concerns with these activities with responses such as (#14) “make field trips optional,” (#2) “activities conflict with sports,” (#25) “not being able to attend some of the activities,” (#26) “couldn’t go on most of the trips,” (#40) “field trips were a requirement,” and (#41) “waking up early for field trips.”.

Table 4

*Program Areas for Improvement*

Overall program areas for improvement
Mandatory field trips/campus activities
Scheduling for program classes
Classroom policies for attendance
Program recruitment for participants

Lack of professional development for faculty
Lack of program funding

*Note.* Responses from students' surveys, faculty member surveys, and interviews with faculty members indicated that there were weaknesses related to administrative aspects of the program.

Scheduling for program classes was also an issue for some students. The time classes were offered and the number of course sections available seemed to be problematic. Students wanted more options for taking the learning community classes at different times so that the class would not conflict with other obligations such as work or sports. Students with concerns for scheduling responded, (#2) "need more times to choose classes," (#3) "different time to take classes," (#5) "more sections to choose from," (#7) "classes at different times.". In addition, an issue was the fact that the opportunity to remain in the program for two years instead of one. Students responded with: (#9) "program should last two years," (#17) "all classes should be in the program," or including additional courses such as other electives to the program that have never been offered (#8) "offer more courses in the program," (#23) "more elective classes for the program.".

In addition, students had other administrative concerns for the learning community program that included the "strict" class attendance policy and the recruitment of participants for the program. For instance, 11% of the students believed that the attendance policy was too restrictive. These students believed that the attendance policy should be flexible (#1) (#3) (#7) or believed that three absences from classes during the

term were not enough (#46) (#47). Those students with critiques of the recruitment process to the program believed that more diverse students should be recruited (#30) (#10) (#33) (#38) (#51), older students should be recruited (#20), or more stringent acceptance criteria should be used (#1) (#10) (#13).

The faculty administrative concerns focused on increasing funding for the program, revising the mentoring and leadership activities for students, and increasing opportunities for professional development for program faculty. In their individual interviews each faculty members explained that limited funding meant that the program could only serve a maximum of 30 students per year but the need for assisting students in development classes was much greater. The English faculty explained, “our contract limits the number of students we can instruct per course. If we admit more students, the program does not receive additional funding nor are we compensated in our salaries for more students.”. They believed that the program could serve more students if additional sections of the learning community courses were offered. The counseling program faculty member stated, “The program is allocated funding by the number of courses taught within the program. When we have more sections, then we can serve more students but having more sections of the learning community program has not been a priority for the administrators.”.

Both faculty members also believed that the training and professional development opportunities specifically for learning community faculty were limited. Both faculty members would like to attend conferences that specialize in training for learning community programs such as the National First Year Experience conference but

neither had the opportunity to participate because of the limited funding allocated for such activities by their college. The counseling faculty member stated “I have been waiting for the opportunity to attend the conference for learning communities and the ones on supporting diversity.”. Their faculty development options were primarily limited to their respective content areas of English and counseling. For instance, the English faculty member stated, “I don’t know everything about learning communities. I would welcome the opportunity to attend those conferences and learn what others do with their programs.”.

The counseling faculty member believed that the mentoring and leadership components of the learning community program needed major revisions and were not effective for students. She stated, “We definitely need to work on [the mentoring and leadership activities] for students. I want it to be a meaningful experience for them rather than something they have to do.”. The mentoring activity was not conducted every year because the program was unable to recruit enough mentors during some years. The student leadership development activities were not consistent and varied each year because the program was dependent on utilizing the activities sponsored by the student government and the campus student activities office.

In summary, the areas for improvement that were identified by the students and program faculty members were issues related to administration of the First Year learning community program. Students believed that administrative policies concerning the field trips, campus activities, attendance, and recruitment procedures needed to be improved. The faculty members for the program believed that administrative policies concerning the

lack of professional development and lack of program funding were aspects of the program that could be improved.

### **Effectiveness of the Counseling Course**

The third guiding question was: how effective was the FYE program's orientation to college course? To provide an answer to this question, the following questions from the survey and faculty member interviews were evaluated:

#### *First Year Experience (FYE) Program Student Survey (Appendix E)*

- multiple-choice item: 13
- open ended questions: 4-8

#### *Faculty Interviews (Appendix G)*

- interview questions: 8-12

The counseling course for the learning community program focused on a variety of topics throughout the year including major exploration and career guidance, developing study skills, time management skills, how to transfer to a 4-year college or university, applying for financial aid, and identifying and using campus based student support services. The response phrases from the open-ended survey questions and faculty member interviews were used to identify the theme in the section. According to the survey results, the most significant aspect of the orientation to college class was that the course contributed to the students understanding of how the process of transferring to a 4-year college worked. The vast majority, 71%, of the students and both faculty indicated that the information presented on transferring to 4-year colleges was the most significant information taught in the orientation to college course (Table 4). The topics related to



transferring that were indicated as important or useful included learning about creating an educational plan (8% of students), identifying potential transfer colleges (10% of students), and specific transfer requirements needed at the 4 year colleges for admission (49% of students). In addition, 10% of students believed that the study skills were most important and 5% of students believed financial aid topics were the most significant component of the counseling course.

Another finding was that 55% of the student participants believed that the counseling course had no effect on their selection of a major or career. Of the of students who believed that the counseling class did not impact their decision, 46% of these students indicated that they had already selected a major or career prior to entering the program. For instance, student responses included (#10) “I already picked my major before we talked about it in class” and (#3) “I decided what I wanted to do a long time ago.”. The remaining 45% of the students indicated that the orientation to college course helped them decide on a major or career or gave them a direction to further explore their professional options.

The program faculty would be interested in making changes to enhance the counseling course. The English faculty member would like to create more curriculum linkages between the counseling and developmental English classes so that students are able to use the reading and writing skills from the English course in the counseling course. Ideally, students would practice English strategies the same week in their counseling course in a manner that is applicable to the class material. The English faculty member stated that “it would be great if there was time in the counseling course for

students to discuss their journal writing each week, especially since most of topics are focused on their college experience.”. The counseling faculty would improve the orientation to college course by adding more activities that allowed students to be involved in campus activities outside of the classroom.

The responses from program students and program faculty members can be summarized that they indicated that the counseling course strength was centered on the transfer curriculum that was taught in the program and the weakness for the counseling course was that some aspects of the course should be changed such as more curriculum linkages and student involvement in the campus based activities needed improvement.

### **Effectiveness of the English Course**

The fourth guiding question was: how effective was the FYE program’s developmental English course? To provide an answer to this question, the following questions from the survey and faculty member interviews were evaluated:

#### *First Year Experience (FYE) Program Student Survey (Appendix E)*

-open-ended questions: 9-13

#### *Faculty Interviews (Appendix G)*

-interview questions: 13-17

Student responses regarding the developmental English course were consistently positive. Nearly every student, 96%, indicated that their reading and writing skills improved because of the developmental English course (Table 5). The response phrases from the open-ended survey questions and faculty member interviews were used to identify the theme in the section. Students identified topics such as specific essay writing

and reading skills that were important to their learning. Numerous students responded that no changes should occur for the English course. For instance, student responded, (#15) “change nothing, because everything was good,” (#18) “nothing because it was the best class I ever had,” and (#48) “nothing, excellent teacher.”. The positive responses from the students for the English course were credited to the faculty and the support students received in class. There were very few suggestions for changes. Three students believed that the English course needed either more class time or fewer assignments.

Both faculty members stated that students were well supported in the developmental English course. The English faculty member believed that the specific instructional strategy that was effective was focused on basic skills for language improvement that students can utilize in all courses. The counseling faculty member believed that the English curriculum reinforced what was learned in the counseling class by requiring rewrites for all essays submitted for the counseling course. She stated, “I have put a lot of time in over the years to make sure that I worked with [the English faculty member] to make the [counseling] class in sync with [the English course].”. Other than wanting more time for class, neither faculty members believed that changes were needed for the developmental English course.

Table 5

*Effectiveness of Program Components*

Program component	Strength	Areas for improvement
Orientation to college	Transfer curriculum	Campus based activities

Developmental English	Improved reading and writing	None
Student services connection	Exposure to student support services Faculty as counselor	No tracking or follow up for student service use

*Note.* The strengths and weakness of each program component was identified using responses from student surveys, faculty member surveys, and faculty member interviews.

The learning community English course was the only program component in which no significant weaknesses were identified. The program faculty members and the student participants believed that the strength of the English course was that nearly every student believed that their English skills improved because of the class.

### **Connecting Students With Institutional Support Services**

The last guiding question was: how effective was the FYE program in connecting students with institutional support services? To provide an answer to this question, the following questions from the survey and faculty member interviews were evaluated:

*First Year Experience (FYE) Program Student Survey* (Appendix E)

-open-ended questions: 14-16

*Faculty Interviews* (Appendix G)

-interview questions: 3-4, 18-20

Introducing program participants to the available student support services was a strength for the learning community program (Table 5). The response phrases from the open-ended survey questions and faculty member interviews were used to identify the theme in the section. Almost every student participant, 82%, learned about the campus services through presentations and assignments in the counseling class. Only two of the

students indicated that they knew about the student services prior to participating the First Year learning community program because their peers informed them. Additionally, about half of the students indicated that they would not have used any student service if they had not participated in the learning community program. For instance, when asked whether they would have utilized students services if they had not been a participant in the program, one student responded, (#18) “no, I would have been too scared” while another responded that they (#30) “wouldn’t even know about them.”. Another significant aspect was that the faculty for the orientation to college course also served as the counselor for the program students. More than 50% of students believed this connection facilitated their use of the counseling services more than the other student services.

