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Best Laid Plans: How Community College Student Success Courses Work

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Abstract

Objective: Beyond understanding whether first-year student success interventions in community colleges are effective—for which there is mixed evidence in the literature—this study’s purpose was to uncover how they work to realize observed outcomes, including at times unanticipated undesirable outcomes.

Method: This qualitative multiple case study used cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) to unpack interactions and tensions among programmatic-level features and individual-level experiences and actions. We conducted classroom observation, document analysis, and interviews with instructors and students in four student success courses across diverse contexts.

Results: Regardless of particular designs and course emphases, we found in all cases a blurring of activity elements, wherein learning tools and learning goals were often coterminous, or instructors effectively took on the role of learning tools themselves, in the form of object lessons and mediators, for instance. Courses had a distinctive character as rehearsal for college that simultaneously created a welcoming peer environment but an uncertain learning and assessment environment.

Contributions: Because of their nature as metacourses—college courses about college-going—success courses’ means and ends ultimately may be functionally inseparable, thus helping to explain their continual evolution and contested roles. Whereas such courses are typically justified as means to teach college skills, we found this utilitarian rationale to be insufficient to describe the experiential dimensions of social learning that participants reported. Instead, we found these courses reveal how college-going is an emergent social literacy, one that a single course is insufficient to fully realize.

Keywords: student success, student success courses, curriculum, first-year experience, activity theory, classroom-based research

Community colleges are increasingly implementing a variety of student success programs and courses designed to equip students with skills, knowledge, and support networks for successful college-going in response to the call for increased college completion (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2012; Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Hatch, 2016). Among the more prominent practices at community colleges are first-year seminars, college success strategies courses, orientation, and learning communities, among related student success programs (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016). Many studies show that participation in these kinds of interventions is associated with positive outcomes including persistence, academic and social engagement, and higher grades (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; CCCSE, 2012; Crisp & Taggart, 2013). Still, the evidence overall is mixed (Karp, Raufman, Efthimiou, & Ritze, 2017), and most published studies come from the 4-year sector, thereby providing limited implications for community college practitioners as student success programming has been found to have goals and curriculum tailored to the community college mission despite going by similar names in the 4-year sector (Young & Hopp, 2014; Young & Keup, 2016). That is, the programs described in the literature are not what community colleges necessarily do or need.

Scholars agree that a major part of the challenge to more conclusive evidence is that very little is known about which programmatic features are related to, let alone responsible for, observed outcomes, which in turn stems from researchers documenting too few details about program features (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Karp, 2011). Others point to a lack of conceptual frameworks for operationally defining student success programs in the first place, frameworks that recognize the common structure, features, and goals of student success programs across contexts and regardless of their names (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016). This is particularly true for quantitative studies that typically rely on a dichotomous operationalization of participation to determine whether a program has an impact, but yield little information about why or how, including how similar programs compare.

A few qualitative studies have worked to fill this gap in the literature by exploring student success programs in experiential terms of their participants (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Blackhurst, Akey, & Bobilya, 2003; Jessup-Anger, 2011; O’Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1994), but such studies are rare compared with

quantitative impact studies that dominate the research literature. Only three (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Karp et al., 2017; O’Gara et al., 2009) come exclusively from the 2-year sector. Although these qualitative studies begin to provide much needed nuance to understanding the nature of student success programs, their findings tend to be mostly thematic and rarely bring to the foreground the mechanisms and actions (Karp, 2011, 2016; Karp et al., 2017) that ultimately shape the experiences that participants report. What many of these qualitative studies do illustrate well is how the benefits of student success programs are often presupposed, and that unquestioned assumptions undergirding their implementation can lead to students experiencing undesirable outcomes (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Blackhurst et al., 2003; Jessup-Anger, 2011; Talburt & Boyles, 2005). This warrants, then, research that meets the call to unpack complex college environments in ways that go beyond summarizing and classifying human experience (Astin & Antonio, 2012) to describing the human activity that brings about those experiences. True to organizational system research and institutional improvement practices (Seo & Douglas Creed, 2002), this requires revealing structural tensions and contradictions to improve systems and ultimately realize the desired benefits of best laid plans.

The purpose of this multiple case study of community college student success courses is to understand, at a granular and overall level, how course design features interact with each other and with participants’ individual actions, to result in a collective lived experience that advances or hinders the stated aim of college success skills. This calls for an understanding of how the courses work at both a programmatic level and at the level of organic, unfolding perception of, and reaction to, course dynamics. As guided by activity systems analysis, fundamental to this question is an understanding of (a) how participants engage with and make meaning of programmatic and curricular elements as they work toward their own a priori and emergent goals, (b) the extent to which students’ and instructors’ goals for student success courses align, (c) how tools (whether concrete or abstract) influence the activity, and (d) how rules (formal and informal) and the division of labor in the classroom among participants shape their interactions. Finally, the question involves a consideration of what systemic contradictions, or tensions, may arise between rules, tools, objectives, and other activity features that may hinder what instructors and students set out to accomplish in these programs and courses.

Literature Review

The Features and Impacts of Student Success Courses

The notion of student success programs is surprisingly hard to pin down in the research literature. Based on their prominence and frequency in the literature, arguably more so than any conceptual relation among interventions (Hatch, 2016), literature reviews (e.g., Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Crisp & Taggart, 2013) have included a wide variety of related interventions including learning communities, first-year seminars, college skills courses, and extended orientations, among others (Hatch, Crisp, & Wesley, 2016). More recently, many student success programs have been brought into an emerging discussion on so-called *high-impact practices* (CCCSE, 2012; Hatch, 2016; Kuh, 2008). Despite variations in their names and features, however, many student success programs typically have more in common in their curricular features than what differentiates them (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016). Namely, they are designed to foster students' college knowledge, psychosocial and self-regulatory skills, personal networks, and utilization of support resources related to successful college-going (Karp, 2016; Karp & Bork, 2014; Robbins, Oh, Le, & Button, 2009).

Adding to incongruence in the literature is the fact that not all student success programs are courses, even though authors regularly use the terms interchangeably. In this study, we use the term *program* to refer to interventions at the institutional level (such as a broad-based First-Year Experience envisioned by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience, Hankin & Gardner, 1996) and *courses* as the most common form of such programs that rely on the traditional format of fixed enrollments and duration alongside other academic offerings.

A handful of studies have investigated student success programs and their features from an experiential, qualitative perspective that would ostensibly address the concern of insufficient programmatic nuance. Indeed, the purpose of these studies, whether regarding learning communities (Blackhurst et al., 2003; Talburt & Boyles, 2005; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1994; Windschitl, 1998), first-year seminars (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Jessup-Anger, 2011; Karp et al., 2017), and others (O'Gara et al., 2009) has been to interpret students'

perspectives and disentangle the relationships among participant behaviors, student experiences, and outcomes of participation. Nevertheless, despite their various analytical approaches, these studies have tended to result in thematic findings that focus on the resulting impact of participation.

