

HISPANIC STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
LEARNING COMMUNITIES:
A CASE STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

A Dissertation

by

HAYLEY DEANN KAZEN

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2008

Major Subject: Curriculum and Instruction

HISPANIC STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
LEARNING COMMUNITIES:
A CASE STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

A Dissertation

by

HAYLEY DEANN KAZEN

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Patrick Slattery
Committee Members,	Elizabeth Foster
	Robert Hall
	Juan Lira
Head of Department,	Dennie Smith

December 2008

Major Subject: Curriculum and Instruction

ABSTRACT

Hispanic Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Learning Communities:

A Case Study of First-Year University Students. (December 2008)

Hayley DeAnn Kazen, B.A., The University of Texas; M.A., The University of Texas at

El Paso; M.A., Texas A&M International University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Patrick Slattery

This study focused on the perceptions students have about the effectiveness of learning communities, a focus of the First-Year Success initiative at Texas A&M International University. Because many of our students are Hispanic and/or first generation college students, the traditional lecture based college classrooms may not be effective. This study employed a case-study focusing on one section of a Freshman Seminar class that was part of a learning community. Data was gathered using interviews and journals.

Students perceived learning communities to be helpful because it enabled them to make friends more easily and feel more connected to the University, two things that have been shown to increase retention. Students also believed that the Freshman Seminar class taught them valuable skills that enabled them to be more successful in college.

However, students did not perceive that an integrated curriculum nor the peer mentoring program as particularly useful. In order to improve the First-Year Success program, these issues must be addressed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee for their encouragement and support. I would like to extend a special thank you to my committee chair, Dr. Patrick Slattery, for helping me achieve my goals and working with me long distance.

I would also like to thank my husband, John, and daughter, Claire, for their support and understanding during the many evenings I had to spend in class or writing at home.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	vii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of Problem.....	1
Purpose of Study	10
Research Questions	11
Definition of Terms.....	11
Theoretical Perspective	13
II LITERATURE REVIEW.....	22
Learning Communities.....	22
Freshman Seminar.....	31
Integrated Curriculum	39
Peer Mentoring.....	49
Academic Advising.....	58
Summary	60
III METHODS.....	62
Methodology	62
Methods.....	66
Analysis.....	69

CHAPTER	Page
IV RESULTS.....	72
Learning Communities.....	72
Freshman Seminar.....	82
Integrated Curriculum.....	91
Peer Mentors.....	99
Research Questions.....	104
V DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....	117
Mentoring.....	118
Integration.....	126
Freshman Seminar.....	129
Critical Theory.....	132
Limitations.....	134
Suggestions for Further Research.....	135
REFERENCES.....	136
Supplemental Sources Consulted.....	149
APPENDIX A.....	151
APPENDIX B.....	153
APPENDIX C.....	155
APPENDIX D.....	157
VITA.....	160

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE		Page
1	Peer Mentor Evaluation Results.....	101

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

At universities and colleges across the nation, retention of students—particularly minority students and women-- is an important issue. Retention programs have become an important topic for many of these schools. One of these programs, learning communities, has become increasingly popular. Learning communities can take many forms. These include linked courses which enable students to enroll in two courses together, cluster or freshmen interest groups, which allow students to take several content courses and one freshmen seminar course together, or coordinated courses, which allow students to take several courses together but exclude the freshmen seminar course (Tinto, n.d.). Studies have shown that students in learning communities generally persist at a higher rate than those who are not. In fact, at one school, the retention rate for students in learning communities is twenty-eight percent higher than students who were not involved in learning communities (Wilkie, n.d.). Additionally, learning communities are “linked to a variety of desired outcomes for students, including increased engagement in learning, greater satisfaction, improved grades, and increased retention” (Henscheid, 2004, p. 1). While research has been done on the effectiveness of learning communities in general, very few studies have looked at the effectiveness of learning communities in institutions with a large minority population.

This dissertation follows the style of *Journal of Higher Education*.

This research is of vital importance because although there are more Hispanic first-time freshmen than any other minority group, they are retained at lower rates than either blacks or Asians. For example, in the Fall of 2002, 11,355 Hispanics were enrolled as first-time freshmen at public Texas colleges; there were 6,791 African-Americans. In contrast, the one year retention rate for African-Americans was 70.3% but only 68.06% for Hispanics (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2003). Learning communities may benefit Hispanic students even more than other ethnic groups because of cultural attributes such as “personalism and cooperative orientation, which may contain moral value, yet...not be conducive for success in schools” (Cortese, 1992, p. 80). Marin and Marin (1991) identified eight personality characteristics of Hispanics: allocentrism, *simpatia*, familialism, power distance, personal space, time orientation, and gender roles. Of these eight, two support the idea that Hispanic students would benefit from learning communities. Allocentrism is associated with “high levels of personal interdependence, field sensitivity, ...mutual empathy, willingness to sacrifice for the ingroup members, and trust of the members of the ingroup” (p. 11). Similarly, *simpatia* emphasizes taking others feelings into consideration and efforts to make social relationships as smooth as possible. Additionally, Hall (1997) found that Hispanics tend to prefer group learning situations rather than individual ones. Because Hispanics are less individualistic than the dominant culture in the United States, learning communities, since they allow for relationship building experiences, may be even more effective with minority populations.

