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The Scope and Design of Structured Group Learning Experiences at Community Colleges

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Abstract

This study explores through descriptive analysis the similarities of structured group learning experiences such as first-year seminars, learning communities, orientation, success courses, and accelerated developmental education programs, in terms of their design features and implementation at community colleges. The study takes as its conceptual starting point the hypothesis put forth by Hatch and Bohlig (2013) that such cohort- or group-structured programs designed to equip students with skills, knowledge, and support networks for successful college-going, and which often go by different names, may be in fact better characterized as variations or instances of a more general type of program due to the similarities of their programmatic and curricular structure. This article explores program features beyond curricular design to consider target audience, mandatory status, reported participation rates, program duration, credit-bearing status, and the roles of involved personnel, among other features. Using data from the 2012 national administration of the Community College Institutional Survey (CCIS) and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement ([CCSSE], Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2013), we provide evidence that all five programs are indeed similar in important ways, even while revealing important dissimilarities that corroborate the need for more detailed accounting of program features noted in the literature. The findings provide baseline data for practitioners and researchers alike in their efforts to further understand why these high-impact practices work, for whom, and under what circumstances, so as to know how to deploy scarce resources.

Community colleges are experiencing an unprecedented degree of attention in light of their potential role in increasing the portion of adults with postsecondary credentials. Policy makers, researchers, private foundations, professional organizations and others are calling on community colleges to improve outcomes while also maintaining their traditional open access mission— especially for individuals from traditionally underserved segments of the population who enroll in two-year colleges at disproportionate rates (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Humphreys, 2012; Lee et al., 2011; Mullin, 2010). These heightened expectations come at

the same time as ongoing and increasing fiscal constraints, thus, heightening the need to identify effective and cost-efficient practices and programs that foster student success so they can be scaled up to benefit the greatest number of students possible.

Various authors and organizations have reviewed the extensive evidence for underutilized practices that “appear to engage participants at levels that elevate their performance across multiple engagement and desired-outcomes measures” (Kuh, 2008, p. 14; cf. Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012a) compared to traditional models of college education (Kuh & O’Donnell, 2013; McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005; Schwartz & Jenkins, 2007; Swaner & Brownell, 2009). Despite the growing evidence that these practices—sometimes referred to as *promising* or *high-impact practices*—are associated with desirable outcomes, there is an emerging consensus in the literature that there is a lack of information regarding which aspects of these programs contribute most to successful outcomes (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Boylan, Bliss, & Bonham, 1997; Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Inkelas, Soldner, Longenbeam, & Leonard, 2008). Clear articulation and elucidation of these details are necessary for researchers to better conceptualize and operationalize their studies and to provide policy makers and practitioners the information necessary to appropriately design, implement, and monitor one or more of these practices at their colleges. This article addresses this need by reporting on the findings of a nation-wide survey of community colleges that provides, among other things, details regarding the programmatic and curricular features of structured group learning experiences (SGLEs) including first-year seminars, learning communities, college orientation, student success courses, and accelerated or fast-track developmental education. There are arguably many underutilized programs associated with improved outcomes, and the labeling of what is and what is not a high-impact practice is a current source of discussion and debate (see Kuh et al., 2013). The practices included in this study were determined by those addressed by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012a, 2013). In community colleges, such practices are often implemented to foster college-going success of traditionally underserved students who are often unfamiliar with college generally. The institutional-level data are compared with selected results of individual-level survey data to draw conclusions about rates of participation in these programs. The findings provide policy makers and practitioners with a view of current practices nationally, which, in turn, may suggest avenues for institutional self-study and may help establish goals for student participation. At the end of the article, we elaborate these implications, together with a discussion of ways the information might inform institutional and academic research.

Conceptual Approach

This article takes as its conceptual starting point the hypothesis put forth by Hatch and Bohlig (2013) that various SGLE programs, which often go by different names (e.g., first-year seminars, learning communities, college orientation, student success courses, accelerated or fast-track developmental education) and are typically designed to equip students with skills, knowledge, and support networks for successful college-going, may be in fact better characterized as variations or instances of a more general type of program. The authors dub this concept a *Structured Group Learning Experience* (SGLE). The evidence in favor of this conceptualization of these programs came from results of the 2012 administration of the Community College Institutional Survey (CCIS) that included

	First Year Experience (n = 178)	Learning Community (n = 151)	Orientation (n = 286)	Student Success Course (n = 266)	Accelerated Dev. Ed. (n = 166)	Overall: Across All SGLEs (n = 1047)
Programmatic and Curricular Elements						
TIME – Time management skills	93	57	53	96	40	69
STDY – Study skills	89	65	39	95	55	68
NOTE – Note-taking skills	81	58	24	92	36	58
TEST – Test-taking skills	80	57	23	91	46	59
INFO – Use of info. resources (e.g., library, finding and evaluating sources)	89	68	63	88	37	70
TECH – Basic technology skills (e.g., using Internet, word processing)	72	48	46	70	51	58
STYL – Learning style assessment	79	38	12	83	13	45
STWK – Identification of personal strengths and challenges	77	40	17	82	19	47
STDGRP – Assigned study groups	18	37	5	23	20	19
GRPPRJ – Assigned group projects/assignments	49	62	6	55	30	38
CMNRD – Common reading(s)	50	68	6	55	36	40
CMNASG – Study/assignments focused on a common theme	48	75	5	53	40	40
CONTEXT – Contextualized curriculum or discipline-related activities	33	64	6	37	45	33
WEB – Online learning skills (e.g., course management system, “netiquette,” constructive discourse)	70	37	33	62	32	47
PLAN – Development of a written individual academic plan	65	29	29	62	8	40
SOCSPY – Info. about and/or use of personal/social support services	87	55	88	77	24	70
ACSPT – Info. about and/or use of academic support network	88	65	86	83	46	76
GRPADV – Group advising	48	28	50	37	16	38
SRVC – Campus or community service project(s)	26	34	10	20	5	18
EXCRCL – Participation in campus activities/events outside classroom	63	45	37	49	14	42
SRVLRN – Service learning	21	30	9	14	4	14
MNTR – Mentoring	37	30	17	29	14	25
TUTR – Tutoring	56	62	51	56	73	58
SUPP – Supplemental instruction	21	30	7	20	41	21

Figure 1. Percent of element implementation, by nominal SGLE programs and overall (Source: Hatch & Bohlig, 2013. © Hatch & Bohlig. Reproduced by permission of Hatch & Bohlig. Permission to reuse must be obtained from Hatch & Bohlig.).

questions about whether colleges implement 24 different curricular and programmatic elements as part of the SGLEs (This same data source, described below, is used in the current study.).