The areas of improvements for the student services connection component were that the program faculty did not follow up on students service use and did track whether students actually used the recommended services. The counseling faculty stated, “I tell the student to go to financial aid but I usually don’t ask them later if they went. I could ask the financial aid staff if the student handled their issue but I assume the student will come back to me if there is a problem.”. The counseling faculty also acknowledged that some student services related problems were left unresolved or became prolonged because of the lack of follow up. The English faculty member expressed similar concerns. The English faculty member stated that referrals were made to the writing center and tutorial center but neither faculty routinely checked the sign in list for either of the services. The English faculty member stated that follow up inquiries with students

were only made when difficulties with class work or assignments did not improve a few weeks after the referral was made.

The data collected indicated that student services component of the program had both strengths and a weakness. The strength of this component of the learning community was that program participants were able to learn about the various student services available at the college and that the counseling instructor also served as the academic counselor for the students. The weakness was that the program faculty members did not follow up with students regarding referrals to student services.

In summary, the data gathered for this project evaluation identified areas that the First Year learning community performed well and areas that needed to be improved. Through the use of students' surveys, faculty member surveys, and interviews with faculty members data were collected that showed that the overall strengths of the program were related to social support for the student participants and the weakness were related to program administrative issues. There were also strengths and weaknesses identified with the counseling course and student services program components. While each of the program components had a strength, the English course component did not have any weaknesses identified by the students or program faculty members.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this project was that it used survey and interview data for a specific program and that it may not be generalizable to other settings or populations (Lichtman, 2012). Since this program evaluation study was qualitative without a random sample or control group, the findings of the program evaluation were specific for Bay

Community College and its First Year learning community program. Thus, a limitation is that other community colleges with learning community programs may not have the same results. Summative evaluation are limited in the data that is collected since the data is collected at the end of the program rely on memory of the participants. In addition, summative evaluations do not allow for any improvements recommended from the findings until the next program cycle since data is not collected during the course of the program. Also, the findings of this study may not be useful for determining funding allocation since significant quantitative data regarding the program were not collected.

### **Conclusion**

This section provided the methods, data analysis, and findings for this qualitative program evaluation study. The study included survey data from past student participants and survey data along with interview responses from faculty. Thematic coding and data analysis were used to determine the evaluation results. The findings indicated that many students believed the social support was a strength of the learning community program while administrative issues were of concern. The findings from the program evaluation can be used to suggest programmatic changes and outline program strengths. The literature review conducted for Tinto's (1997) model and learning communities align to the strengths highlighted in the findings of this study. The literature review supports the findings that social support is an effective component of learning communities. Section 3 discussed the goals and rationale for the project, the review of literature, and a discussion regarding the implementation and implications for social change.

## Section 3: The Project

### **Introduction**

The faculty members of first year learning community program at BCC had never conducted an evaluation of their program. The program evaluation process is essential to improve how the program functions and to ensure that the program goals are met (Spaulding, 2008). The former first year learning community program students and the program faculty members who participated in this project shared their perceptions of the program, which were used as the basis for the program evaluation project. The program evaluation process included identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the overall program as well as the key components of the first year learning community program. The findings of the program evaluation were also used to formulate recommendations to enhance the experiences of the first year learning community students and the two faculty members who teach with the program.

This section includes a brief description of the program evaluation project, the goals, and rationale. A second review of literature and a discussion of the implementation process follows. This section ends with a discussion of social change at the local level of community college and the larger context of higher education

### **Description and Goals**

This project was an evaluation of a first year learning community program at a public community college. The evaluation was intended to address the problem that the learning community program, which is used to improved retention and persistence of students enrolled in developmental coursework, had not been evaluated. Strengths and



weaknesses of the learning community program were identified by using data collected from faculty members and student surveys and interviews with program faculty. The information gathered about the program can be used by the program coordinator, the learning community faculty, and campus administrators to support beneficial program components and provide a basis to improve program weaknesses. Enhancing the program and making needed revisions to the program structure allows the first year learning program to be more effective at accomplishing its mission of improving retention and persistence of students enrolled in developmental classes.

The goal of this project was to evaluate the first year learning community program by focusing on the perceptions of former program students and faculty for the program. The program evaluation was guided by five research questions in order to develop an understanding of the overall program strengths and needs, effectiveness of each course component, and effectiveness of connecting students to campus support services. The following recommendations are based on the weaknesses identified through the students' and faculty members' responses to the survey and/or interview questions.

Students would like to continue for a second year of the learning community program. It is possible to add a year to the program if the learning community can demonstrate sufficient student interest in the program and there are resources available to support the extension of the program. However, this action would require long term planning. The program faculty may want to begin the discussion with their respective academic divisions. A compelling factor would be that the learning community students who were retained successfully completed college level English, and these students could

be further supported the following year as they enter the learning community program for improvement in developmental math.

Another concern regarding program administration was the students' desire to alter the field trip requirement. To make the mandatory field trips seem more flexible to students' scheduling concerns, the field trip options could be discussed during the orientation with student input on the destinations or potential travel dates taken into account. The discussion would help students understand why the particular choices were made and prepare for any potential obstacles in attending the field trips. The discussion also gives the program faculty a chance to know if there are dates or locations that would be difficult for many students and would be able to plan accordingly.

The attendance policy can also be addressed during the program orientation. Although the attendance policy is reviewed the first day of class, students can be given the explanation regarding the attendance policy during the orientation. Students can be informed that the faculty members determine the maximum allowed absences based on the number of class meetings and that exceptions are only made in special circumstances beyond the students' control. Unlike some 4-year college courses, attendance is required in most community college courses because state funding for public community colleges is connected to student attendance.

Students were interested in recruiting a more diverse cohort to the learning community program. The recruitment process can be enhanced by allowing the program students to contribute to changing the recruitment process by helping to recruit new students. Current program students could conduct tabling sessions on campus to inform

other students about the program and distribute program brochures or flyers to other areas on campus.

Program faculty members were concerned about the lack of funding for professional development to receive additional training in learning community best practices. Faculty may be able to secure funding for the professional development activities by requesting funding from campus governing bodies that have discretionary funds that may be allocated to special projects or other departments. For instance, the community college has funding to attend work related conferences through their faculty association. If necessary, any out of pocket costs related conferences expenses are generally tax deductible. Lastly, faculty members could apply for grants that support faculty professional development and this may be another option for obtaining funding.

### **Program Course Recommendations**

A perceived improvement for the orientation of college course was a change to the coordination of the campus activities in which the students participate. Student participation in campus activities and leadership opportunities can be enhanced if the students are allowed to create a group activity that can be performed on campus rather being assigned activities by the student activities office. For instance, students would be able to establish a community service activity that takes place off campus but includes an on campus component of recruiting the general student population for engagement in the volunteer activity. The learning community students can improve the mentorship component and their leadership skills by becoming proactive in identifying and contacting prospective mentors from various industries within their local community.

Although the students and faculty did not find any areas that needed improvement for the developmental English component, some students and the English faculty did suggest that more instructional time would be helpful. Adding supplemental instruction would provide students with extra time to work on English coursework and the English faculty member would be able to propose curriculum for the supplemental instruction leader to review during those sessions. An alternative to adding supplemental instruction would be to organize a study group for students so that students who want additional study time for the English course can support one another outside of class time.

### **Student Support Services Recommendations**

The program faculty members need an efficient and consistent way to track whether students are using the student support services necessary towards their success. The counseling faculty member can increase student services use among program participants by having students complete a course assignment that requires them to use various student services such as going to the career center to use the job exploration software or having the students attend workshops on scholarship or internship opportunities. The English faculty member would be responsible for following up on the writing and tutorial center use by the students. Tracking student use of the writing center or tutoring services could involve students having the respective center coordinators sign the students' assignment to show that they attended. The faculty would be able to see the signature when the assignment is submitted. If no signature is on the assignment, the program faculty member could follow up with the student.

## **Rationale**

I conducted a summative program evaluation because the first year learning community program had not had formal program evaluation. In addition, there is a national focus on community colleges finding effective ways to improve persistence and retention of students, particularly those who are underprepared for college. Students enrolled in remedial math and English courses at community colleges are more likely to drop out of school before reaching their goal of completing a degree, earning a certificate, or transferring to a 4-year college (California Postsecondary Education Commission Report, 2011). Learning communities are one strategy that community colleges employ to improve the odds that students enrolled in developmental classes can reach their goals.