A comparison of Hispanic male and female college graduation rates will show that Hispanics lag behind their White, Asian and Black counterparts in attainment of a Bachelor's degree. Within this group, however, females graduate at higher levels than males. Because the Hispanic population is growing so quickly, their educational attainment will have a major impact on both social and economic factors. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2006, 28.6% of Whites, 16.3% of Blacks, 45.8% of Asians, and 10.8% of Hispanics completed a Bachelor's degree or higher (www.census.gov/population/socdemo/cps2006/tabA-3.xls). Clearly, people of color are not attaining the educational level they need to be economically successful.

Recent trends in higher education have shown that female attendance is increasing. This is especially true among Hispanics and African Americans. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2006, 29.8% of White males age 18 and over had completed a Bachelor's degree or higher, whereas 27.5% of White females had accomplished this same feat. Among Asians, 49.7% of males age 18 and older completed a Bachelor's degree, but only 43.9% of females had. In contrast, 15% of Black males completed a Bachelor's or higher, with 17.4% of females attaining at least this educational level. Finally, 10.2% of Hispanic males achieved this level, while 11.3% if females did. Overall, 26.2% of males of all races, age 18 and over, completed a Bachelor's or higher, while only 24.9% of females attained this educational level (www.census.gov/population/socdemo/cps2006/tabA-3.xls). The data at the state level tells much the same story. In Texas, Hispanic enrollment in college approximates 25% of total enrollment. Of that 25%, approximately 52% are female and 44% male

(www.theccb.state.tx.us). Without a doubt, the trend shows that although college graduation rates among Blacks and Hispanics are far below that of Whites and Asians, females in these two groups are attaining higher educational levels than males.

Many factors can be attributed to Hispanic failure to attend or complete college. Some of these include precollege factors, college-related factors, academic integration, environmental factors, parental education (Arbona & Nora, 2007), and educational aspirations (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Precollege factors generally refer to difficulty of high school curriculum and parental educational attainment. The practice of tracking certainly affects the rigor of high school curriculum. Heck, Price, and Scott (2004) found that students of color, with the exception of Japanese students, were more likely to be placed in lower tracks, therefore receiving a less difficult curriculum. Kao and Thompson (2003), also found that “poor children and racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately placed in low-ability groups early in their educational careers and in non-college bound groupings” (p.423). They also found students of color enrolled in fewer math and science classes than their White counterparts. Additionally, this study pointed out that poor, urban schools are less likely to offer advanced courses. Because students of color are more likely than Whites to attend inner-city schools, they are less likely to be enrolled in courses that would prepare them for college level courses. Even if students of color do not attend a poor school district, they are more likely to be placed in vocational or low-level tracks that will not prepare them for college. If these students do attend college, because of their lack of preparedness, they will be more likely to drop

out or fail. Additionally, those who are underprepared may be placed in remedial courses, which carry no credit, making the road to a degree longer and more difficult.

College-related factors are also related to Hispanic college degree attainment. For Hispanic students, “their commitments to the goal of obtaining a degree and the extent to which they engage in academic discussions and activities on- and –off campus, as well as their first-year academic performance influences their decision to remain in college” (Cabrera as cited in Arbona & Nora, 2007, p. 251). Because research has shown that Hispanic college students have somewhat lower GPA than White or Asian students, this could be problematic (Miller, 2005). If students are not academically prepared for college, which because of tracking practices many students of color are not, their college GPA will likely suffer the first semester. As a result, students may be placed on academic probation after one semester. Ryan and Glenn (2002) found that first-semester GPA had a major impact on if students returned or not. To this end, “significant retention gains could be made by improving the academic performance of freshmen on academic probation” (Ryan & Glenn, 2002, p. 304).

Academic integration is also a factor in determining if a student will persist in college. How involved a student is with the campus, both in and out of the classroom impacts retention (Arbona & Nora, 2007). Learning communities require collaboration between both students and faculty. For learning communities to be effective, faculty must organize their syllabi to include shared assignments. In this way, students are able to see linkages in the content of their courses. Studies have shown that the more college students are connected to each other and to the institution, the more likely they are to

persist. Since students in learning communities have more contact with their classmates and with faculty, they are able to attain a higher level of involvement, which has “prove[n] to be an independent predictor of learning gain” (Tinto, 1997, p. 600). Additionally, it is important that schools provide activities that are multicultural and which will recognize the contributions of Hispanic students (Trevino & Mayes, 2006).

Environmental factors may also affect whether or not Hispanic students attend or stay in college. In fact, “family responsibilities and working off-campus pull students away from full social and academic integration on campus and directly influence their decisions to remain enrolled” (Nora & Wedham as cited in Arbona & Nora, 2007, p. 252). In order to increase the Hispanic student’s chance of success, parental involvement is necessary. This can be accomplished in several ways. Trevino and Mayes (2006) stated that for students to be successful “the relationship between family, community, peers, and school must be conducive to a student’s academic success” (p.76). To accomplish this, they suggest that schools keep Hispanic students’ parents involved by translating necessary information into Spanish, hiring people who can communicate in Spanish, and involving parents in community programs. Walker and Schultz (2000-2001) found that “staff and instructors who promoted Hispanic students’ languages and heritages...contributed positively to the academic achievement of Hispanics (p. 315).

Level of parental education is yet another factor that influences student enrollment and persistence in college. In general, many students of color, particularly Hispanic students, are first-generation college students, meaning they are the first in their families to attend. Parents who did not attend college may have a difficult time

navigating the admissions, testing, and financial aid processes, especially if their first language is not English. First-generation college students may “lack support from family and friends and are academically less prepared for college” (Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004, p.1). Lee, et al. also found that parents who did not receive a college education had a more difficult time seeing long-term benefits. This may explain why first-generation college students lack support. I teach at a university on a border town where the majority of the students are Hispanic and first-generation college students. Some parents do not understand why a student must put in long hours studying when he or she only attends classes a few hours per week. Often, students are given more responsibility at home because they are in school fewer hours than they were in high school. This can lead to reduced study time and lower grades.