The evidence of impact is noteworthy of course and shows that participation (a) enables development of supportive peer groups; (b) facilitates social integration and bridges the academic-social divide; (c) develops students' ability to be active, coconstructors of knowledge with faculty; (d) develops students' time management and metacognitive skills; (e) facilitates self-awareness and appreciation for noncognitive skills; (f) eases the transition to college and beyond the first year; and (g) serves as a unified place to gain and utilize college-related information (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Blackhurst et al., 2003; Jessup-Anger, 2011; Karp et al., 2017; O'Gara et al., 2009; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1994). Conversely, participation in some cases may (a) result in feelings of isolation from the full college experience (Blackhurst et al., 2003); (b) discourage student motivation as a result of a course having a 1-credit, pass or fail structure (Jessup-Anger, 2011); (c) generate resentment due to compulsion and unclear expectations (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Jessup-Anger, 2011); or (d) diminish involvement with broader campus life (Talbert & Boyles, 2005).

What is left largely underexplored by these studies is how curricular choices interact with the goals of participants and how putative learning objectives shape the character of collaborative work. Student success courses are premised on the objective of fostering student development by way of teaching skills, knowledge, and self-awareness within a supportive environment. But those benefits are often presupposed (Talbert & Boyles, 2005), thus revealing an opportunity to explore inherent tensions in program design and course implementation, which shape the nature of the lived experience.

Conceptual Framework: Student Success Courses as Activity Systems

Whether student success initiatives are distributed throughout college or implemented in the form of courses, the purposes and mechanisms need be aligned. CCCSE (2012) proposed that various forms of student success courses can be collectively called *structured group*

learning experiences (SGLEs) in recognition of their role in intentional and structured ways of providing a foundation of knowledge, skills, and networks shown to foster persistence and academic success. Analysis of these program components (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016) reveal empirically how student success interventions, despite their many different labels, often have as much in common as what differentiates them. This suggests that several kinds of student success interventions can be conceptualized as variations or instances of a more general type of intervention.

Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) is a conceptual framework that we propose provides an organizing theory and an analytical approach to studying multiple types of student success programs as instances of a larger sociocultural construct (Roth & Lee, 2007). CHAT, sometimes termed just activity theory, analyzes human behavior in terms of goal-directed, cooperative human interactions within a socially constructed structure, namely, an activity system (Engeström, 1987, 2000; Leont'ev, 1978). Important to this study, CHAT posits that “the main thing which distinguishes one activity from another . . . is the difference of their objects [goals]. It is the object [goals] of an activity that gives it a determined direction” (Leont'ev, 1978, p. 62). Thus, an activity's goals or purposes become the entryway into unpacking a course's curricular elements and human interactions.

The activity triangle of **Figure 1** reveals the relationship between components of an activity system (Engeström, 2000) and shows how features of student success courses are operationalized in this study according to the framework. These components include (a) *subjects and participants*, both students and instructors; (b) *tools* utilized to achieve the object or work goal of the activity; (c) the *object* (or work objective), which is the immediate task at hand that participants are working to accomplish; (d) the *division of labor* among participants—in simple terms, who does what; (e) the *community* that typically extends beyond the particular participants and informs their interactions in important ways; and (f) the *rules* that regulate how the activity is conducted—whether formally codified regulations or informal social norms. The outcome is distinct from the object and is outside the activity system proper. The outcome may be intentional or unintentional. Outcomes may follow immediately, may result in permanent changes, or may be fleeting so as to not effect any noticeable change. Importantly, an activity triangle also serves to map the contradictions

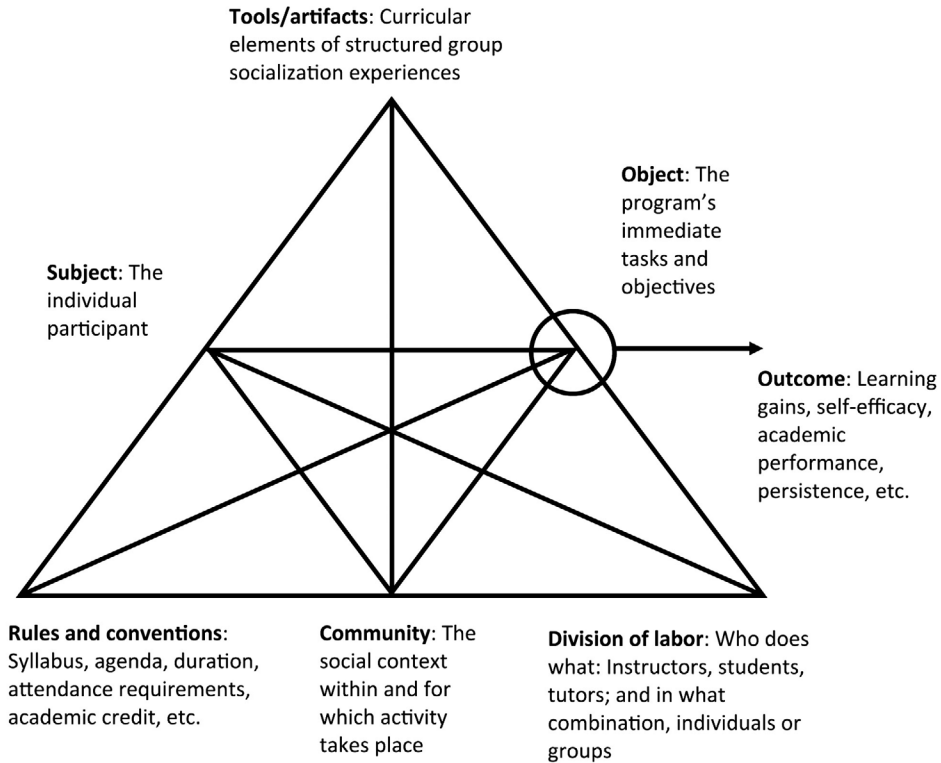


Figure 1. Diagram of a student success course as an activity system. *Source.* Adapted from Engeström (2001) and Roth and Lee (2007).

(i.e., tensions) among elements that emerge in any type of object-oriented human activity (Engeström, 2000). What we specifically looked at was the relationship between these components; for example, how rules—whether formally codified regulations or informal social relationship—affect the division of labor, or as another example, in what ways subjects used tools to achieve the object of the activity. According to CHAT, the object of inquiry is the activity situated at the intersection of individual experience within institutional structures. Thus, CHAT provides a framework and method to understand and address the affordances and limitations of student success courses to foster student success as intended.

Method

This study employs a multiple case study approach through the application of activity systems analysis. Activity systems analysis

(Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) is a methodology based on a CHAT conceptual lens that is useful for unpacking and understanding complex human interactions in natural settings. We used an information-oriented sampling procedure (Flyvbjerg, 2006) to select sites that provide considerable diversity in their social setting to be able to examine potential commonalities in how student success courses, so often borrowed and adapted across institutions, work in different environments (Stake, 2006). As suggested by Creswell (2013), we opted to limit our study to four or five cases to gain sufficient depth to “elucidate the particular, the specific” of each (p. 157). We sent invitations to all public 2-year colleges within 200 miles of Lincoln, Nebraska until locating three that agreed to participate, facilitated ultimately by the professional and institutional affiliations of the research team.