Researchers have shown that some learning communities are effective at improving retention and persistence (Visher et al., 2010). As discussed in the previous review of the literature, the learning communities that are not as effective at improving retention or persistence rates tend to lack critical components in their program such as engagement of students in the learning community or connecting students to campus support services. In challenging economic and funding conditions, administrators must make budgetary decisions that may result in some programs being scaled down or even eliminated. Conducting program evaluations documents the strengths and efficacy of a program, which can provide support and justification for continuing the program's funding as well as identifying areas for program improvement.

## **Review of the Literature**

This project focused on evaluating a learning community program at a public community college in California. The first review of literature in Section 1 was used to examine previous research on learning community programs, particularly those that included basic skills students, programs that were implemented to improve retention or persistence, or programs that were conducted at a community college. This second literature review was designed to focus on the significance of evaluating student service programs at higher education institutions and the literature that supported the evaluation report recommendations. To complete the review of literature to saturation, a Boolean search using key words was used in databases such as ProQuest, EBSCO, ERIC, and SAGE that were available through the Walden University library. The search terms used in these research portals included *community college*, *higher education*, *program evaluation*, *program assessment*, *program review*, and *student support programs*. The search focused on peer review sources and policy literature sponsored by higher education institutions and the most relevant literature was reviewed for this section.

### **Program Evaluations**

Educational institutions use evaluations of their programs as a way to demonstrate effective and meet accountability standards set forth by accrediting organizations (Perry, 2001). The accreditation commission that governs California community colleges requires institutions to assess their programs on a regular basis to ensure that expectations and quality measures are met (Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior College, 2013). The college program evaluation process is considered an equivalent way

for an institution of higher education to conduct total quality management (Sallis, 2014). Total quality management is frequently used in business and corporate organizations to provide quality services in a deliberate and effective manner (Nichols, 1995; Sallis 2014). Thus, conducting program evaluations is part of a college's emphasis to document institutional effectiveness (Shipman, 2005). As mentioned previously, there had been no formal program evaluation of the first year learning community program at BCC.

Evaluating learning community programs became a focal point at many institutions because these programs were used to support underprepared students (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). Programs for first year students are often subjected to more frequent or extensive assessments because these programs are typically linked to the college's mission to improve academic achievement and retention of this student population (Upcraft, Gardners, & Barefoot, 2005). While there is a substantial body of literature indicating the effectiveness of first year learning communities in improving retention and academic achievement, each program needs to conduct its own evaluations to ensure that the improvement occurs at their site with their particular region and student demographics (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Best practices for learning communities include an assessment of the program so that administrative and instructional components can remain aligned to their goals (Huerta & Hansen, 2013). In a national survey involving 66 college campuses that evaluated their learning community program, the vast majority of the colleges included assessments of student engagement or student support as part of the best practices for evaluating the program (Lardner, 2014).

Many of the learning community studies are regionalized or involve special demographics that would make their results not generalizable to other colleges. The alignment of evidence for effectiveness at the site level to national studies helps local administrators make reasonable comparisons between the programs. Program level evaluations in the community colleges have become increasingly important as accountability and effectiveness are examined (Isaacs, 2003).

Program evaluations are conducted for a variety of reasons such as demonstration of effectiveness, addressing costs and funding, strategic planning, institutional policy development, site level political factors, and accreditation (Upcraft et al., 2005). The most common reason program evaluations are conducted was to gather evidence to support effectiveness (Astin, 2012). The data gathered can be used to improve the program and the quality of services provided at an institution (Nichols, 1995). Faculty and administrators need data that indicate that the program has desirable outcomes to improve student success (Astin, 2012; Valenzuela, Copeland, & Blalock, 2005). Issues of cost and funding are also reasons to conduct an assessment of a program (Gill & Leigh, 2004). The cost of operating a program and funding may be tied to program effectiveness so that programs that document positive outcomes receive priority in funding and those that lack evidence of effectiveness may be defunded or deprioritized (Banta & Palomba, 2014; Shipman, 2005).

College and university administrators engage in strategic planning processes that involve organizing program and services to meet the institution's educational mission and goals. Stakeholders can use the information gathered from the program evaluations of



various academic and student services programs to determine which programs are appropriately aligned to the mission and goals of the institution (Upcraft et al., 2005). By using program evaluation data, any weaknesses can be addressed to better support the strategic plans. Program evaluation findings may also play a role in the development of campus based policy. Decisions about procedures, systems, or requirements affecting student success may be based on the results generated from the program evaluation (Brock, 2010). This process also facilitates the documentation needed for accreditation to demonstrate institutional effectiveness. Lastly, political factors may also warrant program evaluations be conducted. Concerned administrators or faculty of other programs may insist that evaluations be completed to promote their agenda or goals (Upcraft et al., 2005).

There are several recommendations regarding program evaluations. For instance, program evaluations should be conducted in regular intervals so that improvements can be made on an ongoing basis (Suskie, 2009). In addition, longitudinal evaluations can capture trends of the program that may not be apparent with a single program evaluation or infrequent assessment of the program (Banta & Palomba, 2014; Taylor, Moore, MacGregor, & Linblad, 2003). When evaluating programs in college settings, faculty should have an active role because they are considered the most significant stakeholders because they are most responsible for the programs implementation and success (Valenzuela et al., 2005). Faculty can use program evaluations to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching and learning strategies and provide data about the quality of the program (Suskie, 2009). The evaluation process should also incorporate feedback

from students because they are the primary beneficiaries of the program's services (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews & Gabelnick, 2004). Student input can be collected using focus groups or surveys involving current or former learning community participants (Dunlap & Pettitt, 2008). When program evaluations document program strengths, this information should be used as part of the institution's best practices and be established as benchmarks (Brescani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004).

A comprehensive program evaluation should include data on retention and student academic progress (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Learning communities should assess the instructional components as well as focus on the experiences of the teaching faculty. Learning community programs should communicate results so that the entire campus community can gain an understanding of the program.

While program evaluations can provide meaningful information about a program, poorly designed evaluations can result in findings that are of little value to the stakeholders (McKinney, 2010). When program evaluation cannot be used for improvements, time and resources are wasted (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). To avoid such findings, an assessment can be completed prior to the evaluation to help guide the future evaluation process. The assessment would include the program goals, determining whether information can be gathered to conduct an effective evaluation, determining what the stakeholders are interested in learning about the program and how the evaluation data would potentially be used (Secret, Abell, & Berlin, 2011). Before conducting a program evaluation, the evaluator should have an understanding of the stakeholders and various individuals and groups that could influence the program or

could be influenced by the program (McKinney, 2010). The assessment prior to evaluation can be useful particularly when the evaluation must be conducted at a financial cost to the program or college.

There is no standardized format for evaluation reports (Spaulding, 2008). However, the common elements of an evaluation report include the executive summary, the introduction, the methods of evaluation, the findings, and recommendations. The expectation is that the report is delivered to those who initiated the evaluation. It is not standard protocol for an external evaluator to disseminate report or results to the stakeholders (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The program administrator's role is to review the results prior to dissemination. Unlike evaluation research, program evaluations are not considered published documents (Spaulding, 2008).

This second review of literature focused on research that provided an understanding of program evaluation process as it specifically related to colleges and universities. As indicated in the research, evaluating college programs is a necessary function for administrators when decisions of effectiveness and funding are being considered.

### **Implementation**

My task towards implementation was to share the evaluation report with the First Year learning community program faculty members. The implementation of the recommendations of the evaluation findings was beyond the scope of this project because this researcher was not a faculty member at Bay Community College or otherwise authorized to implement any program changes on behalf of the college. The goal of this

project was to conduct an evaluation and generate an evaluation report, not work with the program faculty members to implement the findings. The agreement with Bay Community College and Walden University allowed for the evaluation to be conducted with the understanding that there would be no changes to the First Year learning community program. The program faculty members may decide to implement some of the recommendations of the evaluation report at a later date. However, a discussion of the basic steps necessary towards making the improvements to the learning community program are provided in the following sections

### **Potential Resources and Existing Supports**

The First Year learning community program faculty members have the resources needed to implement most of the recommendations outlined in the evaluation report. In addition, the faculty members were supportive of making improvements to the First Year learning community program. Aside from the investment of the faculty members' time, many of the changes proposed in the program evaluation can be made without incurring a cost to the learning community program. The program course recommendations and the student services recommendations can be incorporated with the collaborative efforts of the program faculty members. The recommendations for the changes to the program administration aspects such as the field trip requirement, the absence policy, and recruitment process require the collaborative effort of the program faculty members.

### **Potential Barriers**

The primary barrier in implementing two of the proposed changes for the First Year learning community program would be constraints on the First Year learning

community program's budget. The recommendation of adding a second year to the learning community program may require support from the department chairs or the division deans. Further, adding the second year to the program would involve an increase in expenditures. The funding would need to be allocated for any field trips that the students may take during that second year. Funding sources should be sought out from on and off campus sources.

There are several organizations that should be explored for as potential funding sources. Engaging the community for the support of the program can have positive benefits for the community, students, and continued program success. The Walmart Foundation offers a Community Grant program to individuals and local agencies. The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization that provides resources to higher education institutions in the United States. This organization has recently funded several community college initiatives including a study related to learning communities. Program faculty should continuously research and elicit funding from the local civic and business community, such as Catholic Charities, The United Way, and other local, state, and national organizations.