Finally, educational aspirations can affect whether or not Hispanic students attend or persist in college. Some research shows that educational aspirations are “a good indicator of students’ plans for the future” (Sewell, et al.; Campbell as cited in Kao & Thompson, 2003, p. 422). It follows that if students plan to go to college and have the expectation that they will attend college, the more likely it is that it will actually occur. Although research shows that Hispanics do have lower educational aspirations than Whites (Bohon, Johnson, & Gorman, 2006), these results must be cautiously interpreted. When the researchers looked at the heterogeneity of the Hispanic population, they found that Cuban Americans had high educational aspirations while those of Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans were low. Differences in educational aspirations may be due to lower socioeconomic status, level of parental education or trust in the educational system

(Bohon, Johnson, & Gorman, 2006). Although educational aspirations can have an effect on college attendance, it is more likely that other factors have more influence.

The effectiveness of learning communities may be increased with the additions of a freshmen seminar course as a cornerstone of the learning community and by the use of an integrated curricula within the learning community. In fact, Friedman and Alexander (2006) found that because students in learning communities are more likely to participate in class discussions and ask for help from professors and classmates, they performed better not only in the freshmen seminar class, but also in the class that was connected to it as part of a learning community. At Texas A&M International University, where this study took place, every freshman is required to enroll in a learning community, and each community contains a freshmen seminar course. The freshmen seminar course meets twice a week for fifty minutes during the Fall and Spring semesters. The course is designed to teach students important study skills such as reading, note taking, test taking, time management, communication, and critical thinking. Students also take learning style inventories, as well as personality, and career assessments. These inventories are designed to give students a better idea of how they learn best and what career possibilities exist. Additionally, the freshmen seminar class included guest speakers who address alcohol and drug abuse, date rape, financial aid, study abroad, health issues and other campus issues. Additionally, students attend a library skills session for two weeks. This portion of the course is taught in the library by librarians and is designed to familiarize students with library databases and search methods. The director of student activities also visits the class to discuss the variety of

extra curricular activities available and encourage students to become more involved with campus life. Another component of the Freshman Seminar course requires that students attend an on-campus tutoring center for at least two hours per month.

Additionally, students must visit at least two of their professors in the course of the semester. The final component of the freshmen seminar class is mentoring. All students are required to meet with a student mentor, who is a junior or above with a GPA of at least 3.2, once every other week for thirty minutes. During this time, mentors will show students how to check grades on-line, how to register for or drop classes, how to open a school email account, and how to access financial aid and scholarships. The mentors also discuss time management and study skills. They are trained to refer to students to the appropriate offices should something arise in the meetings which is outside of their domain.

Furthermore, the freshmen seminar class serves as a link between the two other courses in which students are enrolled. Instructors in learning communities meet at various times during the semester to coordinate assignments and integrate their curricula. For example, one learning community consists of American history, speech, and freshmen seminar. The speech instructor will assign speeches based on what students are learning in history. If students are studying colonial America in history, in speech, students may be assigned to give a demonstrative speech on how people cooked during this time period. Freshmen seminar serves as a support class for history and speech; when students discuss reading, note taking or test taking, they will use the material from their other classes. The research suggests that students will learn better if they can make

connections between disciplines. When students “deal with information holistically, it enables [them] to retain knowledge, develop higher-order thinking skills and achieve deeper understanding” (Ignatz, 2005, p. 39). In their study of brain-based learning, Caine and Caine (1995) stress the importance of patterning; information must make sense if the brain is to learn it, and often, fragmented bits of information do not make sense. They also found that the brain “performs many functions simultaneously” (p. 44). In order for optimal learning to occur, the integration of multiple sources is necessary. Klein (2005), believes that an integrated approach is essential if students are to be able to function in the real world. With an integrated curriculum, students can make connections and apply knowledge rather than just learn facts in isolation. With this, students are able to “make meaning and foster the ability to adapt knowledge in unexpected and changing contexts” (p. 9). Other studies have indicated that students are more engaged when the curriculum is integrated, and that students and teachers have more positive attitudes toward learning (Hinde, 2005).

PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study will take place at Texas A&M International University where 91% of the student population is Hispanic (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2003). Over 95% of first time freshmen are enrolled in a learning community which includes a freshmen seminar class. In this study, I will examine Hispanic students’ perception of the effectiveness of learning communities, both socially and academically.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions will reflect the following three interests with respect to learning communities: academic and social support, the inclusion of freshmen seminar, and the use of an integrated curricula.

1. What are freshmen students' perceptions of the academic support provided by learning communities at Texas A&M International University? What are freshmen students' perceptions of the social support provided by learning communities at TAMIU?
2. What are freshmen students' perceptions of the purpose of the Freshman Seminar course with respect to their integration and/or success at TAMIU?
3. Do students perceive that an integrated curriculum aids in connecting their school lives with their lives outside of school?

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Freshman Seminar or First-Year Seminar: A class, usually with twenty to twenty-five students, which teaches study skills such as reading, note-taking, time management, goal setting, critical thinking and test-taking. The class includes an introduction to library research, taught by librarians, as well as an introduction to other university services such as the police department, the campus activity board, the student health center, the student counseling center and the study abroad office. In addition, students are required to avail themselves of academic services at least two hours per month and to meet with a student mentor for thirty minutes every other week.