The three sites, in two states, provided four total cases: one course at a large urban-serving community college (called by the pseudonym Urban Community College [UCC]), one course at the main campus of a large suburban-serving community college (SCC-Main), one at its satellite campus more centrally located within the larger metropolitan area (SCC-Metro), and a fourth course at a small rural-serving tribal community college (Plains Community College [PCC]). Table 1 provides demographic information regarding the colleges, their community setting, and the students who participated in the study by way of a paper survey administered to enrolled students to gather demographic information. Table 2 provides details about the courses’ characteristics as found through data collection and analysis described here and the remainder of this article. According to Hatch and Bohlig’s (2016) typology, the courses at UCC, SCC-Main, and SCC-Metro would be characterized as *success skills programs* due to their focus on two types of curricular elements: college success skills and student support services, combined with few, if any, instances of the other three kinds of curricular elements such as contextualized learning, cocurricular activities, or ancillary instruction. The course at PCC, however, de-emphasized particular skills in favor of a heavy emphasis on academic and career goals, community and campus events, and integrated mentoring elements throughout. These elements point to this latter course being a *collaborative academic program* according to Hatch and Bohlig’s typology.

Table 1. Characteristics of Institutions and Student Participants.

<i>Institutional characteristics</i>	<i>UCC</i>	<i>SCC-main and SCC-metro (parts of a single college for IPEDS reporting)</i>	<i>PCC</i>
<i>Carnegie classification^a</i>	Public 2-year, urban-serving, multicampus, city: Large	Public associate's, suburban-serving, multicampus, town: Distant	Tribal college, rural: Distant
<i>Enrollment^a</i>			
Size (FTE)	Large (5,000-9,999)	Large (5,000-9,999)	Very Small (<500)
Part-time student enrollment	62%	56%	55%
Full-time student enrollment	38%	44%	45%
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>	<i>UCC^a</i>	<i>SCC-main setting^b</i>	<i>SCC-metro setting^b</i>
Hispanic (of any race)	11%	4%	7%
Non-Hispanic			
White	65%	91%	86%
Black or African American	12%	1%	3%
Asian, Asian American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	4%	1%	2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	1%	<1%
Other	8%	3%	2%
<i>Course characteristics</i>	<i>UCC</i>	<i>SCC-main</i>	<i>SCC-metro</i>
Course enrollment	14	8	7
N interview respondents	8	2	3
N survey respondents	10	0	7
High school GPA			
Under 2.0 to 2.3	3	—	0
2.4 to 3.3	4	—	4
3.4 to 4.0	3	—	3

(continued)

Table 1. (continued) Characteristics of Institutions and Student Participants.

Course characteristics	UCC	SCC-main	SCC-metro	PCC
Enrollment status				
Enrolled full-time	7	—	4	4
Enrolled part-time	2	—	3	2
No response	1	—	—	—
Transfer status				
Began at this institution	5	—	7	5
Transferred from elsewhere	4	—	0	1
No response	1	—	—	—
Gender				
Male	6	—	1	3
Female	4	—	6	4
Transgender/other	0	—	0	0
Race/ethnicity				
Hispanic (of any race)	1	—	4	1
Non-Hispanic				
White	4	—	—	—
Black or African American	3	—	1	—
Asian, Asian American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	—	1	—
American Indian or Alaska Native	—	—	—	—
Other	1	—	—	—
No response	—	—	1	—

UCC = Urban Community College; SCC = suburban-serving community college; IPEDS = Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System; PCC = Plains Community College; FTE = full-time equivalent.

a. 2015-2016 IPEDS.

b. 2014 American Community Survey (ACS).

Data Collection and Analysis

We opted to use analytical questions in an a priori fashion that elicited data gathering according to a CHAT framework and, subsequently, seeded the coding scheme for data analysis. We used questions (see Table 3) that Mwanza (2002) and Marken (2006) developed for this particular approach to craft our observation template and interview protocols. The questions are of two types: elemental and synthetic. Elemental questions identify particular features of activity (i.e., subject, objects [goals], tools, rules, community, division of labor, and outcomes) and synthetic questions examine how the elements interact. While we used activity theory notions to sensitize our analysis of the data, we remained open to emergent themes through a balance of “underanticipating and overanticipating” perspectives in the data (Stake, 2006, p. 13).

Data came from (a) at least three classroom observations over the course of the academic term, each lasting the duration of the class session; (b) semistructured interviews with students; (c) an interview with each instructor; and (d) inspection of course syllabi and materials. The observation and interview protocols were crafted from the first set of (elemental) questions in Table 3. Our observation template comprised the questions in Table 3 verbatim, leaving room for researcher notes. The semistructured interview protocol was designed to probe the same questions from the instructor’s perspective; however, it was crafted to phrase the theoretically based questions in more straightforward terms, including prompts (unscripted) for follow-up clarifying questions. For instance, regarding tools, we started by simply asking,

Tell me about the things you and the instructor use in the class in different learning activities, like books, presentation slides, class websites. Do they help you accomplish your goals? Is there something that’s more useful than others for you?

Following each observation, research members elaborated on their freeform notes to fully capture the observed activity system’s elemental features. Then, team members crafted a synthetic memo by responding to the second set of synthetic questions in Table 3 that elicit an analysis of elemental interactions and tensions within the activity. In a similar manner, verbatim transcriptions of interviews with

Table 2. Course Characteristics and Curricular and Pedagogical Features.

<i>Course characteristics</i>	<i>UCC</i>	<i>SCC-main</i>	<i>SCC-metro</i>	<i>PCC</i>
Duration and timing of each meeting	Quarter, 2x weekly, 1 hour 50 minutes	Semester, 3x weekly, 50 minutes	Semester, 1x weekly, 2 hours 45 minutes	Semester, 1x weekly, 2 hours 45 minutes
Most prominent themes/goals identified by instructor	Acquiring skills Gaining confidence, self-efficacy	Involving students with big questions beyond the classroom	Gaining confidence, self-efficacy Establishing a plan	Becoming self-aware Gaining a vision
Student election to enroll	Optional, suggested by advisor	Optional, suggested by advisor	Optional, suggested by advisor	Required of all new students
Part of degree or certificate program	No	No	No	Yes
Eligible for financial aid	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Curriculum: College success skills				
Time management skills	X	X	X	X
Reading and study skills	X	X	X	
Note-taking skills	X	X	X	
Research skills	X	X	X	
Writing skills		X	X	
Presentation skills or practice	X	X	X	X
Interpersonal trust	X	X	X	X
Diversity sensitivity training	X	X	X	
Budgeting, financial literacy	X	X	X	X
Goal setting	X			X
Problem solving and/or decision making	X			X
Health/wellness		X		X
Civic responsibility		X		X

(continued)

Table 2.(continued) Course Characteristics and Curricular and Pedagogical Features.

<i>Course characteristics</i>	<i>UCC</i>	<i>SCC-main</i>	<i>SCC-metro</i>	<i>PCC</i>
Curriculum: Academic and student support				
Group academic advising	X	X	X	
Written academic plan	X	X	X	X
Information/use of academic and student support services	X	X	X	
Career orientation, counseling, incl. résumé creation	X	X	X	X
Learning methods and/or learning styles assessment	X	X	X	X
Orientation to using college online resources and course websites	X	X	X	
Self-reflection and/or identification of personal strengths, challenges	X		X	X
Curriculum: Collaborative contextualized learning				
Assigned group projects (Not used: Common readings, discipline-contextualized curriculum, linked courses)	X	X	X	
Curriculum: Cocurricular and community activities				
Campus or community service		X	X	X
Participation in campus or community activities outside the classroom		X		X
Curriculum: Ancillary instruction				
Integrated mentoring (Not used: Tutoring, supplemental instruction)				X

UCC = Urban Community College; SCC = suburban-serving community college; PCC = Plains Community College.

students and instructors were coded first in light of elemental questions, followed by a synthetic consideration of how elements interacted. All but one student interview was conducted as a focus group with two or three students at a time. In all, 18 students participated across sites, ranging from two (of eight) students at SCC-Main to eight (of 14) students at UCC (see Table 1).