The professional development recommendation could also strain the learning community budget. The suggestion to ameliorate this expense is to apply for the discretionary funding available from the college's academic senate and faculty association. These are on campus based funding possibilities. The faculty association and academic senate both have a fund for travel and professional development. Each of the

program faculty could apply individually for funding which could be used towards professional development related directly to learning communities.

The program faculty members could also secure funding by applying for community-based grants that would help defray the cost of attending any professional development activities. Again, local and state sources of funding can be explored to finance professional development for the faculty members engaged in the First Year Learning community program. It is imperative that all potential sources of funding be explored ensure that this program continue to be available to underprepared students who apply to Bay Community College.

### **Proposal for Implementation and Timetable**

The implementation of the recommendations of the program evaluation would begin when I formally share the evaluation report with the First Year learning community program faculty members in fall 2014. I will be available to answer questions regarding the program evaluation. The program faculty members will then disseminate the evaluation report to their campus administrators if necessary during the fall term. The next action step would be for the program faculty members to collaborate to determine which recommendations will be implemented. Since both program faculty members have teaching duties and responsibilities outside of the First Year learning community program, the decision making and collaboration process may take up to four weeks. If the program faculty members are able to plan before the spring 2015 semester begins, the changes that do not impact the learning community program budget could be in place in time for the next cohort of students. The importance of the review of the findings has

implications for the 2015-16 First Year learning community program. It would be helpful to incorporate those recommendations that have minor implications for the 2015-16 program so the input of the faculty members becomes an affirmative process for the program's continuance and modification. The modifications to the First Year learning community program courses would require a consensus between the program faculty members. Communication of the plan to program students should occur during their orientation in the fall 2015. Facilitating these changes may require several months during the spring term before the start of the fall semester.

The increase in cost associated with the addition of a second year to the program and the professional development would necessitate that the faculty members take more time for planning before these recommendations could be implemented. Because of the administrative processes such as departmental, curriculum committees, and board approvals, this planning process could take one year before the changes could take effect.

### **Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others**

My primary role with this program evaluation project was to conduct the evaluation of the First Year learning community program and produce the evaluation report. My responsibility in implementing the recommendations for this program evaluation project would be to make the report available to the First Year learning program faculty members. I would also be responsible for answering questions about the findings and recommendations. The program faculty members will be responsible for sharing the evaluation report with campus administrators as well as other internal and external stakeholders.

The First Year learning community faculty members would take the primary role in implementing the suggestions listed in the evaluation report. If they decide to make the program changes, the program faculty members would be responsible in the planning and execution of the recommendations. Their tasks would also encompass seeking any administrative support, securing funding, and coordinating the relevant tasks with program students.

### **Project Evaluation**

This project was a summative evaluation. A summative evaluation was used as the basis for this project because it allowed me to gather data that would be reflective of the perceptions and experiences of students and faculty who participated in the learning community program the entire academic year. Collecting summative data was useful for identifying the areas of effectiveness and improvements for the program, which was used to create the evaluation report.

The effectiveness of the First Year learning community program evaluation can be determined by the feedback received from the key stakeholders such as the program faculty members, the department chairs for English and counseling, the Deans for the respective academic divisions, and program students. The individuals connected to the learning community program would be able to determine whether the recommendations that were provided in the evaluation report are feasible, reasonable, and purposeful. If the stakeholders are satisfied with the findings and the recommendations provided in the evaluation report, they may move forward in creating a plan to implement the recommended changes. In addition, the stakeholders may have additional



recommendations or questions after reviewing the evaluation findings. As the program evaluator, I would be available to answer questions and clarify any findings or recommendations with the program faculty members.

Alternatively, the decision makers may decide that certain components of the program of the First Year Learning community program require a more extensive evaluation process. The stakeholders may decide that a different type of evaluation is needed to determine whether the learning community program is meeting its goals. A case study may be needed if more detailed review and evaluation of the program is required. If the recommendations from the evaluation results are implemented, an outcomes based evaluation can be used to assess the implemented improvements. Lastly, this program evaluation project can also be replicated by the campus administrators or program faculty to assess for strengths and areas in need of improvement in future academic years.

### **Implications Including Social Change**

#### **Local Community**

I believe that the findings of my project will have a positive impact on social change in my local area. Program evaluations are important tools in improving student support programs (McKinney, 2010). As a faculty member at a community college, I have an opportunity to teach in a learning community program with students engaged in remedial coursework. This project provides me a unique understanding of the perspectives and needs of students participating in learning communities. Specifically, I learned that students participating in the learning communities valued the camaraderie

and support of the cohort model. I have also learned that students completing developmental coursework are more likely to continue their education when they participate in student support programs such as learning communities. Completing this project taught me that any faculty member or administrator can successfully conduct a program evaluation and that it is a needed process to ensure that the program is functioning effectively.

The evaluation project has allowed me to have a point of reference based on experience for collegial conversations concerning learning communities on my campus. These types of courageous collegial conversations can lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of our college's program. In addition, we can explore other programmatic alternatives that can improve and enhance the program. The ultimate responsibility is to provide academic and student services that support and sustain students in their persistence and retention efforts. Overall, the degree completion and/or transfer options for students continue to drive the first year community agenda.

### **Far-Reaching**

I believe that my study could be of value to the higher education community, particularly community college faculty members interested in implementing an effective program evaluation model for their institutions' learning community programs. I also think that this study can be added to the body of knowledge and practices regarding the feasibility of implementing learning community program for underserved students. Others reading my study as a reference will learn that using the perceptions of program students and faculty members in an evaluation can be useful towards improving a

learning community program so that it meets the needs of those utilizing the learning community program.

I found very few peer reviewed qualitative studies incorporated the perspectives and experiences of students and faculty members involved in learning communities. The practical application of this program evaluation study is that it can serve as a model for other community colleges. Assessing and evaluating first year learning communities from students' and faculty members' experiences provides a unique perspective on the program. This perspective can serve as a catalyst for other colleges to adopt recommendations from this study or to make particular adjustments to their programs.

The findings may be incorporated as recommendations for program improvements and documentation best practices. The implication for positive social change is that other community colleges may be able to utilize the recommendations generated in the report to improve their learning community programs by specifically incorporating ideas of program student and the faculty members. The benefit of conducting a summative program evaluation offers the opportunity to assess the overall effectiveness and efficacy of the actual program. This evaluation process supports the overall improvement plans of college and provides insights, ideas, and innovative concepts to strengthen the program. Student persistence and retention will continue to present challenges to college administrators. An effective first year learning community program is one way to address these challenges.

## **Conclusion**

This section was a discussion of the program evaluation project that included the goals and rationale. The review of literature included research that informed the project evaluation report. The implementation plan described the role of the student and of the learning community faculty members. The implications for social change discussed how I might apply lessons learned from this project at my work site. Section 4 concludes this project with reflections and a final conclusion. The concluding section of this project discusses the project's strengths and weaknesses as well as my reflections as a scholar, practitioner, and program developer.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

A program evaluation was conducted for this doctoral project. The findings from the evaluation were used to produce an evaluation report. The final section of this project is a reflection on the project's strengths, limitations, and how the problem may be addressed differently. A discussion of scholarship, project development, and leadership follows. This section also includes what I learned about myself as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer. Finally, this section concludes with the potential impact that this project may have on social change as well as directions for future applications and research.

### **Project Strengths**

The program evaluation project had several strengths. The most significant strength was that it addressed the need for an evaluation of the first year learning community. Since the program's inception nearly 20 years ago, the program faculty members had not conducted a formal evaluation of the program. They have made curricular changes to their respective instructional components and have revised some of the learning community program procedures when necessary. However, there is no document that delineates effective aspects of the program. The program faculty members have used anecdotal evidence when there was a need to discuss the learning community program in departmental meetings. With the numerous budget issues and more stringent accreditation process occurring in the California education system, a program evaluation

is a valuable artifact for the first year learning community. Documenting strengths of a program is also a way to establish campus based best practices (Suskie, 2009).

An additional strength of the program evaluation project was that it was an inclusive study. Inclusive evaluations include stakeholders who ordinarily may not have an active role in the evaluation process (Bledsoe & Graham, 2005). The first year learning community students had the opportunity to share their experience with the program, thereby contributing to the findings of the evaluation. Student inclusion was also factored into the evaluation recommendations in that some of the suggestions for improvement encompass active student involvement.

### **Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations**

The limitations in addressing the problem were that the project had constraints on time and access to other data. In order to complete this project in a timely manner, restrictions on the amount of time that could be invested were made. A more robust evaluation could have been conducted if there was more time to complete the study or if the evaluation was an ongoing project. Restriction on data meant that students' educational records such as transcripts could not be analyzed as part of the evaluation. The additional data collected would have better informed the findings and the recommendations provided in the evaluation report.