Learning Community: Two or three linked courses. A freshmen seminar course is included in all learning communities. Sometimes, three or more freshmen seminar classes may feed into one history or government section.

Integrated Curriculum: Within the learning community, instructors work together to integrate the curricula of their respective classes as much as possible. This may, but not necessarily, include shared assignments.

Hispanic: At Texas A&M International University, the overwhelming majority of Hispanic students are Mexican or Mexican-American. Most of these students are from the border area, including Laredo, Eagle Pass, and Carrizo Springs. Because of this proximity, many still have strong ties to Mexico.

Academic Support: The extent to which students access services available at the writing center or tutoring center. Academic assistance may also refer to students getting help from professors during office hours. It may also refer to students forming study groups to prepare for exams or working collaboratively on assignments.

Social Support: The extent to which students feel socially or emotionally supported by other students, faculty or staff at the university. Social support may not be limited to issues and problems pertaining to school. Social support may also be offered in issues involving relationships or homesickness, for example.

University Community: Faculty, staff and students that comprise the university. The university community may also include university departments and student organizations.

Writing Center: A tutoring center geared specifically toward writing. Students may take any piece of writing from any class at any point in the writing process and evaluate their work with a tutor.

CASA: Center for the Advancement of Scholastic Achievement. This is a tutoring center that tutors all subjects except writing. The majority of students access it for math tutoring.

LAC: Learning Assistance Center. This is a tutoring center specifically for Title V (education) students. They tutor all subjects including writing.

First-Year Success Program: This term encompasses the mentoring program, learning communities, and the Freshman Seminar course.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

For this study, I plan to employ both critical theory and sociocultural theory. Traditional lecture-based college classrooms may provide “ethnically diverse students with an educational experience that...is unlikely to provide them with the academic skills and critical thinking abilities necessary to mitigate the barriers to educational equity and social mobility” (Munoz, 2004-2005, p. 3). This may be especially important at an institution that serves a predominately Hispanic student body. In order to increase retention and graduation rates of Hispanic students, the status quo must be changed. Because “legitimated discourses of power tell educators...what instructional methods may be utilized” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 310), a change from the traditional collegiate curriculum and instruction has been slow, but it must occur if racially and ethnically diverse students are to be served. Apple (1982) believes that this type of

change is slow because schools simply strive to reproduce capitalist culture; in other words, people who succeed in higher education are the ones who are meant for high-paying jobs, and those who do not simply fill the void in more menial labor. Although change will not happen quickly nor on large scale, Apple believes that “these ...conditions need not preclude teachers from...making commodified cultural forms their own, to generate their own creative responses to dominant ideologies” (p. 156). If enough teachers participate in innovative programs designed to help culturally diverse students succeed, universities can be changed. Learning communities with a freshmen seminar component can further help fill the void left by higher education for minority students by “making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute” (hooks, 1994, p. 39).

There are many aspects to critical theory including reproduction theory and feminist theory. Some social scientists focus on culture and language while others study the effects of gender. All critical theorists have one thing in common: power. The main tenet of critical theory is the unequal distribution of power in society. Critical theorists in the field of education maintain that schools often aid in the perpetuation of the status quo and do little to shift the balance of power to the oppressed, which can include women, people of color, or the economically disadvantaged.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) stress the relationship between language and power. Often schools select students based on their language skills. For example, college entrance exams such as the ACT and SAT have extensive verbal sections. Students who do not excel in these types of exams are often not admitted into four-year institutions.

Bourdieu and Passeron hold that this practice benefits the upper classes since it is their language on which students are being tested. The street language of the lower classes, or the foreign language of immigrants or the culturally different is not valued. Bourdieu and Passeron believe that schools simply reproduce the status quo by adequately educating only those students who have the proper linguistic and cultural capital. They state that “an educational system based on a traditional type of pedagogy can fulfil [sic] its function of inculcation only so long as it addresses itself to students equipped with the linguistic and cultural capital...which the system presupposes and consecrates without ever expressly demanding it and without methodically transmitting it” (p. 99). In this way, the schools reproduce the existing culture with the upper classes in power, and the lower classes with no power. Bourdieu and Passeron believe that teachers and professors perpetuate inequality by transmitting knowledge in ways that is culturally compatible to the upper classes. Schools simply legitimate and perpetuate class differences while pretending to produce equally skilled citizens; schools “contribute to the reproduction of the established order , since it succeeds better than ever in concealing the function it performs” (p. 167). Schools allow a select few of under privileged students to succeed so they can continue the myth that they promote social equality, when, in fact, they simply perpetuate inequality.

Paulo Freire (1973) stresses the concept of democracy in his writings. He believes that when people are oppressed, they adjust to their environment instead of integrating themselves, which requires critical thinking. Freire defines an integrated person as *Subject* and an adaptive person as *object*. A subject is able to act, while an

object is acted upon. An adapted person does not dialogue or participate; he simply “accommodates to conditions imposed upon him” (p. 24). Freire believes that by engaging people in dialogue and educating them, they can become critical thinkers, and thus more independent. For Freire, the effects of colonization and illiteracy have led man to be isolated. Community, rather than individuality, leads to critical thought; “whoever enters into dialogue does so with someone about something” (p. 46). Freire also believes that traditional curriculum is so disconnected from the people’s lives that it hinders critical thinking. In short, in order for people to actively participate in democracy, they must be educated in such a way that allows them to be *Subject* rather than *object* because this will allow them to think critically. Schools must give students the power to act rather than to be acted upon.