Single-case analysis. We utilized the qualitative data analysis software platform (Dedoose version 6.1.18, n.d.) to catalog and cross-reference all data sources, including observation memos, interview transcripts, and course syllabi and materials. Coding proceeded using protocol coding (Saldaña, 2013) in accordance with the framework of activity system elements supplemented with emergent descriptive coding. To build individual case analyses, research team members divided the task of coding and analysis within cases, meeting only to reconcile the process and discuss example excerpts. Team members made sense of first-order codes and excerpts through axial coding (Saldaña, 2013) as suggested by the synthetic questions of activity system element interactions. This process led to several analytic memos, one for each data artifact, whether an observation, interview, or document analysis. Because of the common underlying framework, each was organized in a similar way that allowed us to lay them out side by side to derive an overall case study analysis.

Multiple case analysis. In a multiple case study, the object of analysis is a phenomenon or *quintain* (in this instance, student success courses as activity systems) that exists outside of specific cases but which is illustrated by them (Stake, 2006). The structure of our data for individual case analyses and the analytical memos from each data artifact—ultimately derived from the same set of elemental and synthetic questions (Table 3)—allowed us to conduct a cross-case analysis by aligning all data sources side by side. We conducted a comprehensive reading across cases in a cross-referenced nested manner, from raw data to memos through to case summaries. Our goal was to follow Stake's (2006) directions on using a matrix of case reports to identify similar patterns while still maintaining a degree of situationality. Below, a case analysis is presented for each site before elaborating a cross-case synthesis (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009). Throughout, we use pseudonyms for course instructors and participants.

Table 3. Activity System Features Guiding Observations, Interview Protocols, and Coding.

<i>Activity system feature</i>	<i>Analytical question</i>
Elemental features	
Activity	How would you characterize the activity broadly speaking?
Objective	Why is this activity taking place? What is the immediate learning objective or task?
Subjects	Who is involved in carrying out this activity?
Tools	By what means are the subjects carrying out this activity?
Rules and regulations	Are there any cultural norms, rules, and regulations governing the performance of this activity?
Division of labor	Who is responsible for what, when carrying out this activity and how are the roles organized?
Community	What is the environment in which activity is carried out?
Outcome	What is the desired outcome from this activity?
Tensions	What tensions or disconnections are apparent in accomplishing the object?
Synthetic features	
Subjects + Tools + Object	What <i>Tools</i> do the <i>Subjects</i> use to achieve their <i>Objective</i> and how?
Subjects + Rules + Object	What <i>Rules</i> affect the way the <i>Subjects</i> achieve their <i>Objective</i> and how?
Subjects + Division of Labor + Object	How does the <i>Division of Labor</i> influence the way the <i>Subjects</i> satisfy their <i>Objective</i> ?
Community + Tools + Object	How do the <i>Tools</i> in use affect the way the <i>Community</i> achieves the <i>Objective</i> ?
Community + Rules + Object	What <i>Rules</i> affect the way the <i>Community</i> satisfies their <i>Objective</i> and how?
Community + Division of Labor + Object	How does the <i>Division of Labor</i> affect the way the <i>Community</i> achieves the <i>Objective</i> ?

Source: Adapted from Marken (2006) and Mwanza (2002).

Trustworthiness

We took several measures to ensure the trustworthiness of our analysis. As members of the research team, we individually and collectively reflected on ways our own perspectives and biases influenced how we interpreted the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This was important as each of us brought in individual knowledge grounded in our engagement in research on community colleges and student success courses as well as experiential knowledge that two of the team

members offered based on their work in community college settings. Furthermore, one of our research team members offered a unique insider-outsider perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) as an enrolled tribal member. Her positionality provided invaluable analysis for the PCC case that otherwise would be problematic from only an outsider's perspective. Second, we triangulated our findings through continual cross-checks of our analyses among data derived from interviews, observations, and documents (Maxwell, 2013). Third, we conducted member-checking interviews with the instructors at two stages (Creswell, 2013): after the drafting of the analytical memos for individual cases, and then the single-case analysis before the cross-case analysis was conducted. Finally, we worked with an external auditor (Creswell, 2013) to consult on methods and chain of reasoning in light of the evidence. This auditor noted, among other observations, that the data were comprehensive and that the study overall is "rigorous, logical, well designed . . . given the framework and goals for the study." The auditor provided points of reservation, including whether the study design allowed for understanding "co-construction of meaning and lived experience—phenomena that qualitative research is best positioned to uncover/examine," and "whether the influence of context affecting specific cases was sufficiently considered and explored" in all cases. These concerns resonated with comments from peer reviewers and speak to the limitations we acknowledge below.

Limitations

Limitations to this study are to a large degree germane to limitations of our selected framework and method. Although using CHAT is an effective way to account for a broad range of complex human interactions and influential variables, one of the primary criticisms of activity systems analysis is that it still cannot capture the richness and complexity of human experience (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Yamagata-Lynch (2010) identified this critique as stemming from the perception that the unit of analysis, the activity, is limited to observable behavior and, as such, does not sufficiently account for the unobservable: the cognitive and psychological processes underlying the activity and the role of "emotion, motivation, and identity" (Davis, 2012, p. 97). In an effort to address this limitation, we took measures to include these unobservable processes as part of the analysis. Beyond observations

and member checking to confirm perceptions, we used interviews with students and instructors as a way of “vicariously experiencing the participants’ observable and mental activities” (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 29) and endeavored to incorporate these aspects of the activity into our analysis to the degree possible. We agree with one peer reviewer’s feedback that additional information about the individuals’ motivations to enroll in the course in the first place have the potential to enrich our findings as to how they experience course features.

Our decision to adopt a case study design limited the number of student success courses that we could include in this study compared with, for instance, a survey design. However, unlike quantitative studies in which researchers strive for larger sample sizes to ensure generalizability, we accepted this limitation to our research to instead provide a more complex and descriptive understanding of how these student success courses are structured and function. We believe this perspective will provide a more useful and instructive product to community college researchers and practitioners.

Individual Cases

Urban Community College

At UCC, Andie taught what was labeled one of their college success strategies courses. The objective of UCC’s course, as envisioned by its syllabus, is to expose students to behaviors (punctuality, time and money management, goal setting, use of campus resources), attitudes (confidence, valuing of diversity), skills (note-taking, test taking, reading, communication, memory techniques, research), and knowledge of self (learning styles, personal strengths and weaknesses) and of campus resources, which contribute to academic, personal, and professional success. While the day-to-day activities focused on these skills to a varying degree, there was a notable emphasis on fostering confidence building, interpersonal communication, and self-awareness throughout.