### **Recommendation to Address Problem Differently**

A summative evaluation method was used to address the guiding questions of this project. However, other methods of evaluation could have been used to assess the first year learning community if time and access to educational records were not limiting

factors. Using different evaluation methods may have identified additional program strengths or weaknesses and generated different recommendation in the evaluation report.

If time were not a limiting factor, longitudinal examination of the learning community could have been conducted. The project study could have evaluated the program over the course of 2 or more years. This type of evaluation would have allowed for a comparison of cohort groups and also captured perceptions of students while the experience and memories were still recent. In the current program evaluation, some of the student participants had completed the program in previous years and their recollection and perceptions of their experiences may not have been as accurate.

Another evaluation method that could have been used if time were not an issue was the case study method. An evaluation that used case study methodology would have allowed for rich contextual data to be collected. This technique may have involved multiple observations of students in the learning community English and counseling courses and observations of program students participating in the campus based activities. Case study methods may have included interviews with some of the students in the program. A program evaluation using a case study would have provided additional details about program processes that could have contributed to more specific ways to improve any areas for improvement identified in the findings.

A goal-based evaluation could have also been used to assess the first year learning community program if access to educational records were not limited. The current study could only use self-reported data such as GPA because of restrictions on access to student educational records. However, a goal-based evaluation would have enhanced this study

by examining trends in GPAs for program participants, credit hours completed, transfer rates, or graduation rates for program participants. These data could have provided statistical evidence of program effectiveness and could have identified strengths or weaknesses based on those data sets.

### **Scholarship**

The custom of requiring doctoral students to be immersed into the world of scholarship has reaffirmed and increased my understanding and respect for the role of theory and research in the practice of education. My professional practice has been firmly anchored to the Walden vision of scholar-practitioners involved in creating positive social change based on ethical scholarship. The Online Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (2014) defined scholarship as "the character, qualities, activity, or attainments of a scholar." As I worked toward completing this culminating project, reflecting on my experiences and writing these final chapters have come to symbolize for me the end of a long awaited journey.

The process has also given me a sense that I am also preparing myself for a new beginning. I have waited a long time to be recognized for my interest in pursuing knowledge in a formal way and being admitted to the EdD program gave me the recognition that I have sought. I first entertained the notion of one day becoming a scholar during my senior year of high school after having an inspiring dialogue with my social science teacher, a man who himself earned a doctorate degree before committing his career to teaching in the public school system. Since that point in my life, each one of the degrees I have earned has been a step leading up to the doctoral degree. I was able to



finally pursue my goal and embark on my personal doctoral journey in January of 2009 when I was admitted to Walden University. Becoming part of the community of doctoral learners is not something that I take lightly. I believe that being an active part of the academic community includes being a critical consumer of research, practicing reflective teaching, and learning and producing quality writings. I have been pleasantly surprised to know that my personal goals and professional mission is in alignment with the goals and mission of the Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership

I am convinced that every aspect of the Higher Education and Adult Learning doctoral program was designed to help learners understand and appreciate the importance of scholarship and developing ourselves into scholar-practitioners. For me, every course provided learning activities that were challenging and provided opportunities for growth and development in all aspects of scholarship. The lessons I learned from these experiences were invaluable because I learned that in order to prepare myself and perform well for the discussion modules, writing assignments, and other learning opportunities, I had to first start by organizing my resources and focusing my attention. Developing a plan of action and managing resources helped me to be prepared for any task that was presented. This really helped later on in the program when it was time for me to develop the prospectus and the project study.

Upon completion of the core coursework and artifacts of the EdD program, I was prepared to take on the challenges of the project study process. Walden University has given me the opportunity to develop and hone my research skills, increase my knowledge of online academic resources such as the library and research databases, and read in depth

about the newest research and best practices in the fields of higher education and adult learning. Having such an intellectually rich and stimulating experience allowed me to understand my own strengths as a developing scholar-practitioner. I also was given the opportunity to identify areas that needed improvement and the professional skills necessary to improve and develop a higher level of proficiency.

### **Project Development and Evaluation**

This project began as an idea to evaluate a first year learning community program intended to assist students enrolled in developmental coursework at a community college. I wanted to study this topic because much of my work as a faculty member at a community college involves working with students who need to complete remedial courses. As a faculty member who works with this student population, I have learned that these students are more likely to continue additional years beyond their initial matriculation when they participate in student support programs such as learning communities. I wanted to examine the components of the learning community program that contributed to the success of these types of interventions.

The project development pathway was not as straightforward as I had envisioned the process to be at the start of my doctoral journey. The project development process was lengthier than I anticipated. I drafted this project idea with the assumption that I would be able to carry out the project at the community college I worked at. However, it became clear within the first few months of my project development that using my place of employment was not feasible and that I would encounter validity issues because I worked with many of the students enrolled in the developmental classes. I felt that I could

also be more objective and without bias evaluating a program at a different college. Thus, I selected another community college that had a well-established learning community program. However, selecting this community college site almost derailed my project development process due to the California budget crisis and the eminent lay-offs of program staff members. I lost precious time in the developing my project waiting for the crisis to resolve. It took 6 months before I realized that I needed to continue with the development process by approaching another institution about my project. Once I was able to secure a new site, I was able to move forward in the project development process.

Although I had a general idea of what I wanted to accomplish with my project at the start of the doctoral study, I had not developed the strategy of how to accomplish the task until I began working on the details. I realized that the details would be essential in the planning and design of the project study. The design process was initiated by the idea of incorporating student opinions. I knew that it was important to me to construct the project in a manner that was inclusive of the perceptions of program participants and the program faculty members. I felt that their insight would be a valuable part of the evaluation process. As a program developer, I also wanted to design the project evaluation in such a way that it could be useful for the learning community faculty members in making program improvements. Through the drafting and rewriting process, I was finally able to refine my ideas for developing the project.

### **Leadership and Change**

College administrators are responsible for ensuring student success through effective teaching, curriculum, programs, and services. Effectiveness in an educational

setting can be determined by using assessments and evaluations (Suskie, 2009).

Individuals who are responsible for institutional evaluations are placed in a leadership role because they must act with integrity and report objectively despite any budgetary or stakeholders influence (Rubin & Babbie, 2012). Educators who participate in the evaluation process not only assume a leadership role but also become agents of change.

Leaders in the higher education environment understand the importance of program evaluations in the college accreditation process and of resource allocation. Ineffective programs lead to poor evaluations and potential defunding of those programs. Programs that are not corrected prior to the regional accreditation process are issued a warning to remediate or the college could receive a negative review (Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior College, 2013). Program evaluations are necessary for college leaders to make informed policy decisions for the campus.

My leadership abilities have been enhanced as a result of my doctoral process. During the course of my educational experience, I have had to identify a problem, engage in critical thinking, and potentially initiate the change process for a learning community program. I anticipate that I will be able to use my leadership skills by being an active participant in the change process as it relates to program evaluation on my campus. Because I have had the opportunity to practice these skills, I feel capable of being a leader in future evaluations needed in my academic department. I am also willing to assume a leadership role in assisting my colleagues in other departments to evaluate their programs.

### **Analysis of Self as Scholar**

I have had almost 5 years to ponder the different dimensions of my development as a scholar practitioner. At times, I have doubted or at the very least questioned my trajectory. At other points of the process, I have been more than satisfied with my evolutionary journey to culmination. Walden University has allowed me the space to be challenged, nurtured, and supported within an atmosphere made up of peers and mentors. Because of the life enhancing opportunity that the Higher Education and Adult Learning doctoral program has afforded me, I believe that I have evolved into what I would call a multidisciplinary agent of change.

My bachelor's degree was earned in the discipline of communication studies; I completed a master's degree in the field of multicultural education and completed a second master's degree in the discipline of social welfare. At Walden University, I was encouraged by my instructors to draw upon my previous education and all of the related professional experiences that I possess to inform my doctoral studies. The Higher Education and Adult Learning doctoral program experience has pushed me to grow as a teacher, counselor, and change agent. I have been able to build a solid intellectual foundation and applied research skills that will serve me well for the near future and beyond.

Upon graduation, I plan on moving forward and advancing my career as a community college educator. I have developed a much broader understanding of curriculum and course development, program design and outcomes evaluation. I am now more confident in my leadership and management abilities. Because of this growth, I

intend on pursuing administrative assignments, initiating and participating in applied research projects, and participating in professionals conferences, writing and publishing in peer reviewed journals in my region, nationally, and one day internationally. These were activities that I was apprehensive about pursuing before enrolling in and completing the required courses and competency requirements for the EdD program. Because of the extensive training and preparation I have received, I am able to present my ideas based on the most current research available.

### **Analysis of Self as Practitioner**

I am interested in improving the educational outcomes of community college students, particularly those who are underprepared for college, which makes them less likely to persist towards completion of their goals. As a practitioner, this evaluation project has informed my professional work as a community college faculty member who has taught for a learning community. The findings of this project helped me to understand which components should be emphasized in a learning community program. Although I learned from professional development activities that the social learning and support was an important aspect of the learning community, it was enlightening to read the responses from students of what they valued from the learning community and why. This program evaluation also helped me to understand that I should improve aspects in my nonlearning community classes that could facilitate cooperative learning.