Apple (1982) also believed in the idea of commodified cultural capital. Cultural resources which were equated with school success were reserved for the upper classes; however, Apple believed that lower class workers and students resisted their oppression. Apple holds that schools are both productive and reproductive. Schools do have a role in cultural reproduction, but some students reject this reproduction, and “this very rejection of the hidden and overt curriculum gives us one of the major principles from which we can analyze the role of our educational institutions in helping to reproduce the social division of labor and inequality in corporate societies” (p. 96). In other words, it is only through student rejection that we can be provided insight on the societal functions schools promote. For Apple, students are not simply passive recipients of knowledge or upper class values. In fact, students regularly resist both the overt and hidden curriculum

by acting out in class, refusing to participate in class, or by not following the teacher's instructions. Rather than investing in cultural capital, these students prefer their own lived culture, which often rejects individualism and embraces community. In fact, Apple feels that students are not the only ones engage in rejection. Teachers who are forced to use pre-packaged curricular materials practice this also when they inject their own materials or when they only follow the prescribed curriculum for three days a week instead of all five. For Apple, hegemony can only be maintained through "a continual process of conflict, compromise, and active struggle" (p. 30).

McLaren (1998) believes that schools prepare students for their roles in life, and these roles differ dramatically depending on one's race, class, and gender. Schools "reproduce inequality, racism, sexism, and homophobia,...and fragment democratic social relations through an emphasis on competitiveness and cultural ethnocentrism" (p. 188). Schools are meant to prepare some students for university level work and others for menial labor. McLaren believes that schools must not be simply providers of knowledge; rather, schools must become a means to equality and empowerment. McLaren argues that knowledge is socially constructed, but questions why some knowledge is legitimated while other forms are not. Which type of knowledge is most powerful is heavily influenced by both class and culture. The working and under class is populated by people of color, the unemployed, women, and the handicapped. Their lived culture is not seen as valid in the educational arena. In this way, "the dominant class secures hegemony—the consent of the dominated—by supplying the symbols, representations, and practices of social life in such a way that the basis of social

authority and the unequal relations of power and privilege remain hidden” (p. 203).

Formal schooling promotes the culture of the privileged while denying the culture of the other. Both the overt and the hidden curriculum operate within these parameters.

Teaching and learning styles, grading techniques and teacher expectations all serve the culture of the dominant class. Like Freire, McLaren believes school should be a place where students learn to think critically. All students’ voices must be heard; only then can all students successfully construct knowledge. With no interaction and no voice in the classroom, people of color and other oppressed students cannot use their lived experiences and culture to construct meaningful knowledge, and without meaningful knowledge, there can be no critical thought. To have a voice is to share in the power. However, all too often, the only voice heard in the classroom is that of white upper-and middle-class students.

Lather (1991) further explores the relationship between discourse and power from a postmodern perspective. She writes that “postmodernism foregrounds how discourses shape our experience of ‘the real’ in its proposal that the way we speak and write reflects the structures of power in our society” (p, 25). This is especially true in today’s society. Our schools are enrolling more and more immigrants or children of immigrants for whom English is not their first language. Speakers of other languages are at a distinct disadvantage in our schools as standard English is the only accepted and valued mode of discourse. This is especially problematic in a community like Laredo where the majority of its citizens speak Spanish as a first language. While K-12 schools attempt to accommodate these students with ESL and dual language programs, no such

programs exist at the college level. Because these students do not speak standard English, their voices in the classroom are silenced. Oppressed people become the “other”; they are subject to the influence and will of those in power. Even in instances where the teacher or researcher is attempting not to inject their voice or values, it is not possible to do so “without putting ourselves back at the center” (p. 91). We are always being acted upon within our relationships with others, so identity becomes problematic. However, this concept of acting and being acted upon force us to explore the definition of legitimate knowledge and how pedagogy can address issues of power and dominance.

One of Lather’s interests is feminism, or seeing “gender as a basic organizing principle which profoundly shapes/mediates the concrete conditions of our lives” (p. 71). Feminists believe that power and oppression are based on gender with women enduring an unequal social position. This issue is well documented in schools with girls receiving less attention from teachers and being pushed in to traditional female courses such as those offered in the liberal arts. Lather looks at feminism through a postmodern lens “offering feminism opportunities to avoid dogmatism and the reductionism of single-cause analysis, to produce knowledge from which to act, and to diffuse power as a means to take advantage of the range of mobile and transitory points of resistance inherent in the networks of power relations” (p. 39). By examining the interaction between the subject and the other, postmodernism can give feminists a broader base from which to conduct research.

hooks (1994) focuses her discussion of critical theory on the issues of voice and class. As other researchers, she claims that “it is painfully clear that biases that uphold

and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom” (p. 29). This is evident in college attendance and drop out rates. White students continue to enroll and persist in college at higher rates than other populations. hooks believes that classrooms should be places where everyone has a voice and contributes ideas and knowledge. Classrooms must become like communities where every participant feels safe and valued. Like Freire, hooks feels that education should be liberatory, and like Lather, she believes that feminist research should not concentrate solely on differences caused by gender; we must also look at the intersection of race and gender. Education can become viable for everyone if his or her personal experiences are included and valued in the classroom. When students’ lived culture is validated, they “seem more eager to enter energetically into classroom discussion...because it pertain[s] directly to them” (p.87).