Hatch and Bohlig’s (2013) study provides evidence that nominal categorizations of SGLEs typically used in the literature both conceal and reveal commonalities in the kind of curricular and programmatic elements colleges put into them (see Figure 1). This notion suggests that SGLE programs may often have more in common than otherwise suggested by their nominal categorizations. The current study adopts this notion by searching for evidence of similarities across nominal SGLEs, but it does so by considering additional aspects of SGLE programs beyond their programmatic and curricular elements per se, such as the programs’ target students, extent of participation, and college personnel involved in their design and facilitation. These data provide further insight into how such programs are structured, implemented, and experienced by college constituent groups.

Research Questions

The particular aspects of SGLEs that we focus on in this paper are the ways in which these programs are designed and the students whom colleges target for participation (Clark,

2005; Tinto, 2000), in addition to other salient design features that are noted as important in the literature (e.g., Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Inkelas et al., 2008) and which were operationalized in the CCIS; namely, program and curricular elements, duration of the programs, their intensity, credit available, and the personnel involved. The following research questions guided the inquiry of the data regarding the structure and scope of SGLEs:

1. To what extent do colleges offer multiple versions of SGLE programs?
2. Which groups of students are targeted for SGLE programs and for whom are they mandatory?
3. What is the extent of student participation in SGLEs, according to colleges and according to students?
4. How are SGLEs designed in terms of duration, intensity, credit awarded, and the personnel involved?

Data and Methods

The data, composed of program-level and student-level survey responses, were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods with an eye toward comparison and contrasts across nominal SGLE types. The data came from two surveys administered in 2012 by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE): the Community College Institutional Survey (CCIS) and the student-level Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). The CCSSE instrument has been utilized for over a decade, whereas the Center developed the CCIS survey in 2011 and 2012 as part of a grant-funded initiative to identify and promote high-impact practices. As part of this initiative, the center developed and administered special modules of related items for the center's student and faculty survey instruments. The current analysis utilizes data from only United States-based colleges due to possible institutional and regulatory issues that may impact how the non-U.S. colleges operate in systematically different ways regarding these practices.

The CCIS was a nation-wide web-based census survey of 1,084 public two-year colleges in the U.S. and a handful of other CCCSE-affiliated international colleges. The invitation letter to the college executive leader recommended that the task of completing the survey be delegated to the person or persons most knowledgeable about the programs and practices included. Respondents included 431 colleges from 48 states, the District of Columbia, and a few international institutions, a 40% response rate. Of these, records from the 424 U.S.-based colleges were used in this study, representing colleges of varied sizes and locations in all regions of the country.

The CCIS instrument is divided into three sections. The first section includes survey items requesting detailed information about the student participants, rate of participation, and other implementation details regarding duration, credit hours awarded, and the personnel involved in designing and facilitating SGLE programs. The second section requests detailed information about the programmatic and curricular elements that colleges implement in the programs offered. The final section includes questions about other high-impact programs and policies related to placement, advising, registration, supplemental

instruction, tutoring, and experiential learning, among others. CCIS items used in this paper come from the first two sections related specifically to SGLE programs.

The CCSSE instrument is a paper-based survey administered to students in randomly selected classes during the spring term. The sampling frame comprises all credit-bearing courses, excluding those taught exclusively at a distance, independent study, lower-level English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and dual-enrollment courses enrolling only high school students. The sampling scheme is stratified by the time of day—morning, afternoon, or evening courses—to ensure a representative sample of students with different attendance schedules. The center reports response rates for a three-year rolling cohort. For the 2010–2012 cohort, the response rate for CCSSE was 86% of sampled courses returning surveys and 51% of students enrolled in sampled courses responding. In terms of total number of respondents, in 2012 alone, there were 174,345 student responses to CCSSE across 276 U.S. colleges.

Note that all frequencies and means calculated for CCSSE data involve a statistical weight to correct for the sampling bias that results in an overrepresentation of full-time students due to the class-based sampling strategy. Because full-time students are by definition enrolled in more courses, they are over-represented in the data. The center uses enrollment data reported to IPEDS to calculate a unique weight correction for each institution.

Findings

Research Question 1: To what extent do colleges offer multiple versions of SGLE programs?

In CCCSE's 2013 report, *A matter of degrees: Engaging practices, engaging students* (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2013), it was reported that, overall, colleges implement these five nominal SGLE programs at quite different rates. Figure 2 shows at a glance these differing rates. (Note that because response rates differed across survey items, the data are reported as percentages to put the responses on the same scale, thus allowing comparisons across programs.) For instance, there were 374 colleges that responded to the item as to whether or not a college offers some kind of first-year seminar; of these, 227 (61%) indicated yes. By comparison, 196 of 365 responding colleges (54%) reported that they implement some kind of a learning community. Orientation programs were most common among these five kinds of first-year programs.

The data in Figure 2 represent only the highest level of program prevalence: whether the college implements any particular instance of a program at all. Many colleges implement several of these programs in different combinations. Further analysis of the CCIS data revealed that only 6 colleges (of 347 responding across all five survey items) reported having only one of these five programs, and 45 reported having two of the five. Most colleges (85%) reported offering three or more SGLE programs. On average, colleges reported implementing 3.6 SGLEs.