This optional course enrolled approximately 14 students, eight of whom we interviewed. Many of the students expressed specific doubts about their ability to be successful in college. Several said they enrolled due to past academic struggles (secondary or postsecondary)

and were wary of getting lost while articulating and pursuing their academic goals. Their uncertainty about college carried over to the mood in class early on. Joel, a recent high school graduate, noted that initially “people were very reluctant to share ... and participate” but that there was a “transition, a mood shift” after a classmate opened up about her story of falling behind in the workforce and now returning to college. For Joel and other interviewees, it was not just a turning moment that created “a comfortable environment where we can share,” but it was also seen as a “bold” move that broke through the hesitation “to raise your hand because of the fear of failure basically, fear of being wrong or what ... ‘they’ [are] going to think.”

Andie deliberately designed activities to work toward such goals to inspire through sharing other students’ experiences, to reflect on past successes, and set achievable academic and life goals. Andie modeled this activity often by sharing her own and her son’s experiences in college—some successful, some not. Thus this task, like the later skills training, was accomplished through a division of labor where students were called on to share valuable insight and knowledge that other students could learn from. Despite the course being nominally organized around skills (the syllabus showed just two of eight units as being student-focused), in fact the students themselves—and their development as college-going individuals—were at the heart of the course throughout.

Andie laid the groundwork early on for this approach, proposing to her students that college culture is “the combination of language, behavior, values, and philosophy or outlook that are part of a college education.” She emphasized that it is through following “‘rules,’ usually unspoken, that college students learn to fit into a college.” Andie integrated what she called “habits for success” which were section headings in the textbook, as fundamental expectations. She both taught and enforced these norms. In this way, rules were not solely for regulating the activity; rather, their enactment was the very object of activity. Joel said that in other courses, “we just view it as work first,” whereas “anything that we do in this class, self-improvement is the foundation, the very core and basis of what we’re doing ... [from there] you can branch yourself in any direction that you want to.” Allisha applied this flexibility when she learned that “teachers sometimes teach differently” and she had to adapt to be successful in other classes.

Language in course materials indicating what *master students* do inadvertently betrays the question as to whether or how much the rehearsal and enactment of college skills will translate to success. The goal of the course is to develop study and personal skills, and these are assumed to contribute to achieving later success in life situations, academics, and beyond; yet time constraints (system rules) and the introductory nature of the course (novice participants) meant that what students accomplished was more awareness than mastery.

Suburban Community College—Main Campus

Sam and Matt, the two student participants in interviews at SCC-Main, were the first in their families to attend college and both hoped to transfer to a university. To prepare, they enrolled in a section of a course intended to improve students' ability to be successful in college through the development of strategies for persistence, academic planning, and self-reliance. The course was offered nominally as a leadership course. In reflecting on what they expected to gain, Matt and Sam expressed more pragmatic concerns. Matt noted his anxiety surrounding expectations in college and doubts about his ability to meet them. Sam explained his reason for enrolling in the course, "Hopefully getting a better understanding of what actual college is like. ... Just so you know what you're getting into when you actually like go to a university."

The instructor, John, in his take on the purpose of the course, emphasized the need for students to be prepared for successful participation in college courses. One of his goals was to engage students in discussing "big questions" and develop their confidence to walk into a college classroom and be able to do whatever the instructor asked: discussions, group work, presentations, or papers, even when "the conversation gets a little bit heady." John resisted making the class into what he perceived as a traditional study skills course, and therefore he continually sought authentic, challenging content for the students to work with. "We've been learning not just study skills, but applying those study skills to specific topics throughout the semester," John explained.

The atmosphere in John's classroom was formal, characterized by measured, deliberate, and sometimes reserved responses from

students individually, in pairs, or small groups. Whether this was due to the course or the particular mix of personalities, it is impossible to say. Matt reported that most students did not talk very much during class; in fact, Sam was surprised by how reticent his classmates were to contribute, “Where I’m from we really talk a lot in class . . . [In this class] I had to speak and hope somebody else would come speak against my argument . . . It was hard adapting to that.”

Tools and objects, according to an activity systems perspective, often overlapped, and a single lesson or assignment often presented multiple objects. For instance, engagement with and debate about texts such as Martin Luther King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, TED Talks streamed from the Internet, or a film about the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 were presented as activity goals. At the same time, these were also tools or means to practice mandated note-taking and reading strategies. John’s reflection on what makes this course different from others shows this tension between elements as tool and object.

It’s not just a lecture on [a] subject. It’s also, here’s the subject, what strategies do you have for coping with it? For trying to access it? When you read Martin Luther King’s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, how do you read it? So we bring in reading strategies. We talk about the ideas in it in a way that maybe we don’t in other classes ... (It’s) much more work in the *how-to* than just the content.

This dual focus permeated the course activities and assignments with both positive and adverse results. On one hand, the course offered a relatively low-stakes environment in which students could experience some of what happens in a college course without the pressure to be evaluated on both form and substance. For instance, Matt learned that the way he was speaking was hard for others to follow. Matt related that he learned to slow down and “had space” to practice something he could apply in the future. Conversely, the goal of substantive discussion was not always realized, as the work of constructing meaning was often done by the instructor. In a presentation assignment on a controversial world leader or historical figure, students presented factual, biographical information on their topic leaving the instructor to raise controversial ideas and offer ways to navigate problematic issues. What Sam was looking for—an opportunity to challenge himself intellectually—was exactly what John wanted for his students and even what he demonstrated for his students. But

the unspoken professional norms of this community combined with the tension between “comprehension and skills” in one participant’s words, ultimately limited extensive engagement with the topic.

Suburban Community College—Metro Campus

The second section of the course we studied offered by the suburban community college (SCC-Metro) met in a building that is collocated with a local high school. While the syllabus for this course was identical to the course offered at SCC-Main, this section focused more prominently on practicing skills: the personal, analytical, and communication skills considered important for successful participation in college-level courses. The vision of the instructor, Jessica, was that students would develop attitudes such as self-confidence, which would be useful to them in college and beyond, and she worked to help students view their learning in the context of their adult lives. The three students interviewed revealed a career-oriented approach to their participation in the course. Erin reflected on the desired outcome of the course, “The practices we do in the class will help us be prepared for other jobs when we go to our career jobs.”

Students who participated in interviews were the first in their families to attend college, and many had shared with Jessica that they lacked confidence in their ability to be successful. Jessica described her students as “really, really bright and [had] either low self-confidence or no support so they didn’t know how to be a college kid.” Jessica deliberately structured assignments, such as a presentation the students were nervous about, to be low-stakes to make the students more comfortable. The students reported relying on the instructor, particularly in the beginning of the course, to create an environment conducive to their participation. Erin explained, “Just the fact that we’re all comfortable with each other, I feel like, helps us communicate more with her because we’re not shy about things.”

The students cited videos such as TED Talks as the most useful tools. Victoria felt that the videos provided an example for students, “You can see how they’re doing it, and I guess we can copy or ... do the same thing.” From Erin’s perspective, the act of working in groups was itself a tool used to reinforce objectives related to communication and cooperation. She recounted, “We have to communicate or not talk to each other and know how to [manage multiple demands]: being able

to handle going to school, doing stuff at home and working.” In their view, students progressed from being nine strangers at the beginning of the term to a group that had exchanged cell phone numbers and which left together after class on the day of the observation on their way to “do something together,” as Jessica reported.