Because I live and work in a border city, I am particularly interested in the concept of language and power. In Laredo, language is an especially important topic. Most jobs in Laredo require one to speak both English and Spanish, but often the Spanish language is more important because that is what the majority of the population speaks. If one hopes to get elected to public office, he or she must speak Spanish and English. In these realms, it would appear that the two languages have equal power. Yet, when it comes to formal education, particularly higher education, standard English continues to hold sway. Many of our students are terrified to speak in class or write papers because their language is either corrected or criticized. I have had students tell me they will not speak in class because they do not feel comfortable speaking in English.

Professors have told students their written work has too many “Hispanicisms”. Many of our students are denied having their voice heard because they are afraid their language skills may not be up to par. Over 85% of our student population is Hispanic, but many times they are not allowed to participate in the construction of their own knowledge. I believe that in order to empower our students, we must allow them to engage in dialogue and create a safe classroom where they can forge a sense of community. If students’ are not allowed to find their voice, they will not become critical thinkers.

Sociocultural theory states that “society and culture determine learning as much as mental activities, or rather, learning and mental activities are cultural” (Oakes & Lipton, 2003, p. 84). Students are unable to separate their culture from their learning. If Hispanic students have a more collective culture and are more family oriented than other groups of students (Cortese, 1992), they may form close connections with other university students in their learning community, helping them succeed academically. If forming close connections is part of Hispanic culture, Hispanic students will require these connections to learn. Learning communities may provide these connections.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Although many retention programs have failed, learning communities “have become important seedbeds for pedagogical innovation” (MacGregor & Smith, 2005, p. 4). Students in learning communities have several important advantages. Learning communities allow students to build supportive peer groups, a task which can be daunting at a large university. The importance of this support is that “participation in the learning community enable[s] students to develop a network of supportive peers that help students make the transition to college and integrate them into a community of peers” (Tinto, 1998, p. 7). As a result, students do not feel isolated. They know that they can turn to each other for academic and social support. Secondly, learning communities provide opportunity for shared learning. These communities often “served to bridge the academic-social divide that typically plagues student life” (Tinto, 1997, p. 610). This bridge might be helpful in a family-oriented Hispanic community. For many Hispanic students, family ties are of the utmost importance. When they leave home, a void is left in their social world. Being involved in a learning community may help to fill that void. If students do not leave home, which is often the case with regional universities, students may still have trouble if they are first generation college students. Often family members do not understand why students spend so much time at school or on homework and study time; consequently, there is conflict. Members of the learning community, who may be experiencing the same thing, can be a source of support. Thirdly, learning communities,

with their collaborative approach to learning, give students a “voice in the construction of knowledge” (Tinto, 1997, p. 611). Students often work in groups and actively participate in classroom discussion and learning. Students are able to learn from each other and “become responsible to each other in the process of trying to know” (Tinto, n.d., p. 2). Although research shows that “the more students are involved in the social and academic life of an institution, the more likely they are to learn and persist” (Tinto, 1998, p. 2), studies have not shown how effective they are with minority populations. Minority students likely use learning communities more as a source of support because of shared obstacles than do other students.

Collaboration seems to be a key factor in the success of Hispanic college students. Losey found that “Mexican American students seem to prefer a collective or cooperative classroom structure over an individualistic, competitive one...[and perform better in] classrooms [that have] almost ‘familial’ relationships between teachers and students” (1997, p. 12). Learning communities, particularly those at the institution studied, lend themselves especially well to this type of environment in that students have three courses together. Allowing students to collaborate can be affiliated with culturally responsive pedagogy if that particular learning style is bound to the culture. For Hispanic students, this seems to be the case. Studies have shown that in Hispanic families base many decisions on the opinions of others (Valdes, 1996). Rather than being taught a skill by an authority figure, Hispanic children often learn by watching others; tasks are not directly taught, and “questioning authority head-on [is] not encouraged (Valdes, 1996, p. 121). As a result, learning communities can be a place where culturally

responsive pedagogy is encouraged. If students are allowed to collaborate and learn from one another, and if they have a closer relationship with the instructor, this results in a learning atmosphere closer to their culture than a typical school environment; therefore, they are more likely to achieve success.

Developmental students may benefit even more from learning communities. At the institution under study, students are placed in developmental classes according to scores on an acceptable placement test such as the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA). The university offers two levels of developmental writing, two levels of developmental reading, and three levels of developmental math. Developmental classes seek to strengthen students' skills in their weak area hopes of preparing them for college level work. However, since these students are placed apart from other students, they are often labeled and isolated. Furthermore, since many models of developmental education models emphasize individualistic educational models (Beach et al, 2002), Hispanic students may be further threatened. The effect of this isolation is that students often "build ...self-destructive schooling habits such as avoiding contact with the teacher, not asking questions, missing assignments or classes, or not following up on problems they have discovered in their work" (Hardin, 1988 qtd in Brittenham et al ,2003, p. 19). This self-defeating behavior may be lessened by involvement in learning communities. Students in learning communities come to rely on each other for support and to ease the feelings of isolation. Often students forge more meaningful relationships with each other, tutors, peer mentors and faculty members (Brittenham, 2003).

Learning communities assume that knowledge is built by doing things with others. In other words, knowledge is socially constructed. According to Watkins (2005), language, a critical element in culture, is a vital part of negotiating meaning. In fact, “the context in which meaning-making happens comes to be important, with more attention being paid to the processes by which learning communities are built” (p. 17). If knowledge is socially constructed, learning communities, in which students feel comfortable with each other, will be important to student learning. Learning communities may be especially important to college students. In a traditional university setting, students typically sit in large lecture halls with students they only see for that hour. At most, students see each other for three hours per week with minimal interaction. In this situation, students may never feel close enough to their classmates to participate in class or form study groups. In contrast, in learning communities, students may take up to three classes together; at TAMIU, the learning communities are anchored by a small freshmen seminar class. In this way, students are far more likely to interact with each other, which, in turn, help them construct knowledge.