This level of analysis, though, is still at the general level of broad nominal categories. Within each kind of SGLE program, colleges may have several different instances or versions such as a first-year seminar for nursing students and a different one designed for students placed in developmental math. Figure 3 shows the results of the follow-up survey items asking about multiple instances across the five SGLE categories. When comparing Figure 2 and Figure 3, it can be seen that though nearly all colleges reported having

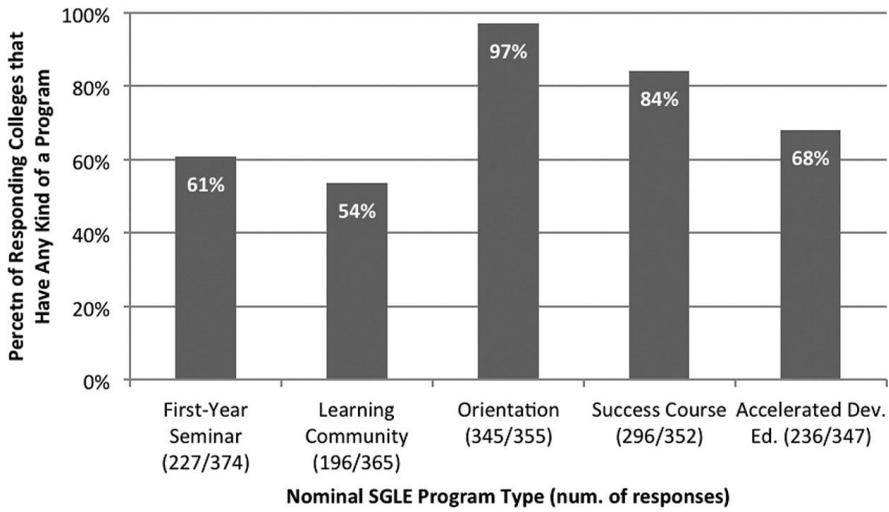


Figure 2. Percent of responding colleges that indicated they implement each of five different SGLE programs (Adapted from: Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2013. © Center for Community College Student Engagement. Reproduced by permission of Center for Community College Student Engagement. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the Center for Community College Student Engagement.).

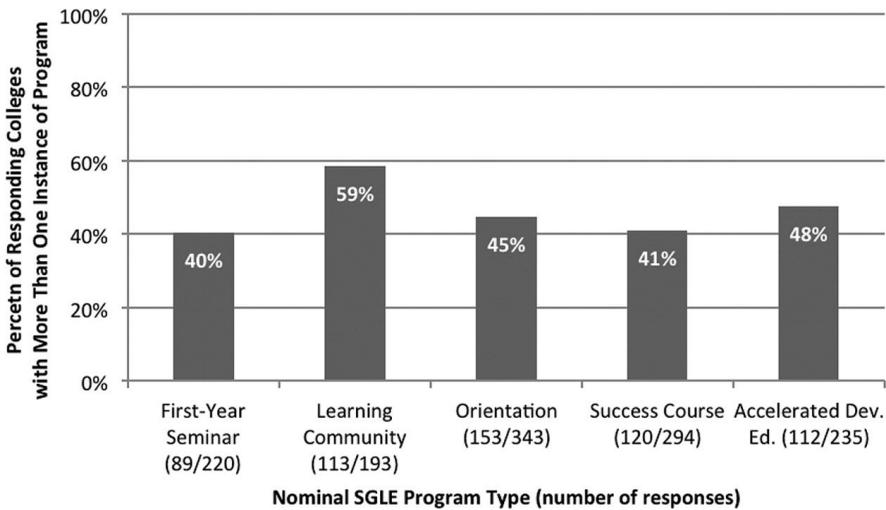


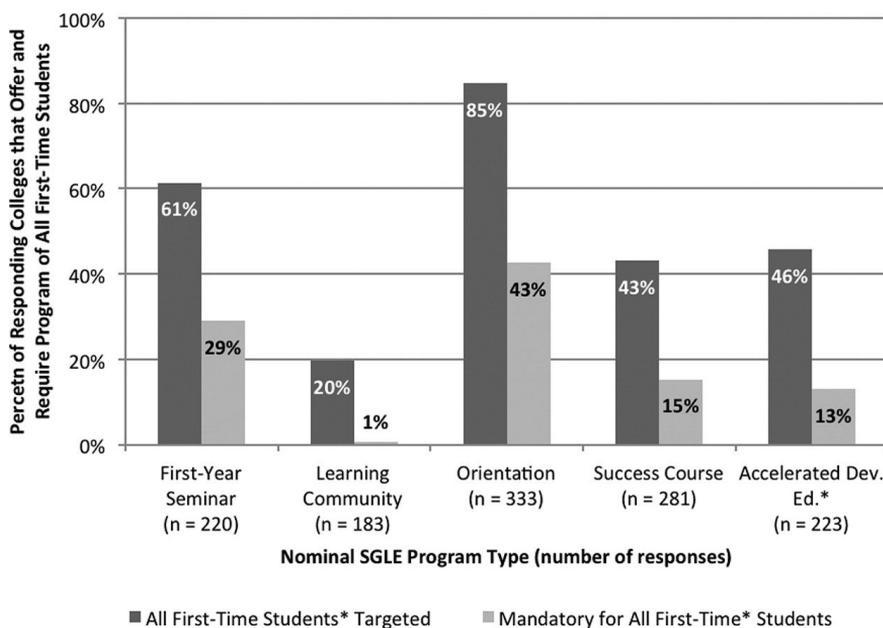
Figure 3. Percent of responding colleges that indicated there is more than one type or instance of a given SGLE program, if offered.

orientation programs, the portion of colleges that implement more than one version of orientation is under half, similar to other SGLE programs. Conversely, learning communities, though being implemented by the smallest portion of colleges (see Figure 2), are most likely of any program type to have multiple versions at a given campus.

Research Question 2: Which groups of students are targeted for SGLE programs and for whom are they mandatory?

Program offerings by themselves do not reveal to what extent students actually participate in them. For each program type, the CCIS survey included items asking about which student groups compose its target population and whether the program was mandatory for those students. The response options for both questions were the following: (a) all first-time students (full- and part-time); (b) first-time full-time students; (c) developmental/remedial students; (d) students from disadvantaged backgrounds (low-income, first-generation, in programs such as TRIO, Extended Opportunity Programs and Services [EOPS], CaliforniaWork Opportunity and Responsibility for Kids [CalWORKs], etc.); (e) no specific group of students; and (f) other.

To get a sense of the extent to which colleges are working to implement these programs, consider for now just the first in the list of response options: all first-time students (full- and parttime). Figure 4 shows how often colleges indicated whether programs are targeted at all first-time students and whether the programs are mandatory. If the answer is



* In the case of accelerated developmental education programs, this figure represents the response option of all developmental students.

Figure 4. Percent of responding colleges that indicated whether a given SGLE program, if offered, is targeted to and/or mandatory of all first-time students.

affirmative for both questions, it would imply a large-scale implementation. Comparing Figure 4 to Figures 2 and 3, we can see that orientation, though being nearly ubiquitous in some form across colleges and targeted in most instances to first-time students, are mandatory for all first-time students in less than half of the cases in this sample. Also, though learning communities were offered at more than half of the responding colleges (see Figure 2), and were more often offered in multiple versions at a given college (see Figure 3), learning communities were reported to be targeted at all first-time students at much lower rates than other SGLE programs (see Figure 4).