Though the syllabus for the course listed eight grade determinants, from the students’ perspective, the expectations for the course were straightforward. Erin described them as “Show up, do all the work,” while Dan boiled it down further, “Participate.” Jessica, the instructor, echoed this,

... it’s more about participation in here ... Did you play along? When we went to the library did you really go through the activity or did you just sit there? It [the assignment] seemed more participatory than accomplishing a task.

For Jessica, the goal of participation was fulfilled when students enacted the roles assigned to them. Having the experience of performing was sufficient; the quality of the product was less, or even not at all, significant.

PCC

The desired outcome as stated on the syllabus of this student success strategies course, sometimes referred to by participants at PCC as a “college survival course,” was the development of a 10-year career and educational plan to be achieved by gaining knowledge of self and of various career fields and skills such as budgeting, online research, and “lifelong learning skills” according to course materials. In the words of Gerard, the instructor, the overall goal of the course was envisioning the “big picture and then the steps to go toward it.” Course materials and activities prompted students to articulate and consider both personal values and those of the Native community as the first step in career discovery and in creating a vision for their lives. Margaret and classmate Nicky appreciated the opportunity to learn more about themselves and wanted to use it to be intentional about moving forward through school to a future career. “I’m glad it gives us this time to see, to give us more opportunities, what do we like, what are we more suited for,” Nicky explained. Students may have enrolled in this course because it was required of them, but over time their motivation

to attend changed. Lorraine, who enrolled only because her advisor told her she had to, noted,

[In the beginning] I really thought this class was like, why am I taking this? Now I see the bigger picture. It's to help me in the end. Pick a career, don't just stick your hand in the box and pull out something.

This community of students and instructor was situated within a widely distributed Native community—comprising multiple counties and reservations—which influenced how the students and instructor met the objectives of the course. Due to PCC's small student body and large service area, courses are often delivered from one campus to another by video teleconference (VTC), a delivery format that presented challenges for students in making connections with the instructor, classmates, and the material. Being able to participate face-to-face in this particular student success course made Margaret more comfortable asking questions here than in other courses, and she reported that her personal connection with the instructor kept her coming to class. Nicky noted the “comfortable environment” of the classroom, which Wes attributed to their “personable teacher.”

The Native American community—its members, its values, its ways of learning and communicating, shared topics of interest or concern—was prominent in the course and reflected within the syllabus. The local tribal community and events often served as tools in their own right in the course, from a powwow, screening of Native-produced films, a protest march, and a group visit to a tribal university. Stories narrated by guest speakers, for example, provided encouragement and positive role models. Guest speakers not only delivered content knowledge (of transfer possibilities, awareness of necessary skills and grit), but also their role within the community and the classroom was a pedagogical means toward the end of transmitting a vision for college informed by Native values. They shared knowledge and experience in negotiating marginalizing societal systems. Community members were also tapped as resources in a job-shadowing assignment, which Gerard summed up as “ask someone who's been there.”

The predominant topic of this student success course was the students themselves and their values and goals. Gerard noted that the class used to be offered as a study skills course and had been purposefully re-redesigned to move away from that focus. Because many assignments were primarily reflective in nature and not aimed at the

production, necessarily, of college-level work, it was not clear to what extent the class prepared students with actionable skills to implement in the classes what they needed according to their education plans.

As noted above, the element of community surfaced many times in this case. To what degree this was influenced by the college's small enrollment and how much was due to the Native cultural setting was not completely clear, but based on member checking and insight from a tribal member on our team with a professional higher education background, it is important to underscore that the Native culture informs this class and the overall PCC experience in one other important way. The cultural knowledge of the instructor carried weight and lent credence to his role in ways that were as, or more, important than his academic credential of an associate's degree. That is to say, his cultural knowledge is shared among participants in the activity and so this influenced the division of labor, in an activity system sense, in light of the participants' community. Whereas in the cultural setting of the other cases the teacher-student relationship here was largely influenced by societal roles of those who are credentialed or not (and undoubtedly also by racial and socioeconomic differences between instructors and many students), in this small tribal college, that relationship was mediated by virtue of the shared cultural knowledge and the goal to transmit it, strengthen it, validate it. This community setting contributed greatly toward a primary goal, as stated in the course syllabus, to "help students and community grow in individual and native sovereignty and provide an environment which nurtures learning and growth."

Cross-Case Discussion and Implications

This study aims to move beyond largely thematic dimensions of the lived experience of student success courses to provide an understanding of why and how they work toward their jointly created outcomes in a sociocultural setting, whether those outcomes are beneficial or otherwise. Nonetheless, a cross-case analysis cannot help but be thematic to some degree due to it being a synthesis at the abstract level of a *quintain* (Stake, 2006)—in this case the idea of a student success course. Using a conceptual frame of an activity system helps to stay true to the goals of the study while also permitting

thematic interpretations. This is possible in large part because the themes we derived from our cross-case analysis reflect the common and prominent patterns of interactions among activity system elements within each case separately. Instead of focusing on resultant meanings of the interaction, important as that is, we paid special attention to prominent patterns of contradictions that may frustrate successful goal completion. Implications for practice and research arise primarily from these tensions as they reveal potential limitations that require attention.

Blurring of Activity Elements Muddles Expectations

Perhaps the most prominent finding in our cross-case analysis was the implication we found due to the blurring of activity system elements. That is, different aspects of the course at times occupied different roles within the activity simultaneously, often due to pedagogical reasons or as a natural consequence of their being a kind of *metacourse*: a college course about and enacting college-going. A relatively simple example illustrates this. The use of group work in class represented a division of labor, but it was also simultaneously imposed as a rule to be followed, and at times was the very object of activity: The goal was to perform group work, whereas the content of their deliberations was secondary or inconsequential. Therefore, group work filled multiple roles within the activity, sometimes simultaneously as a rule, a division of labor, and the object itself. That such a pedagogical feature is both a rule and tool simultaneously is not uncommon in teaching and learning. The difference here was how it became the object or end goal of the activity *per se*; group work was required in many instances for its own sake as the skill to learn, enact, and carry forward instead of being (just) an enabler of some other goal. The blurring of activity system elements at times developed over time in a cyclical process where the object moved to become a tool, and vice versa.

This cyclical, or even dialectic, role of activity elements may be one reason these kinds of programs can lead to particularly engaging shared learning environments (Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1994), and how course elements reinforce each other (O’Gara et al., 2009), for the process, true to the purpose, encouraged instructors and students to articulate why they were doing what they were doing. Indeed, in student interviews at UCC, SCC-Metro, and PCC, students were

emphatic of how over time a welcoming peer environment emerged in which they felt free to interject relevant personal experiences even when the instructor was presenting information.

Other instances of a blurring of activity system elements phenomenon were where instructors and guest speakers filled a dual role: not only that of the traditional expert guiding novices, but also as tools or means themselves toward learning goals. We observed Andie tell her students at UCC about her own challenges and failures as a college student and warn them against making the same mistakes she had made. Jessica too, at SCC-Metro, often explained how her college-going experience compares with what she perceived her students' experience to be. In both cases, the instructor took on the role of an object lesson, proposed as a model of success, not necessarily for specific expertise in a given content area, but for being successful in college completion. Inspirational and motivational testimonies played a large role in many classes toward establishing a vision for students. Sheryl, a student at UCC, identified watching inspirational videos in class as one of the most prominent activities in helping her achieve course goals:

By watching videos, inspirational videos like Tyler Perry or Will Smith or this one that this lady, she couldn't go to school and she really wanted to ... she did go to school sooner or later. She got her bachelor's degree and stuff like that. I look up to that.