### **Analysis of Self as Project Developer**

This project provided me an opportunity to develop an idea from conception to fruition. Completing my project required synthesis of my research, writing, and

organizational skills. The development process also required an investment of time and commitment. Designing the project was initially a daunting task because the structure and direction depended on my efforts. This process helped me gain confidence in being able to develop a project and follow through. I was appreciative of my faculty chair who allowed me the time and space to grapple with my ideas until I was able to give them a viable structure. I learned that flexibility and patience were a necessity in allowing the project to evolve.

### **The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change**

The potential of this project to have a positive impact on social change in the local context is great. This project has added an additional published research document to the conversation on student success in public community colleges. Hearing the voices of students and the educators committed to serving them adds layers of breadth and depth that numbers alone cannot provide. The students participating in the First Year learning community program have provided an insider's view of how the various program functions perform. However, this is not a one sided inquiry. This study also provided insight into how the learning community program counselor and instructor perceived the effectiveness of the program.

Improving academic support programs such as the First Year learning community has the potential to increase persistence, retention and graduation rates of at risk community college students (Cooper, 2010). The economic and educational implications of this are profound. In the United States, individuals that graduate with a 2-year degree will earn more over the lifetime of their careers than individuals that do not earn a college

degree (Boroch et al., 2012). College degree attainment also has a positive impact on individuals, and families. Children of college graduates are more likely to complete post-secondary education programs (Moore & Shulock, 2009). This in turns helps create more potential leaders, which benefits society at the local, state, national, and international levels. Many of the career opportunities available in the ever evolving globally connected economy require a minimum of post high school vocational training or a two year degree or higher.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

The results of this project study will be a valuable resource for the faculty participating in the First Year program at Bay Community College. The report will serve as a model for future program evaluations that they will conduct. Statistical data have been readily available to faculty, but this evaluation provided them with an additional resource- the perceptions of the students that they serve. It also gave the faculty a chance to reflect on the program and to describe their experiences. The report gives the faculty another form of information that they can use in their discussions with the college administration and other stakeholders about the success and needs of the program.

Students seem to have had a positive opinion about the program, however they did offer some critiques of their own. The open-ended nature of qualitative research allows the evaluator to gather information on trends that may appear in the context of the study. This is another benefit for the faculty who help shape and manage the program. This is also a benefit for students because through this process they now have an opportunity to make comments and suggestion on the future of the program. My



suggestions on further research would include expanding the number of learning communities that conduct qualitative program evaluations. It would also be beneficial to interview students while they are in the program.

### **Conclusion**

Learning community models are an effective strategy for assisting students who are underprepared for college. Students enrolled in developmental courses without institutional support are less likely to perform well academically or achieve their collegiate goals. Successful learning community programs are able to support students in helping them to achieve their academic or vocational goals by creating an environment of engagement, social and instructional support (Visher, Schneider, Wathington, & Collado, 2010). I have a vested interest in the learning community model as a faculty member at a community college that provides education to many students requiring remedial coursework in English or math.

This doctoral project was an exploration of a First Year learning community program that had not completed a formal program evaluation. The purpose of the project was to conduct a program evaluation and use the findings for recommendations that were presented in the evaluations. The overall findings from the evaluation were that social support was a strength for students in the learning community program and some of the administrative issues were weaknesses. The recommendation for improvement included modification of existing procedures and including program students and faculty members in the change process.

Evaluating a program is not only an essential task for accreditation purposes but also serves as tool for improving programs intended to promote student success. With an open enrollment policy that allows all levels individuals of academic preparation admissions into the community college, efforts have been made to provide students with a quality education. As the community college system strives to increase the skill set of the workforce, improving the educational support systems for underprepared students will become a significant mission.

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Appendix A: The Project

**Evaluation Report for  
Bay Community College  
First Year Learning Community**

**Prepared by: Dennell Smith  
February 2014**

### **Executive Summary**

A qualitative evaluation of the First Year learning community at Bay Community College was conducted. The evaluation utilized learning community students' and faculty perceptions as a basis for evaluation. The guiding research questions structured the data towards understanding aspects of the program that contributed to student success and factors considered weaknesses for the program. The data for the evaluation were collected using surveys for students and faculty as well as interviews with faculty. These qualitative data were organized into themes that identified the perceptions regarding the program. The results from the study were that the learning community provided a social support for learning which was considered a strength for the program and that elements of programming such as class scheduling and policies were considered weaknesses. The findings of this program evaluation were used to provide feedback to the First Year learning community faculty members as a guide towards making program improvements.

### **Program Description**

The First Year learning community program at Bay Community College is a collaboration between the counseling and English departments to provide a cohort learning model for students enrolled in developmental coursework. The program is a yearlong learning community for students who are enrolled in the same developmental English and counseling courses. It is designed to provide additional support and guidance to help underprepared students persist towards their academic or vocational goals.

The faculty member for the English coursework provides remedial instruction and builds the curriculum so that by the end of the program students will have completed their required college level English composition course. The counselor faculty member is responsible for teaching the counseling courses associated with the First Year learning community that includes topics for new students such as information on study skills, student services, major and career exploration, and transferring to four year colleges or universities. In addition, the counseling faculty member tracks students' progress, creates their educational plans, provides personal counseling, and coordinates on campus activities that the program students can participate in.

To be eligible to participate in the First Year Learning community program, students must first complete their college assessment exam and place within the developmental English range. Applications are accepted from eligible students on a first come, first serve basis until the 25 participant slots are filled. Students participating in the program agree to abide by the policies of the program, which include committing to the year sequence of learning community classes, meeting with the learning community faculty counselor, and actively participating by being engaged in the classroom, attending the orientation, going on the field trips, and joining the assigned campus activities.

### **Evaluation Design**

The purpose of this evaluation was to determine program effectiveness in promoting student retention and student academic persistence for developmental students enrolled in the program by using student and faculty insights. The program evaluation examined the perceived strengths and needs of the First Year learning community

program by evaluating the orientation to college course, the developmental English curriculum, and the students' use of the institutional support services of the learning community program. Using a summative program evaluation design, data were collected from the students after they completed the First Year learning community program. By waiting until the conclusion of the program, students had the opportunity to provide their feedback in context of their entire experience. The faculty members for the learning community who participated in the surveys and interviews used for the evaluation have been with the program for more than 15 years.

The evaluation used a purposeful sample because the participants needed to be students and faculty of the learning community program since only students who have participated in the program and faculty members who have taught the courses for the First Year learning community would have been able to provide the necessary information. Access to faculty and students respondents by sending an email to the First Year learning community faculty. The researcher-participant relationship with student participants was limited to email contact. Only students who have participated in the learning community program were contacted via email to request their voluntary participation in the survey. The email invitation included the purpose of the study, information about confidentiality, and informed consent. The two faculty members also received the email invitation through SurveyMonkey that included the purpose of the study, information about confidentiality, and informed consent, along with a request for an interview.

The data generated for this evaluation were collected from student surveys, faculty surveys, and faculty interviews. Responses from 51 students and the two program faculty members were utilized. Students who responded to the surveys were primarily female, aged 18 to older than 46, many considered underrepresented minority, and attended college full time. The student respondents were mostly first year students without children, indicated that English was their primary language, and intended to transfer to a four year university. The faculty members were both women who had at least 15 years of experience teaching for the learning community program and taught courses in their academic departments that were not part of the learning community program.

The surveys and faculty interview questions for this evaluation were designed to elicit specific and useful information about program function from the students' and the faculty's perspective. The data analysis consisted of reading interview transcripts and the surveys multiple times to identify patterns or themes for each of the questions once all surveys and interviews were completed. The themes were sorted into groups that identified a strength of the program and those that identified a weakness or area of improvement for the program. Steps were taken to ensure credibility and accuracy of the data and findings and no discrepancies were found in surveys or the faculty member interviews.

### **Findings**

The findings from the evaluation study were that the First Year learning community provided a social support for learning which was considered a strength for the

program and that elements of programming such as class scheduling and policies were considered weaknesses. The evaluation study was guided by the following research questions:

*1. What were the perceived strengths of the First Year learning community program?*

The strengths of the program primarily centered on the theme of feeling supported in the learning community program. According to the students and faculty, support was derived from the instructors and through group/peer assistance. The strengths identified by students included believing that the program helped them become a better student, helped them to stay in college, and helped them progress towards their academic major or career goal. The support students received from the class as a group was equally as important because the learning community provided support in terms of friendship and a family like environment. The faculty for the English component described the classroom support as an environment that facilitated cooperative learning. The faculty for the counseling course described their support of students in terms of building a community like environment in the classroom so that students can feel comfortable to ask for help and work with one another. The overall program strengths found in this evaluation can be attributed to the social support that the students and faculty described.

*2. What were the perceived needs of the First Year learning community program?*

The weaknesses for the learning community program centered on the theme of administrative issues. These administrative issues encompassed a variety of policy and structural concerns identified by students and faculty. Students reported issues with required activities, difficulties with class scheduling, and other administrative procedure



concerns. While some students enjoyed the mandatory field trips and campus based activities, there were some students who believed that these components of the program needed revising. Scheduling for program classes was also an issue for some students. The time classes were offered and the number of course sections available seemed to be problematic. Students wanted more options for taking the learning community classes at different times so that the class would not conflict with other obligations such as work or sports. Also, an issue was the fact that the opportunity to remain in the program for two years instead of one, or including additional courses such as other electives to the program that were not offered.