Figure 5 shows the full complement of response options to the question of which students are targeted for programs. Respondents could mark all response options that apply—in case multiple groups are targeted at a given college. In this Figure, the data are grouped to show the different rates at which certain groups are the target audience for SGLEs. The target group discussed above, all first-time students, is seen in the first grouping on the left-hand side of Figure 5 (Accelerated developmental education is excluded from this Figure because the options for targeted groups are not parallel with the other four SGLE program types). This display of the data shows that first-time full-time students and disadvantaged students are the target group for particular SGLEs at roughly similar rates, whereas developmental students are the target audience at notably higher rates for all SGLEs except for orientation programs. Some programs were reportedly targeted at “no specific group of students,” especially learning communities in fact, at more than a fifth of responding colleges.

The response option of “other” was also very common. Upon reviewing and categorizing the write-in responses that accompanied this response option, it was apparent that colleges tended to use the space to clarify the nature of their program, not necessarily to indicate some other group exclusive of the response options. Many write-in explanations indicated, in effect, that the program is available to all students, even if only certain groups are recruited. Some colleges did use the “other” category to specify additional

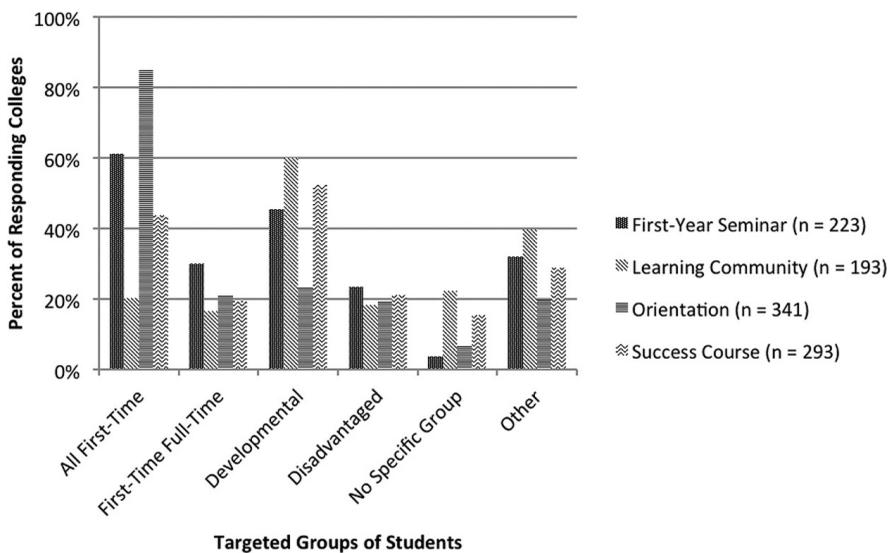


Figure 5. Percent of responding colleges that indicated which groups of students are targeted for a given first-year SGLE program, if offered.

named targeted groups that were not included in the survey, or to be more specific about them. For instance, write-in responses for the “other” category in orientation show that colleges sometimes target very specific groups such as military veterans, high school students, home-schooled students, readmitted students, new students entering a health profession field, adult learners, and international students, to name just a few. Some colleges indicated that they invite all or nearly all first-time students to participate in orientation, but that they don’t have mechanisms in place to ensure participation. This overview of colleges’ responses to which programs they offer, if there are multiple instances of them, and which student groups are targeted, helps interpret the findings of the next section as to the scope or extent of student participation in these programs.

Research Question 3: What is the extent of student participation in SGLEs, according to colleges and according to students?

Figure 6 and Figure 7 summarize the extent of student participation in various first-year SGLE programs according to values reported by the institutions. For each of the five SGLEs, the CCIS included two items asking about the portion of students that have participated. The first asked what percentage of all currently enrolled credit students (including developmental students) have participated; the second asked what percentage of targeted students have participated. The responses to these two questions are reported, respectively, in Figure 6 and Figure 7. In these Figures, the responses are binned in decile groupings, each of which excludes the lower value and goes up to and includes the higher value. For instance, as seen on the left-hand side of Figure 6, more than 80% of colleges reported that more than zero and up to 10% of their currently enrolled credit students have participated in a learning community (square indicator); whereas approximately 35% of colleges reported that more than zero and up to 10% participated in a first-year seminar (diamond

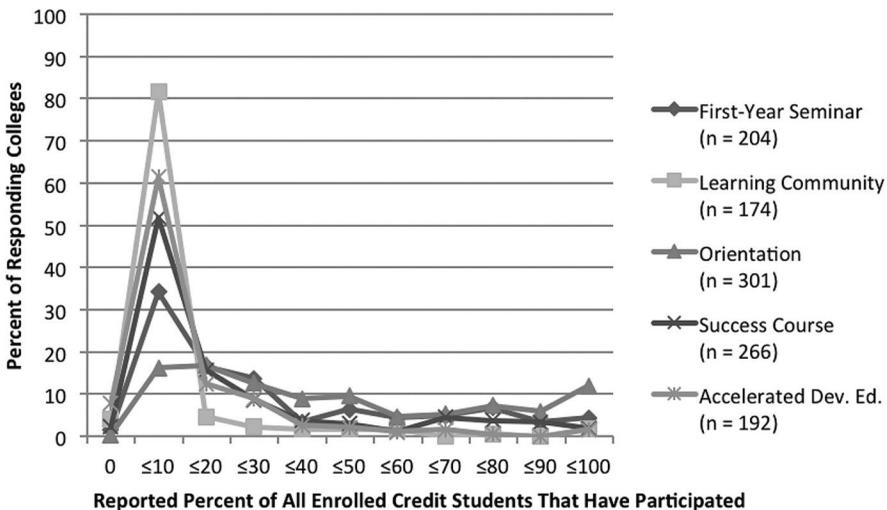


Figure 6. Distribution of college responses of the percent of all enrolled credit students having participated in a given SGLE program, if offered.