Watkins (2005) also identified four hallmarks of learning communities: Agency, belonging, cohesion and diversity. Agency is “the belief—on the part of all members—that they can and do make real choices and take action, intentionally and knowingly” (p. 32). This is empowering to individuals, but learning communities can also form a collective agency. With collective agency, the group believes it can produce results. Empowerment results if students believe their voices are heard and that they have a part

in creating their own knowledge. If students have ownership in their courses, they may be more likely to learn.

A sense of belonging is also important as it “has significant effects on engagement in the life and purposes of the collective” (Watkins, 2005, p. 32). If students feel they belong, they may be more likely to be accountable. Previously mentioned studies have shown that the more students feel connected to each other and to the university, they are more likely to persist. Watkins (2005) also believes that a sense of belonging can lead students to perceive a greater sense of support. This may be important for Hispanic students who are often navigating college life without the support of parents who may have never attended any institution of higher learning.

Watkins (2005) also found that cohesion is created when students formed a learning community. With this, students develop “an investment of themselves for the purposes which are being achieved in and through this collective” (p. 32). Students become committed to each other and to the group as a whole. This may encourage students to attend classes more often and complete homework, especially if they feel the group is counting on their presence or input in some way. A feeling of cohesion may also discourage students from withdrawing from the class.

An acceptance of diversity can also be encouraged through learning communities (Watkins, 2005). White believes that learning communities can increase students’ exposure to diversity, thereby decreasing stereotypes. Students may also be exposed to various viewpoints, expanding their world view and gaining acceptance of others’

learning styles and cultures. Watkins feels that learning communities enable students to “embrace difference and to view diversity positively” (p. 33).

Watkins (2005) also identified four processes in community. These include acting together, bridging, collaboration, and dialogue. Learning communities provide for active rather than passive learning. They encourage students to learn together rather than alone. Bridging allows students in a learning community to connect to each other. They make connections to other people’s lives and experiences, which expands their own knowledge. Collaboration encourages cooperation and allows students to work together. Finally, dialogue allows students to discuss, debate, and exchange ideas (Watkins, 2005).

In addition, Watkins (2005) stated that learning communities also lend themselves to enquiry, knowledge-generation, reflection, and meta-learning. When students are comfortable with each other and believe that their voice, ideas, and opinions are valued, then “enquiry is likely to be emphasized as a means of learning and coming to know” (p. 36). The dialogue that learning communities allow encourages enquiry to arise. The goal of this enquiry is not simply answers, but rather greater understanding (Watkins, 2005). Knowledge-generation refers the creation of “contextually relevant new meaning, often in the form of new understandings for the people involved in learning” (p. 37). This type of learning may also aid in the transfer of knowledge and skills. Knowledge-generation may also helps students understand that knowledge is not absolute, that it is subjective and constantly changing.

Individual and collective reflection are encouraged in learning communities. If people are to “learn from experience, reflection is essential” (Watkins, 2005, p. 39). Communities can grow through reflection. Learning communities enhance reflection because relationships have been established between students and between students and teachers. In this type of relationship, students are more likely to state what they believe is working in the classroom and what is not. Since students have been encouraged to learn about how they learn, individual reflection is also enhanced. In addition, learning communities involve meta-learning, or learning about learning (Watkins, 2005). This may also promote transfer. If students are able to learn how they learn, they can apply this knowledge to other courses. If students know how they learn best and can transfer this knowledge, they may be more likely to persist and succeed in higher education. Novick, Kress, & Elias (2002) found that learning that is “goal-directed, focused, purposeful, and linked with positive emotion is most likely to endure and translate into constructive action” (p. 34). Learning communities may provide this type of environment.

Learning communities have implications as far as the self efficacy, motivation and persistence of Hispanic students. When students have a sense of belonging, they are more likely to achieve academically. Covington (2000) reports that achieving the social goal of acceptance among peers encourages individuals to achieve more fully in other areas such as academics. In fact, it has been well documented that individuals desire “to achieve for the sake of the group” (p. 178). As evidenced by the results, students are likely to make friends in a learning community; these friendships could help them

achieve academically. A sense of belonging can also lead to a higher self image among students. As members of learning communities encourage each other to strive for higher grades, students are able to attain a sense of self-efficacy. If their classmates believe they can attain higher results on exams or assignments, they students themselves will also believe it to be true. Covington maintains that “self-worth theory assumes that the achievement goals adopted by students...reflect...a life-spanning struggle to establish and maintain a sense of worth and belonging in a society that values competency and doing well” (p. 181). This may be especially helpful for developmental students. Because they are already labeled as low-achieving, their sense of self efficacy is probably low. If they are involved in a learning community where they are able to feel a sense of belonging and are encouraged to set academic goals, their self-worth will rise. The result of this will be higher academic success.

Learning communities may also result in higher motivation for students. However, motivation may be related to culture as “standards and values presumed to motivate learning are socially constructed” (Hickey, 2003, p. 409). According to Hickey, motivation is also associated with engagement, participation, and interpersonal relationships. If a student has a personal investment, he or she is likely to be more motivated to achieve. In this study, students had both a social and academic investment in other members of their learning community. They counted on each other for support when they needed help with assignments, when they had missed a class, or when they needed encouragement. This type of engagement can lead to higher motivation.