In addition, students had other administrative concerns for the learning community program that included concerns regarding the attendance policy and the recruitment of participants for the program. For instance, some students believed that the attendance policy was too restrictive and that the three absences from classes during the term were not enough. The critiques of the program recruitment process focused on the lack of ethnic and age diversity of potential students and the lack of an extensive applicant selection process.

The faculty administrative concerns focused on increasing funding for the program, increasing opportunities for professional development for program faculty members, and revising the mentoring and leadership activities for students. The program could serve more students if additional sections of the learning community courses were offered. Both faculty members also believed that the training and professional development opportunity for faculty specifically for learning community faculty was

limited. If funding were not an issue, the program faculty members would attend conferences that specialized in training for learning community programs such as the National First Year Experience conference. Their faculty development options were limited to their respective content areas of English and counseling. In examining the mentoring and leadership components of the learning community program, the counseling faculty believed that major revisions were needed and that they were not effective for students. The mentoring activity was not useful because the program was unable to recruit enough mentors some years. The student leadership development activities were not consistent and varied each year because the learning community program was dependent on the activities sponsored by the student government and the campus student activities office.

*3. How effective is the orientation to college counseling course?*

According to the survey results, the most significant aspect of the orientation to college class was that the course contributed to the students' understanding of how the process of transferring to a 4 year college works. The vast majority of the students and both faculty members indicated that the information presented on transferring to 4 year colleges was the most important information taught in the orientation to college course. The topics related to transferring that were indicated as important or useful included learning about creating an education plan, identifying potential transfer colleges, and specific transfer requirements needed at the 4 year colleges for admission. In addition, a few students believed that the study skills or financial aid topics were the most significant component of the counseling course. Another finding was that more than half of the

student participants believed that the counseling course had no effect on their selection of a major or career. Of those students who believed that the counseling class did not impact their decision, most of these students indicated that their major or career decision had been determined prior to entering the program. The remainder of the students indicated that the orientation to college course helped them decide on a major or career or gave them a direction to further explore.

The program faculty members would be interested in making changes to enhance the counseling course. The English faculty member would like to create more curriculum linkages between the counseling and developmental English classes so that students are able to use the reading and writing skills from the English course in the counseling course. Ideally, students would practice English strategies the same week in their counseling course in a manner that is applicable to the class material. The counseling faculty would improve the orientation to college course by adding more activities that allowed students to be involved in campus activities outside of the classroom.

#### *4. How effective is the developmental English course?*

Students' responses regarding the developmental English course were consistently positive. Nearly every student indicated that their reading and writing skills improved because of the developmental English course. Students identified topics such as specific essay writing and reading skills that were important to their learning. Numerous students responded that no changes should occur for the English course. The positive responses from the students for the English course were credited to the program faculty and the support students received in class. There were very few suggestions for changes. Three

students believed that the English course needed either more class time or fewer assignments.

Both faculty members agreed that students were well supported in the developmental English course. The English faculty member believed that the specific instructional strategy that was effective focused on basic skills for language improvement that students can utilize in all courses. The counseling faculty member believed that the English curriculum was reinforced in the counseling class by requiring rewrites for all essays submitted for the counseling course. Other than wanting more instructional time, neither faculty believed that changes were needed for the developmental English course.

*5. How effective is the program in connecting students with institutional support services?*

Introducing program participants to the available student services was a strength for the learning community program. Almost every student participant learned about the campus services through presentations and assignments given in the counseling class. About half of the students indicated that they would not have used any student service if they had not participated in the program. Another significant aspect in connecting the students with supportive services was that the faculty for the orientation to college course was also the academic counselor for the program students. Students believed this connection facilitated their use of the counseling services more than the other student services.

The weakness of the student services connection component was that the program faculty members did not follow up on student service use and did not track whether the

students actually used the recommended services. The counseling faculty member also acknowledged that some student services related problems were left unresolved or became prolonged issues because of the lack of follow up. The English faculty member expressed similar concerns. In the referrals that were made to the writing center and tutoring center, none were routinely checked for subsequent use of the services. The English faculty member stated that follow up inquiries regarding tutoring and writing assistance were only made when student difficulties with class work or assignments did not improve a few weeks after the referral was made.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on the identified areas of improvement constructed from the students' and faculty members' responses to the survey and/or interview questions.

#### *Program Administration Recommendations*

- Students would like to continue for a 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the learning community program. It is possible to add a year to the program if the learning community can demonstrate sufficient student interest in the program and there are resources available to support the extension of the program. However, this action would require long term planning. The program faculty may want to begin the discussion with their respective academic divisions. A compelling factor would be that the learning community students who were retained successfully completed college level English and that these students could be

further supported the following year as they enter the learning community program for improvement in developmental math.

- Another concern regarding program administration was the students' desire to alter the field trip requirement. To make the mandatory field trips seem more flexible to students' scheduling concerns, the field trip options could be discussed during the orientation with student input on the destinations or potential travel dates taken into account. The discussion would help students understand why the particular choices were made and prepare for any potential obstacles in attending the field trips. The discussion also gives the program faculty a chance to know if there are dates or locations that would be difficult for many students and would be able to plan accordingly.
- The attendance policy can be also addressed during the program orientation. Although the attendance policy is reviewed the first day of class, students can be given the explanation regarding the attendance policy during the orientation. Students can be informed that the faculty members determine the maximum allowed absences based on the number of class meetings and that exceptions are only made in special circumstance beyond students' control. Unlike some four year college courses, attendance is required in most community college courses because state funding for public community colleges is connected to student attendance.
- Students were interested in recruiting a more diverse cohort to the learning community program. The recruitment process can be enhanced by allowing

the program students to contribute to changing the recruitment process by helping to recruit new students. Current program students could conduct tabling sessions on campus to inform other students about the program and distribute program brochures or flyers to other areas on campus.

- Program faculty members were concerned about the lack of funding for professional development to get additional training in learning community best practices. Faculty may be able to secure funding for the professional development activities by requesting funding from campus governing bodies that have discretionary funds that may be allocated to special projects or other departments. For instance, the community college has funding to attend work related conferences through their faculty association. If necessary, any out of pocket costs related conferences expenses are generally tax deductible. Lastly, the faculty members could apply for grants that support faculty professional development as another option for obtaining funding.

#### *Program Course Recommendations*

- An improvement for the orientation of college course that is needed is a change to the coordination of the campus activities that the program students participate in. Student participation in campus activities and leadership opportunities can be enhanced if the students are allowed to create a group activity that can be performed on campus rather than waiting for activities to be coordinated through the student activities office. For instance, students would be able to establish a community service activity that takes place off

campus but includes an on campus component of recruiting the general student population to participate in the volunteer activity. The learning community students can improve the mentorship component and their leadership skills by becoming proactive in identifying and contacting prospective mentors from various industries within their local community.

- Although the students and faculty did not find a weakness for the developmental English component, some students and the English faculty did suggest that more instructional time would be helpful. Adding supplemental instruction would provide students with extra time to work on English coursework and the English faculty member would be able to propose curriculum for the supplemental instruction leader to review during those sessions. An alternative to adding supplemental instruction would be to organize a study group for students so that students who want additional study time for the English course can support one another outside of class time.

#### *Student Support Services Recommendations*

- The program faculty members need an efficient and consistent way to track whether students are utilizing the student support services necessary towards their success. The counseling faculty member can increase student services use among program students by having students complete an assigned task that requires them to utilize various student services such as going to the career center to use the job exploration modules or have the students attend workshops for scholarships or internships. The English faculty member would



be responsible for following up on the writing and tutorial center use.

Tracking student use of the writing center or tutoring services could involve students having the respective center coordinators sign the student assignment to show that the student attended. The faculty would be able to see the signature when the assignment is submitted. If no signature is on the assignment, the program faculty member can follow up with the student.

## Appendix B: Email Invitation for Study Participation (Student)

Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in a study of the First Year learning community at Bay Community College. This study is about perceptions and experiences of the First Year learning community program. The information gathered will be used for an evaluation of the program.

Participation in this survey is voluntary and all information will be kept confidential. The anonymity of participants and college identification will be maintained. Since the survey is anonymous and confidential, there are no identifiable risks or benefits to you for filling it out. The survey responses will be used to help improve the First Year learning community program. It will take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions about the study or if you need any clarification for the questions on the survey, please feel free to contact me at

Sincerely,

Dennell Smith

## Appendix C: Email Invitation for Study Participation (Faculty)

Dear Faculty,

You are invited to participate in a study of the First Year learning community at Bay Community College. This study is about perceptions and experiences of the First Year learning community program. The information gathered will be used for an evaluation of the program.

Participation in this survey is voluntary and all information will be kept confidential. The anonymity of participants and college identification will be maintained. Since the survey is anonymous and confidential, there are no identifiable risks or benefits to you for filling it out. The survey responses will be used to help improve the First Year learning community program. It will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. A request for an interview is also attached.