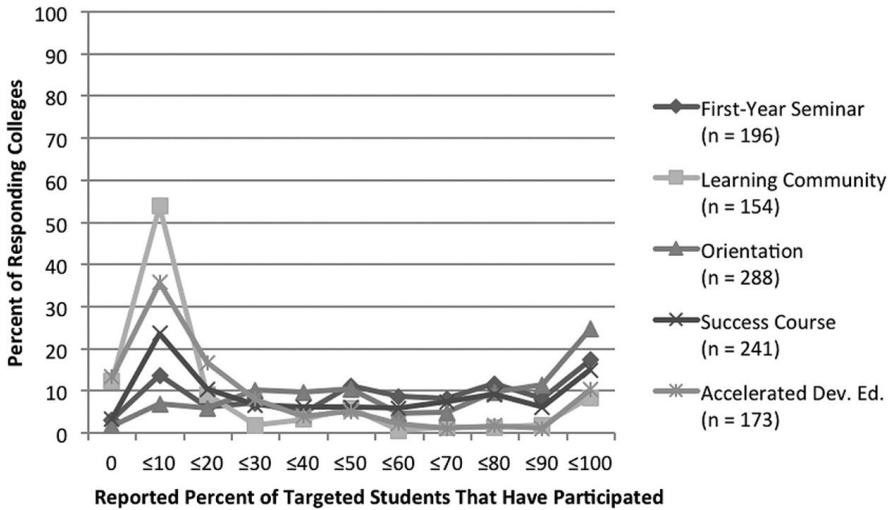


Figure 7. Distribution of college responses of the percent of targeted students having participated in a given SGLE program, if offered.

indicator). As in other Figures, note that because response rates differed across survey items, the data are reported as percentages to put the responses on the same scale, thus allowing comparisons across programs.

A few trends in the data that are summarized in Figure 6 can be observed from the shape of the distribution of responses. First, it is apparent that a large portion of colleges in this sample reported that 20% or less of all their students have experienced these programs. To be sure, all trend lines are raised at the low end of the student participation scale compared to the high end of participation rates. As shown by the fact that the trend lines remain mostly flat from the midranges through to the higher values at the right-hand side of the Figure, there are few colleges where significant portions of the student body have participated. The data show that there may be some institutions that have reportedly scaled up SGLE programs to reach most students, but overall very few community college students are experiencing these programs.

Figure 7, in contrast, considers a narrower segment of the student body: the portion of targeted students who have participated. Compared with the distribution of responses in Figure 6 that shows the portion of participating students in the overall student body, the distribution of responses shown in Figure 7 is flatter. That is, the modal peak at the left is lower, and a slightly larger portion of the responses are found among greater values at the right-hand side of the Figure. Still, the trend is apparent that even among targeted students, the college-reported participation rates are low at most institutions. Only in the case of orientation is the slope positive.

How do student responses compare to SGLE institutional responses across these programs? In order to summarize the data in a comparable manner to the CCIS responses above, we calculated the percentage of students, per college, who indicated they participated in a given SGLE. The results are displayed in Figure 8. The distribution of student-reported participation rates are plotted in deciles, as above. At first glance, it is very apparent that college-reported rates are quite different than what is reported by students.

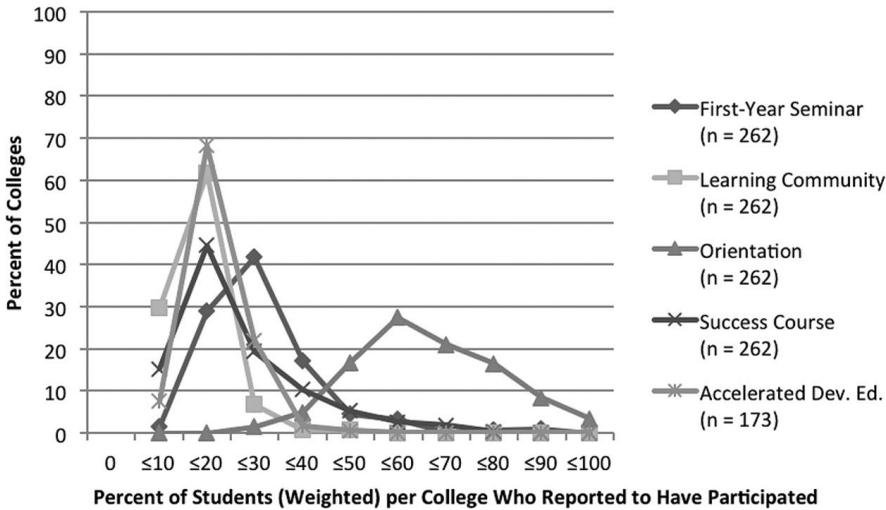


Figure 8. Distribution of the percentage of students, per college, who indicated that they participated in a given SGLE programs.

For example, at just under 30% of colleges, more than 50% and up to 60% of students indicated they participated in orientation; whereas at less than 10% of colleges did more than 80% and up to 90% of students indicate they participated in orientation. It is important to note that these data do not come from necessarily the same colleges as the CCIS results reported above (though there is some overlap: there were 97 U.S. colleges that participated in both CCSSE and CCIS in 2012).

The general shape of the distribution of mean responses per college from the student perspective as provided by CCSSE data, seen in Figure 8, is somewhat comparable to the distribution of overall participation rates as reported by colleges provided by CCIS data (see Figure 6); there is a large portion of colleges that have participation rates toward the low end. In the case of the student perspective, the peak in the distribution for all five SGLEs is to the right of the 10% mark instead of being at the 10% mark, as reported by colleges (see Figure 6). Participation rates in orientation are most notably different across the two data sets. Instead of a bimodal distribution as seen in Figure 6, or an increasing slope as seen in Figure 7, the student-reported rate of participation in orientation per college peaks at the decile of more than 50% and up to 60% of the student body, and then it declines.

Research Question 4: How are SGLEs designed in terms of duration, intensity, credit awarded, and the personnel involved?

The previous sections describe variation across first-year SGLE programs in terms of the extent of their implementation and participation by students. This leads to the last research question regarding the programs' time demands and credit-bearing status. As noted in the conceptual approach to this paper, Hatch and Bohlig (2013) presented evidence these various programs may be considered variations of a more general intervention in that they may have more features in common than they have distinguishing features. Therefore, student

Table 1. Average Duration of SGLE Programs in Weekdays

<i>Nominal First-Year SGLE Type</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
First-Year Seminar	219	1	360	67.3	51.5
Learning Community	186	21	560	110.0	94.4
Orientation	332	0	560	10.7	42.5
Success Course	288	1	160	69.2	19.1

participants may encounter many of the same curricular design elements regardless of the name of the program. Other differences, therefore, beyond curricular elements may become relatively more salient as distinguishing features such as duration and intensity; how much credit, if any, is awarded; who is involved in designing, overseeing, facilitating the programs; and whether they receive professional development; among many other details (and setting aside for a moment the vital question of implementation quality—which can only be accounted for through detailed close-up research not possible through the survey methodology utilized here). How (dis)similar are these SGLE programs in these other aspects? The following results give some insight.