At PCC, Gerard invited speakers to the class whose role we recognized at two levels. In one sense, guest speakers had the nominal role of instructor in the traditional teacher– student duality. In this sense, they shared in the division of labor toward the goal, for instance, in one episode we observed, of exploring the link between personal values and career paths. But in the form the presentation took, we recognized a parallel with the inspirational videos in the other cases—as tools or means to an end—examples of perseverance to achieve a vision of possibilities. The speakers' role within the Native community enhanced the salience of their experiences for students from a marginalized standpoint, in accordance with the findings of Acevedo-Gil and Zerquera (2016).

While the blurring of some system elements was often a beneficial or arguably an unremarkable feature, other prominent patterns of activity system element blurring were sources of contradictions within the system. At SCC-Main, John integrated the prescriptive use of a

formalized note-taking method, Cornell Notes. Yet because it was not optional to use this format, this was simultaneously a rule. While this rule—and goal—is designed in light of a recognized need for students to internalize effective note-taking skills they can carry forward, this particular method was not beneficial for all students. For instance, his student Sam asserted, “I’ve never liked Cornell Notes. Everyone has their own specific way of taking notes and Cornell Notes isn’t for me. It’s really difficult.” At SCC-Metro, Jessica required her students to give final presentations in which they were to stand in front of their peers and talked about “something academic” that interested them for 10 minutes. The assignment was purposefully not about the content, but about the experience. It was at once the object and the tool. One result was that the students correctly perceived it as a rehearsal, and were uncertain about how to prepare, presenting what were largely informal—though personally meaningful—testimonials. Research on adult education shows that students may lack motivation when they sense a disconnection between objectives and their own interests (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002). The phenomenon we observed was instead alignment between the instructor and student interests (the objective of the course) but a disconnection (confusion) between objectives and tools to achieve the objective.

Another result was uncertainty for instructors about how to assess student learning. Jessica explained,

Now I’ve got to figure out how to grade it ... I don’t think I even created a rubric for it [the presentation]. I think I just gave them full credit if they participated, spoke for the allotted time (or even close to it) and gave a good effort.

Conversely, at SCC-Main, in his required presentations, John emphasized the importance of academic content. Yet his students also experienced uncertainty in their delivery. Students were cognizant of their presentation being a low-stakes rehearsal and were perfunctory in presenting facts but not raising, let alone engaging, with the controversial issues surrounding their selected historical figures. The tension of the presentation as both object and tool led students to follow the letter of the presentation assignment but not necessarily achieve the spirit of it. John was compelled to step in and demonstrate that his goal for the assignment was, in fact, more than participation.

The implication of this blurring of system elements is that, whereas the overall purpose of the course is typically understood and shared in similar terms by instructors and students—evidence of an alignment with student needs (Ayers & Ayers, 2013)—it is not always clear to participants how to accomplish those goals in the daily work of the class. Because it is challenging to assess accomplishment in many of the course activities beyond perfunctory participation, instructors and administrators would do well to consider creative assessment approaches that necessarily recognize the liminal nature of such a meta-course. For instance, e-portfolios encourage metacognitive reflection by students and faculty that necessarily recognizes the developmental process enabled through the dual nature of objects and tool, the goal and the method (Bowman, Lowe, Sabourin, & Salomon Sweet, 2016; Miller & Morgaine, 2009).

Inherent Tensions Provide Opportunities to Understand and Improve Educational Practice

The blurring or instantaneous states of activity elements in these courses led us to see these courses as having goals and means that are inherently uncertain—or at least emergent. This characterization is quite different from how they are typically described in the literature as spaces for the straightforward learning of noncognitive skills and acquisition of social capital. We propose that this uncertainty may be inherent because ultimately these are college courses about college-going. It is only natural that in a college *metacourse* the means and ends would be functionally inseparable. Whether the tension between objects, tools, and rules in college student success skills courses that we observed is naturally inherent or not, the tension presents opportunities for researchers and practitioners to investigate and perhaps improve them in three ways that we identified—in ways that extend to educational practice broadly.

Success courses invoke fundamental questions of the philosophy of learning. Ultimately, the tensions we noted are closely related to debates about fundamental theories of learning that are missing in the discourse around these practices in the higher education literature. For instance, course syllabi and instructors all described these courses in familiar terms of pragmatic learning outcomes of skills and knowledge

and network creation for college and life success. Yet in practice, all of the instructors gravitated to teaching and learning that prioritized the humanist and social dimensions of learning, rather than in utilitarian human capital dimensions that nominally serve as the rationale for these courses in today's policy landscape (Ayers & Ayers, 2013). Instructors invariably used what Grubb (1999) might call progressive learning styles that seek a transformative education of the whole student (Keeling, 2004). In the debates going back centuries between learning as a product or a process, whether learning is knowing *that* or knowing *how* (Ryle, 1949) largely holds sway in today's climate of accountability. The value of the sociocultural process of college-going, though it plays prominently in the lives of students and instructors within these classrooms, is not always valued by performance and accountability measures. This agrees with Bennett and Brady's (2014) argument that the modern focus on learning outcome assessment tends to reinforce an ethos of monitoring and auditing rather than a tool of teaching and learning that is cognizant of the deep engagement involved in learning *how* to do college (Gildersleeve, 2010).

And so, that these kinds of courses have the character of a rehearsal makes perfect sense, and in one way may be unremarkable—except that few have remarked on it. In these case studies, we saw the blurring of objects and tools as a manifestation of participants naturally or inadvertently paying special attention to the experiential dimensions of learning, consistent with theories of learning as a process of socialization and social imitation (Olsen & Hergenbahn, 2013). The competing (and dialectically alternating) roles of activity system elements in these success courses revealed how “without [a] system of relevancies, there is not learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part” (McDermott, 1993, p. 17). Thus, learning in these courses we found to be necessarily socially based. Furthermore, the attentiveness of instructors to their students' true needs led to interactions that organically transcended the nominal utilitarian needs that the course syllabi presume. Therefore, this could be read as evidence that instructors are not unknowingly co-opted by a hidden neoliberal curriculum, according to some critiques of modern community college working conditions (Ayers & Ayers, 2013; Levin, Kater, & Wagner, 2011), but instead naturally work against it in the best interest of their students as individuals.