If you have any questions about the study or if you need any clarification for the questions on the survey, please feel free to contact me at

Sincerely,

Dennell Smith

### Appendix D: Informed Consent for Interview (Faculty)

You are invited to take part in a research interview of First Year Learning community program. You were chosen for the interview because you are a faculty member of the learning community. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be part of the interview.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this interview is to gather information about the First Year Learning community program, which will be used for a program evaluation.

**Procedures:**

If you agree, you will be asked to participate in an audio-recorded interview, lasting not longer than one hour.

**Voluntary Nature of the Interview:**

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. Your decision of whether or not you want to be part of the interview will be respected. If you decide to join the interview now, you can still change your mind later. If you feel stressed during the interview, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Interview:**

There is the minimal risk of psychological stress during this interview. If you feel stressed during the interview, you may stop at any time. There are no benefits to you from participating in this interview.

**Compensation:**

There is no compensation for participating in this interview.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports of the interview.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have received answers to any questions I have at this time. I am 18 years of age or older, and I consent to participate in the interview.

Printed Name of  
Participant

Participant's Signature

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## Appendix E: First Year Learning Community Student Survey

**Demographic Information:**

## 1. Gender

 Male    Female

## 2. Age

 16-21    22-25    26-30    30-35    36-40    40-45  
 46+

## 3. Ethnicity

 African American    Asian    Latino    Native American  
 Pacific Islander    Caucasian    Other \_\_\_\_\_

## 4. Class level

 1<sup>st</sup> (FR)    2<sup>nd</sup> (SO)    3<sup>rd</sup> year    4<sup>th</sup> year    transfer/graduate

## 5. Cumulative GPA

 Less than 2.0    2.0-2.5    2.6-2.9    3.0-3.5    3.6-4.0

## 6. Attending school

 Full-time    Part-time    Not currently attending

7. Are you a first generational college student?

Yes            No

8. Are you a single parent?

Yes            No

9. Is English your first language?

Yes            No

10. What are your academic goals?

Transfer        AA/AS degree    Certificate    No current academic goal

11. Participating in the learning community has helped me become a better student

Strongly Agree      Agree            Disagree        Strongly Disagree

12. Participating in the learning community has helped me stay in college

Strongly Agree      Agree            Disagree        Strongly Disagree

13. Participating in the program has helped me progress toward my academic or  
career goals

Strongly Agree      Agree            Disagree        Strongly Disagree

14. I like having cohort classes

Strongly Agree      Agree            Disagree        Strongly Disagree

15. I would recommend this program to other students

Strongly Agree      Agree            Disagree        Strongly Disagree

16. The program faculty have helped me progress academically

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

17. I would have dropped out of college without this program

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

18. I would be as successful without this program

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

19. I believe all students should participate in a similar program

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

20. The program helps me feel like I am involved with the campus community

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

### **Open Ended Survey Questions**

#### **General**

What was the best part about being in the First Year learning community program?

What was your least favorite part about the program?

How would you make the program better?

#### **Orientation to College Course**

What was the most important information you learned in this course?

What was the least important information you learned in this course?

What would you change about the course?

Did the course influence your major or career choice? If so, how?

Did this course help you understand the transfer process? If so, how?

**Developmental English Curriculum**

What was the most important information you learned in this course?

What was the least important information you learned in this course?

What would you change about the course?

Did your reading skills improve because of this course?

Did your writing skills improve because of this course?

**Student Support Services**

How did you learn about student services when you were in the program?

What student services did you find most helpful while you were in the program?

Would you have used student services if they were not a part of the learning community?



## Appendix F: First Year Learning Community Faculty Survey

1. Gender

Male     Female

2. How long have you taught in the First Year learning community program?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Which First Year learning community program course do you teach?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What non First Year learning community program courses do you teach? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Approximately how many program students transfer to 4-year institutions each year?

0-5     6-10     11-15     16-20     21-25

6. I believe the learning community has helped participants become better students

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

7. I believe the learning community has helped participants stay in college

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

8. I believe the learning community has helped participants progress toward their academic or career goals

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

9. I like teaching cohort classes

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

10. I would recommend this program to other students

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

11. I believe the learning community faculty has helped participants progress  
academically

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

12. I believe the participants would have dropped out of college without this program

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

13. I believe the participants would be as successful without this program

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

14. I believe all students should participate in a similar program

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

15. I believe the learning community has helped participants feel involved with the  
campus community

Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

## Appendix G: First Year Learning Community Faculty Interview Questions

### **General**

What is the purpose of the First Year learning community program and what are its goals?

How does the program's learning community model promote student success?

What program activities are most successful in promoting student success? Why?

What improvements should be made to the program? Why?

How does the First Year learning community program specifically help basic skills students?

What are the types of funding for the program?

What type of faculty development and staff training occur

### **Orientation to College Course**

What was the most valuable information you teach in this course?

What was the least valuable information you teach in this course?

What would you change about the course?

How does this course inform the participants of the major or career choices?

How does this course help the participants to understand the transfer process?

### **Developmental English Curriculum**

What was the most valuable information you teach in this course?

What was the least valuable information you teach in this course?

What would you change about the course?

What specific strategies are used to improve reading skills for participants?

What specific strategies are used to improve writing skills for participants?

### **Student Support Services**

What types of resources are available to promote student success in basic skills courses?

How are student services incorporated into the First Year learning community program?

How do you know if students are using the available services?

## Appendix H: Sample Student Survey Responses

21. What was the best part about being in the learning community?

Answer Options	Response Count
51 answered question	51
skipped question	0

Number	Response TextCategories
1	English teacher
2	having other people to support me
3	the classmates
4	friends in class, fun
5	I like that they have us participate in events on campus and we can do it as a class. I love my instructors and my classmates were good
6	community
7	being in class with my friends
8	amazing instructors
9	Teachers actually helpful and cared
10	best instructors, family environment
11	class feels like family, all the help you ask for
12	I liked how we got the opportunity to go and explore all the different colleges
13	leadership and campus resources
14	Having a lots of friends in the same class
15	having my friends in class with me
16	The family environment because you are not overlooked or ignored in class
17	It was like a big family
18	I loved everything about our program especially my English teacher
19	Teachers that care about you
20	The teachers really wanted to help me do better
21	The teachers and the class
22	Everyone tried to help everyone succeed
23	The main thing I liked was that the teachers were so close to us. They made sure we were on top of our game.
24	field trips
25	got to know more people and my peers better
26	there is always support from others
27	getting to know more students and working with them
28	being able to visit other schools
29	the field trips

30 I have more people with expectations for me makes me do better  
31 meeting new people  
32 group work, meeting new people  
33 interacting and learning from others  
34 feeling like I belong to a group, having been around a group of people  
who have big hearts, big goals and came from similar struggles as myself  
35 support from instructors  
36 making close friends and exploring all options  
37 being able to understand transfer process  
38 gives me goals  
39 help with assignments  
40 look at pathway to the university  
41 gaining an experience with the group  
42 everything is connected  
43 professors are friendly  
44 helps me make the right decisions, helped me look forward to my forward  
45 meet new people and make friends  
46 everyone close, we had a counselor  
47 topics I was interested in  
48 being with same group of students, being able to work as team  
49 knowing the people in class  
50 knowledge on how to transfer to a CSU  
51 being with same students for English and counseling

## Appendix I: Sample Faculty Survey Responses

Question	Faculty1	Faculty2
Gender	Female	Female
How long have you taught in the learning community program?	18 years	18 years
Which learning community course do you teach?	(English) intro reading/intro writing/English 1A	college success
What non learning community courses do you teach?	Intro reading/ Intro writing/ English 1A	cross cultural perspectives
Approximately how many program students transfer to 4-year institutions each year?	11- 15	11- 15
I believe the learning community has helped participants become better students	Agree	Agree
I believe the learning community has helped participants stay in college	Agree	Agree
I believe the learning community has helped participants progress toward their academic or career goals	Agree	Agree
I like teaching cohort classes	Agree	Strongly Agree
I would recommend this program to other students	Agree	Strongly Agree

## Appendix J: Faculty Interview Excerpts

Question	Faculty1	Faculty2
General: What is the purpose of the learning community program and what are the goals?	help students progress through basic coursework with a support system	provide students with a community and a network on campus
General: How does the program's learning community model promote student success?	support system created vital to student success, outside of classroom we encourage students to work together and to use campus based services	by providing linked English and counseling courses, meetings with counselor
General: What program activities are most successful in promoting student success? Why?	supplemental instruction, group activities help students focus on reading/writing, field trips and group activities help keep students motivated and interested in college	community oriented class work, field trip, counseling
General: What improvements should be made to the program?	more institutional support, more campus recognition about success of program	more opportunities for faculty development, greater funding opportunities, improve mentoring component, more leadership workshops
General: How does the learning community program specifically help basic skills students?	scaffolding for reading/writing, individualized help, supplemental instruction,	community building makes students comfortable to relax enough to ask questions and become involved in their learning