Duration

Table 1 shows the average duration of these programs in weekdays (except for accelerated developmental education which, by definition, might not have a set duration), though it must be noted that the distribution of these values is skewed. On average, except for orientation, programs last about as long as a typical academic term. There are some questionable outliers that could very well be errors; but it is also the case that several programs do indeed last up to multiple terms, as clearly specified in the write-in comments that some colleges provided.

Intensity

The complement to the duration of a program is how much time students spend in class on activities throughout the duration. This complementary aspect of duration might be called intensity, for lack of a better word. Colleges were asked: “For how many total clock hours does a student participate in [a given] program over its duration?” In other words, how many were the total contact hours. By dividing the hours by total duration, we can derive a rough measure of intensity, which is the average hours per weekday. These values are reported in Table 2. Because these statistics were derived from more than one variable, there are fewer instances of each program represented than for just duration.

The intensity of programs was in the range of one-to-two hours per weekday on average, except for orientation, which on average was more intense. The deviations from the means were relatively small, though the max values were high in a few cases, reflecting perhaps some unique all-day programs, or just response anomalies. The minimum time reported for all four programs was zero hours. This value came from a few records in each category. Why colleges would have responded this way is not clear from the survey data. By looking past the outliers in the data to the bulk of the responses, we can see in Figure 9 that when plotting duration and intensity, it suggests again the similarities among

Table 2. Average Hours per Weekday over Program Duration

Nominal First-Year SGLE Type	<i>n</i>	Min	Max	Mean	SD
First-Year Seminar	203	0	24	1.2	2.9
Learning Community	165	0	24	1.6	2.3
Orientation	321	0	18	3.4	2.2
Success Course	272	0	7	0.6	0.7

these programs yet the wide variety of designs throughout. Most programs are found in the lower left corner of the scatter plot, representing programs fitting within a single academic term and meeting, on average, less than two hours a day. Many orientation programs are relatively very brief, appearing close to the y-axis at the far left of the scatter plot, but spread out from top to bottom; however, there are also nominal orientation programs that last substantially longer. The bulk of learning communities fit within the time-frame of an academic term, but this type of SGLE program also has a number of instances of lengthy and intensive programs.

Credit awarded

Table 3 summarizes the responses to the survey item asking how many credits, if any, does a program confer (whether institutional or degree credit). For four of the SGLE programs, the statistics are found in Table 3. (For accelerated developmental education, the

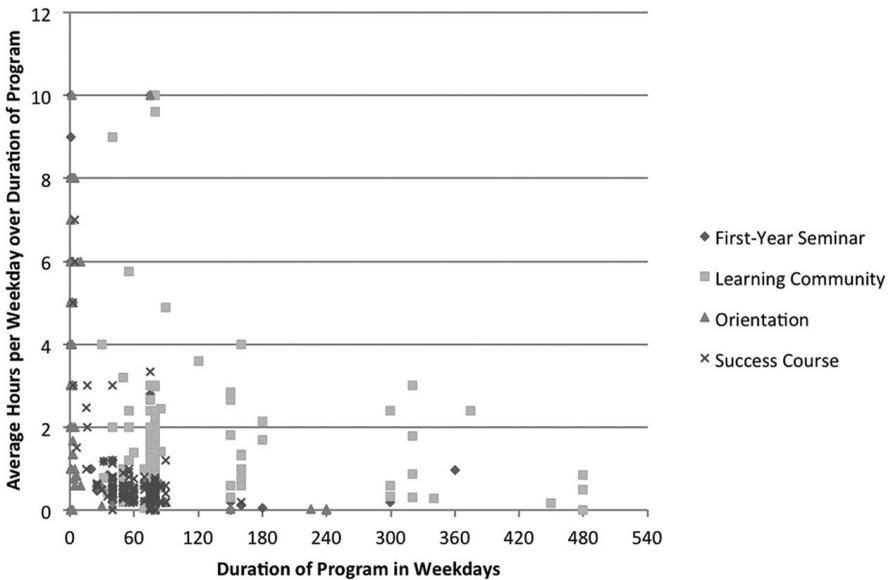


Figure 9. Intensity vs. duration of SGLE programs.

Table 3. Average Number of Credits Awarded

<i>Nominal First-Year SGLE Type</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
First-Year Seminar	215	0	12	2.0	1.7
Learning Community	178	0	95	11.3	16.0
Orientation	322	0	3	0.5	7.8
Success Course	287	0	5	2.2	1.0

survey item asked not how many but *if* students receive credits associated with the program. 177 of 224 [79%] colleges responded yes.) As with the duration and intensity of these programs, there are likely outliers in these data. However, in this case, the minimum of zero credits is a logical value and the maximum of 95 credits for a learning community makes sense, where an entire degree program is designed with linked classes and/or set up for cohorts of students throughout its duration, which may be particularly characteristic of programs in certain fields such as nursing or allied health. Note the very different averages and standard deviations among the four different kinds of programs in terms of credit awarded; for instance, learning communities on average carry the most credit awarded, while orientation, which has the lowest mean value, also has the second largest variation.

Personnel

The last set of data regarding the design of first-year SGLE programs concerns the people involved in designing and staffing them. For each of the five SGLEs, the CCIS instrument included a question about who plans/designs the programs (see Figure 10), coordinates/supervises them (see Figure 11), and teaches/facilitates them (see Figure 12). These data, provided from the perspective of the colleges, show not how many or what portion of college personnel are involved, but if they are involved.

Again we see the (dis)similarities across nominal SGLE types. Administrators and department heads are involved in planning and supervising the programs at similar rates, and they are less often involved in teaching them; though at a rate of 20% to 40% depending on the practice, administrators are involved in teaching these programs at least to some extent. In terms of other personnel groups and programs, it can be seen that student services staff are involved in relatively few accelerated developmental education programs and learning communities; yet—perhaps not surprisingly—they are very often involved in orientation programs. Faculty members play a relatively smaller part in orientation across all three roles than they do in the other four SGLEs.