An awareness of how program features align with philosophical purposes of education has practical implications for the planning and implementation of these courses. For instance, one instructor told us of administrators trying to decide whether to keep the course as a regularly scheduled class or to break it up into chunks of skills training—perhaps as self-guided computerized tutorials. Based on our findings, we question whether such an atomistic approach would make sense, as students may find little value in the teaching of college skills separate from their modeling and rehearsal of them with others in a community of practice. In terms of the particular curricular goals and features of these courses, which our findings show are enacted in the form of low-stakes rehearsal, it is imperative for researchers, practitioners, and instructors to first consider what skills students are lacking and which can be effectively taught in such a way (Ayers & Ayers, 2013). Without a close articulation of student needs and course activities, there is increased potential for goals to be frustrated. For instance, it is important to distinguish whether students need to rehearse an activity or master the content, or perhaps both, so that it is clear how it will be evaluated (Lawy & Armstrong, 2009). Indeed, Jessup-Anger (2011) found that misalignment between performance and mastery objectives was one of the main contributing factors to unintended negative experiences among first-year seminar participants. Our findings suggest this may be due in part to the unreconciled tension between learner needs of socialization (rehearsal, mutual support) versus presumed needs of human capital development (skills acquisition). Therefore, more broadly, our findings also corroborate Ayers and Ayers' (2013) call to reaffirm the civic and democratic objectives of education beyond the utilitarian.

Success courses reveal college-going as an emergent social literacy. In his book on the social inequities and barriers that immigrant Latino students face in higher education, Gildersleeve (2010) used a CHAT framework to show how educational opportunity can be considered a kind of literacy that can be learned and taught more equitably. Viewed this way, the design and delivery of student success programs should be couched in an asset-based approach that creates spaces for the voices of students in shaping their college-going experience (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). In our observations and interviews, we saw this hypothesis play out as the realization of learning objectives

was inseparable from students' voices in meaning making and formation of their identity as college-going students. Regardless of the stated object of the course (i.e., a focus on skills, a focus on career exploration, a preview of academic rigor), students repeatedly noted to us that the courses gave them a space where they could break down traditional barriers among themselves, learn to trust each other, and fully explore their goals in light of their values.

Nonetheless, an equitable and beneficial process is not inevitable. Roth and Lee (2007) pointed out that activity system elements and their tensions tend to reproduce themselves, and that learning through participation in such systems "presupposes both what we *become* and how we *act* as knowers" (p. 215, emphasis in original). This is an important consideration of success courses because of the way the goals were reflected in the students' interviews. Though students discussed at length the value they found in the developmental and interpersonal nature of the courses, when queried directly about the purpose of the course, students responded in ways that were a reflection of what the instructor or syllabus stated.

This points to the question of what values, expectations, and perspectives are imparted as part of the official and unspoken curriculum (Lawy & Armstrong, 2009). The implication here is that the developmental experience of students, instead of being considered a consequence of a course, may well be one of its fundamental purposes or features. That is, although these courses seek to articulate the frequently unspoken expectations, behaviors, and attitudes to which students must adhere if they are to be successful (Karp & Bork, 2014), they are often communicated as skills and knowledge rather than as a transformative developmental experience. Further research is warranted to know to what extent students might benefit if this aspect were given greater explicit attention in classroom activities. In the meantime, the findings point to the need to include in curricular planning discussions, and likely in course syllabi, an explicit acknowledgment of the courses' role in developing a college-going identity in relation to the social setting of the class and the institution.

Success courses may have a potentially long-term, unrealized role. Some of the uncertainties we observed due to blurred activity system elements point to questions of what becomes of the course itself within the institution over time. As our study contemplated what

occurred for participants within courses within one semester, we have only limited evidence in this regard, and findings point to needed research to more fully explore. These issues are in two areas: the blurring of the activity system elements point to one reason why student success courses may have limited impact over time (Weiss, Visher, Weissman, & Wathington, 2015), and it may be at the heart of their continual transformation within the curriculum as college faculty and leaders struggle to determine what role they play in college in the first place.

We found that due to the blurring of activity system elements, the courses functioned as rehearsal spaces for college, a place to learn the form and get a preview of the substance, but—perhaps necessarily—with limits to how much participants could move beyond the form. This tension between the form and substance, theory and practice, is certainly present in any area of learning where, in the early stages of learning there is a focus on the tools, which ultimately gives way to a focus on the performance. That is, in any learning situation, early on the tools are coterminous with the object because at first the tools are the object. However, the difference with student success courses is that college-going is not a discipline area that leads to a credential or advanced level of instruction, at least not formally. As students exit a one-semester activity system of a college success course, the many dozens of other activity systems they participate in (including those involving home, work, and other demands) can overwhelm their emergent skills and network, in agreement with activity theory wherein the outcome of one system is the input of yet others (Engeström, 2001).

One cannot reasonably expect students to continually enroll in student success courses to refine their practice of college-going. However, one *can* reasonably expect students to continually be exposed to and involved in good educational practice that teaches and expects and assesses performance on college-going. This might be thought of as nothing else than the kind of inescapable, holistic, and intrusive student support that many have argued for (Karp, 2011, 2016) and it returns to the question of how instructors and administrators decide to structure these courses and other similar interventions. In each of our cases, the instructors communicated to us that the courses have gone through multiple iterations, that administrators continue to question their role in the institution, and there is continual debate and struggle to figure out what they are all about and how they should be delivered.

We propose that based on the evidence here, this struggle may be a direct manifestation of the liminal blurring of activity elements due to competing goals or objects for the courses. It may be the case that as long as a student success course is a *metacourse* about and situated within college, the contradiction may be inevitable. Alternately, it could be the case that if practitioners accept the tension, it may be reconciled and leveraged. For us, this is a promising area for future research, one for which CHAT lends itself well as a conceptual framework as it is fundamentally designed for understanding historical evolutions of activity systems.

Conclusion

As colleges increasingly invest resources in student success courses and related high-impact practices to foster student achievement, it is important to understand not just whether they have an impact, but how. By examining the activities that take place in community college student success courses in relation to their curricular and programmatic features, this study adds important nuance to the literature regarding how to more fully understand and ultimately realize the aims of student success courses.

In terms of course design, an important principle revealed in this study is the need to clearly distinguish between means and aims. This does not mean that teaching good educational practice simultaneously as both a means and objective is not desirable. To the contrary, both may be critical to the social process of learning college skills that we observed. More fundamentally, this study reveals that a utilitarian focus on college skills, which often is their organizing rationale, may be too narrow a framework, and in fact may frustrate the attainment of effective college skills. Rather, we found that an important aspect of student success courses is found in their ability to facilitate a low-stakes rehearsal space for developing a college-going identity that transcends the particular form of the activities. Even where instructors and students were not always entirely clear on the ultimate goal of day-to-day learning activities, the evidence is clear that they found value in the joint goal of making sense of and rehearsing college-going. In this way, we find that the regular blurring of course norms, learning tools, and course goals may be instrumental to students' having

the space to gain confidence, increase their own self-awareness, and create connections with each other and the larger campus community. In other words, these student success courses provided the means for individual development of a college-going literacy (Gildersleeve, 2010; Karp & Bork, 2014) that may be just as important as any skills or knowledge the courses impart.

In this way, the blurring of course norms, learning tools, and goals may also play a role in the impact of student success courses fading over time as seen in some research, but in ways not fully explored. That is, Karp et al. (2017) showed that beyond exposure to key skills in student success courses, positive student outcomes may largely depend on the degree to which students have the opportunity to practice skills and apply them in new contexts. Without the iterative and overlapping activities of skills learning, practice, and application, these courses may not work as intended. Further inquiry is needed to understand how curricular and pedagogical tensions can be not just reconciled by instructors and students, but also leveraged to maximize the success that these courses aspire to achieve throughout students' subsequent college-going experience.

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