These data from the institutional perspective complement the faculty perspective as reported in CCCSE's 2013 national report (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2013), in which it was reported that relatively very few faculty members are involved in a teaching or facilitating role in any of these programs. Namely, for any one of the five SGLE programs covered here, CCCSE reported that between 82% and 94% of faculty members are not involved in teaching or facilitating SGLE programs; part-time faculty members are consistently less often involved.

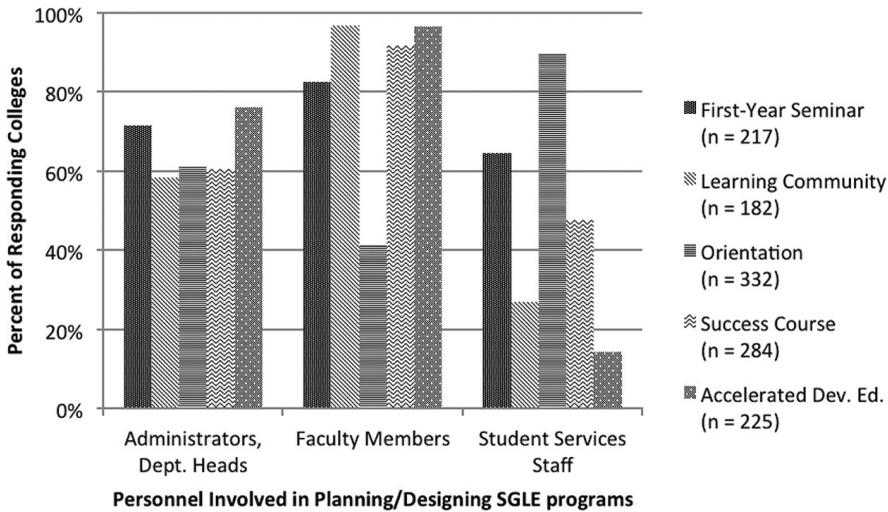


Figure 10. Personnel involved in planning/designing SGLE programs according to colleges.

Another aspect of personnel involvement in these programs is whether professional development is available and/or required of certain groups. Figure 13 summarizes these responses across all five program types. Among the 424 responding colleges and five program types, there was a total of 1,240 programs identified. As seen in Figure 13, in 82% of those cases, professional development is offered to faculty and required of them in 47% of the cases.

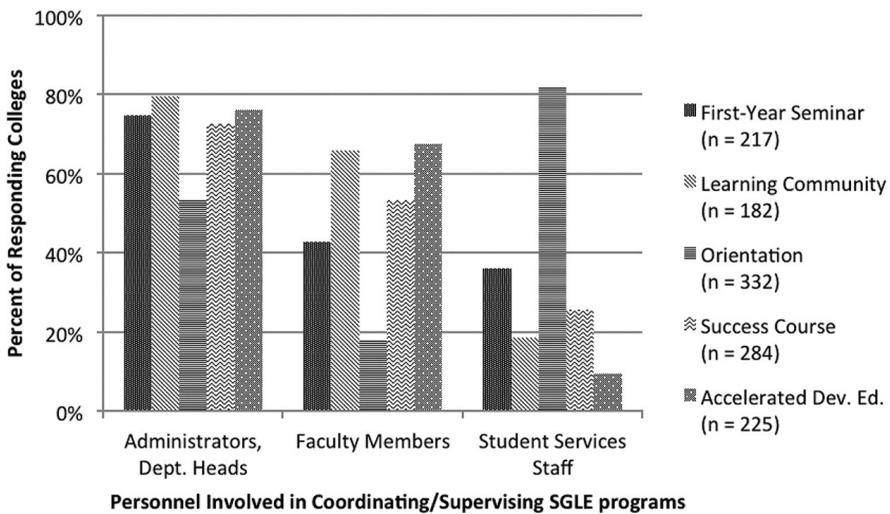


Figure 11. Which personnel are involved in coordinating/supervising SGLE programs, according to colleges.

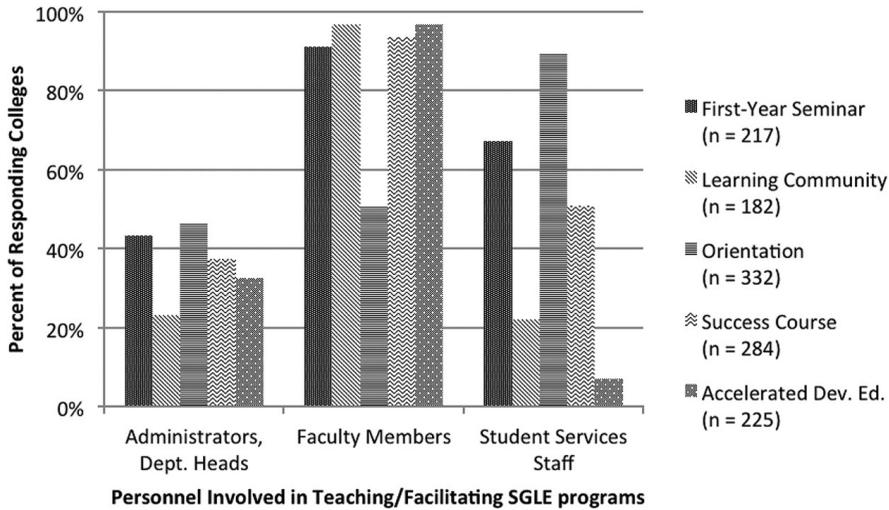


Figure 12. Which personnel are involved in teaching/facilitating SGLE programs, according to colleges (Adapted from: Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2013. © Center for Community College Student Engagement. Reproduced by permission of Center for Community College Student Engagement. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the Center for Community College Student Engagement.).

Limitations

The limitations inherent in survey research methods to gather the kind of data reported here are apparent. They include, among others, the self-selection of respondents; the difficulty in responding to survey prompts that use certain program names which may be ambiguous (precisely part of the problem this research seeks to address: the similarities of programs regardless of nominal labels); and the cross-sectional, reductive nature of the data.

The colleges that responded to CCIS, while diverse in their size and geographical setting, might not be representative of colleges across the country. Also, participating colleges may be those that have made relatively greater efforts to implement SGLEs and, as such, our results could over-estimate what is actually happening nationally. For student respondents, on the other hand, response bias is minimized due to CCSSE's rigorous sampling method, relatively high response rates, and the sheer number of responses from a large number of colleges (Marti, 2004). Still, the colleges that opt to administer the CC-SSE instrument are also a self-selected group.

There is a potential limitation in the ability of survey participants—college administrators and students alike—to accurately respond to survey questions about SGLEs. Across the country, there are the different definitions of these programs and different ways they are integrated into the college structure and experience. College administrators responding to CCIS may have had to arbitrarily select a label for a given program, and students responding to CCSSE may not realize that some of their courses fit into the classification schemes of the survey, even when they understood the question.

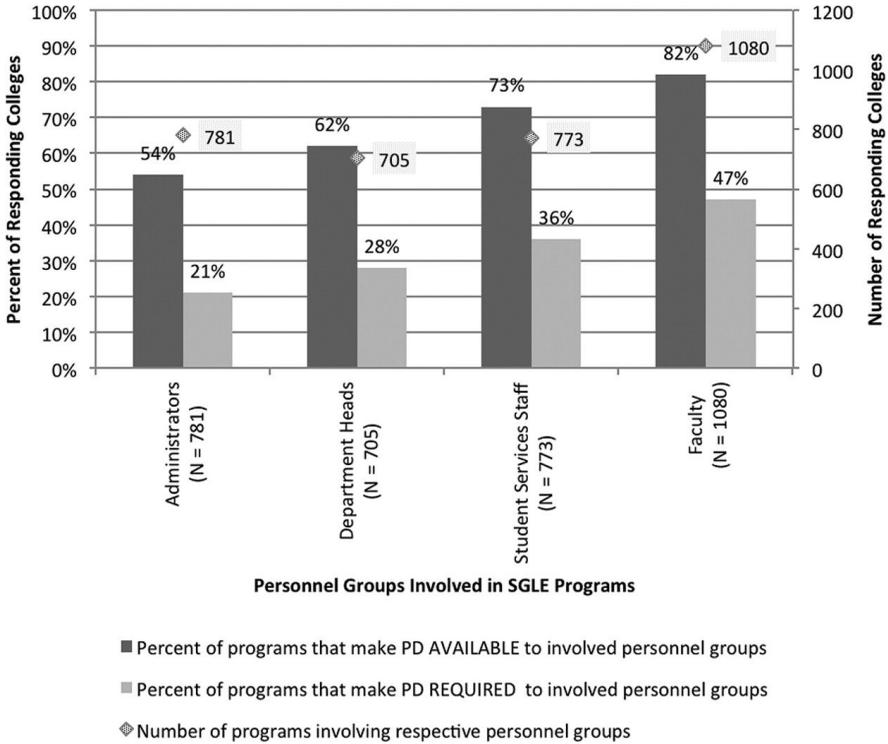


Figure 13. Percent of programs that offer professional development for college personnel or that require it of them.

Additionally, the data are cross-sectional in nature; thus, they hide trends or current anomalies in program offerings. Survey data are not able to account for variances in program implementation across contexts, a notoriously intractable problem, even where implementation is tightly controlled (Dane & Schneider, 1998; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Despite these drawbacks of survey methods for the purpose of this research, the data are worthwhile in that they provide a baseline understanding at the national level of the general patterns of practice and the extent of implementation of these kinds of programs that are the target of much discussion by researchers, practitioners, and policy makers.

Discussion and Implications for Practice and Research

The findings of this research underscore both the similarities and dissimilarities of (nominally) different structured group learning experiences in both design and implementation. Such programmatic nuances as found in this analysis illustrate the kinds of detail program features researchers are calling for (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Crisp & Taggart, 2013). At the same time, the results likewise validate our argument that SGLEs may have more underlying similarities than salient distinguishing features (Hatch & Bohlig, 2013).

Looking across the results, it becomes apparent that some kinds of programs tend to be unique in specific ways, some of which might be expected. Take the following, for example:

- Orientation programs, while offered almost universally and demonstrate the highest participation rates of the five SGLE practices, their actual participation falls far short of universal at many colleges. Their curricular and programmatic features are relatively sparse compared to other programs—although still richer than one might suspect—and they are sometimes as extensive in duration and credit-bearing status as other term-length programs. Their design and implementation are clearly dominated by student services staff compared to other programs.
- Learning communities, the rarest of the programs, are most likely to have multiple versions or instances at a given college. Of the five nominal types, they also are most likely to not target any particular type of student. Participation rates are the lowest among all five practices. The duration of these programs and number of credits they award are greatest on average. Learning communities are clearly dominated by faculty in their design, supervision, and delivery.
- Accelerated developmental education is unique among SGLEs in that it is clearly structured differently, making it difficult to compare to the others, as evidenced by the use of prompts and response options that are not parallel with the other four practices. Participation rates in these programs are low, even as they are offered on many campuses. And they incorporate many of the programmatic and support features that other programs do, such as learning communities and success courses, which receive more attention in the research literature.
- Overall, student success courses and first-year experiences are largely indistinguishable based on the programmatic design features covered in this study and are good examples of how many of these high-impact practices share common features.

Practitioners can utilize the data and findings of this research as part of the efforts to design and implement their own programs in light of their unique context and particular strategic goals. College practitioners can also use these results to gauge where they stand in relation to the national sample of responding colleges, while keeping in mind the important caveats underscored in the limitation section above. The data provide a baseline understanding of the degree to which these programs are being implemented across the country, but they do not necessarily establish benchmarks. Indeed, there is a wide range of implementation and participation, and the data do show that some colleges have implemented several programs or that they have reportedly achieved high levels of participation or perhaps both—and this does provide aspirational targets for colleges to know it is possible. However, consideration must be given to the quality of implementation and process evaluation in order to understand the costs and associated benefits for students when dedicating scarce resources to these efforts.

In order to further understand the outcomes associated with these programs in light of their features is precisely the utility of these findings for researchers. In this paper, we have outlined baseline data on a national scale along several axes of descriptors based on features discussed in the literature. Just as for practitioners, the findings reveal baseline data for furthering inquiry into SGLE program effectiveness. The findings invite reflection on the (dis)similarities among program types and possible new avenues to explore the relationship of design features with student outcomes. Ultimately, as a community, we can ensure greater success for growing numbers of colleges students who need it and merit out best efforts to foster it.

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