Motivation is socially constructed in that participation and success can be

achieved by using socially defined tools-“what might best be called knowledge rituals and knowledge tools” (Hickey, 2003, p. 408). Since it has been shown that Hispanics students tend to perform better in collaborative settings, learning communities may help students attain higher motivation. Students who are able to bring their cultural background with them into the classroom are more likely to have academic success. Learning communities tend to mimic the same type of instruction valued in their culture; for example, they allow students to collaborate and form closer relationships with each other than a normal college schedule would allow. This type of environment may motivate students to seek new challenges. Hickey states that “relationships, social supports, opportunities, and emergent interactions...empower the individual to seek new challenges” (2003, p. 409). Since learning communities provide these opportunities, students may be more motivated to seek higher academic challenges.

Learning communities may also encourage Hispanics students to persist in higher education. When students become disengaged from the school, they are more likely to drop out (Johnson, et al, 2001). However, if students are “comfortable at school or socially integrated with other students”, they are more likely to persist (Johnson, et al, 2001, p. 323). As indicated by the results of this study, students in the learning community formed friendships and felt very comfortable with each other. They felt that since “they all struggle[d] with the same problems”, they could work together. This sense of community could lead to further engagement with the university itself. There is a sense of sharing problems and struggles, of all being in it together that made these students feel close. Because they knew they would see the same students every day in

three classes, the university possibly became a less intimidating place for them. Instead of feeling disengaged, they actually became more engaged, studying together at the tutoring or writing center, working on assignments together, studying together and eating together at the student center. Those that lived in the dormitories sought each other out when they needed help with an assignment, and those who did not live on campus, sometimes chose to stay on campus after class to eat or study with a classmate. This engagement with the university and personal investment with friends may lead to higher persistence among students in learning communities.

FRESHMAN SEMINAR

Learning communities that include a freshman seminar component may also be an effective way to increase persistence among Hispanic students. Tsui and Gao (2006) found that “well-designed freshman orientation courses can positively affect student retention and success” (p. 149). Because they help familiarize freshmen with campus services and organizations, as well as teach study skills, these types of courses may help students both feel comfortable in the university environment as well as maintain an acceptable grade point average. Tsui and Gao particularly advocate freshman seminar courses that are discipline based, believing this type of environment will lead to deeper understanding of the content. They also state that freshman seminar courses, because they are usually smaller, should incorporate as much active learning as possible because this type of approach “has been found to be superior for long-term retention, application of knowledge to new situations, development of higher order cognitive skills, and promotion of positive attitudes toward material studied” (p. 151).

Miller, Janz, and Chen (2007) found that freshman seminar courses had an effect on retention among students from all levels of pre-college academic preparation. Even among students with high academic preparation, freshman seminar courses are effective with respect to retention. In fact, they found that “student accrue similar benefits regardless of entering ability level (p. 58).

Thompson, Orr, Thompson & Grover (2007) studied students’ perceptions of the first-year experience because they believe that “students’ perceptions of the college experience influence their grades, degree completion, satisfaction, and other positive student outcomes” (p. 640). Their study assessed students’ perceptions in six areas: goal setting, campus resources, stress, relationships, racial sensitivity, and belonging/identity. They found that students living on campus had more positive perceptions of the first-year experience because they felt a sense of connectedness to the university. Additionally, these researchers found that students who set goals, learned and used effective study strategies and were taught time management skills were more likely to report positive perceptions. As freshman seminar courses focus on these issues, these types of courses may aid in enhancing students’ perceptions of their first-year, which may lead to an increase in persistence.

Howard (2000) studied the effectiveness of a freshman seminar at an urban university. She studied five areas, including students being prepared for the university experience, choosing a major, being confident as a student, having knowledge of campus resources, and having competence in study skills. Howard stated that freshman seminar courses are “offered with the assumption that freshmen can be taught how to be

successful students with belief that when students are given accurate information and ample support, they will feel more secure and therefore have a greater chance of success in this new environment” (p.510). Her study showed that with the exception of choosing a major, the freshman seminar course helped students in each of the areas under study. Howard believes her data suggest that all students can be helped by a freshman seminar course, but it may be particularly helpful for those students whose high school grades suggest they are not adequately prepared for college.

Rhodes (1999) studied community college students’ perceptions of the value of the freshman seminar course. She found that “randomly grouping students with wide-ranging abilities and life experience in a freshman seminar class had a number of drawbacks, as older adult learners differ greatly from younger student learners in aptitude, ability levels, maturity, and academic needs” (p. 511). As a result, older students expressed dissatisfaction with the freshman seminar course. This may indicate that the same model may not work for all students. Freshman seminar courses may need to be developed for older students if they are to be helpful to that population.

In Porter & Swing’s (2006) research, they sought to gain a greater understanding of how first-year seminars affect persistence. They studied both individual variables such as high school grades, work hours, residence, and race and ethnicity, and school-level variables such as study skills, college knowledge, and campus engagement. Porter & Swing (2006) found that “study skills and academic engagement, and health education have substantial impact on early intention to persist” (p. 105). Since freshman seminars often stress study skills and academic engagement, the authors believe that it makes

sense that students who take these courses plan to return to school the next semester. The authors also feel that other aspects of the freshman seminar course may impact students later in their studies.

Sidle & McReynolds (1999) looked at student retention and success with respect to the freshman year experience. Their study found that “students who participated in the institution’s freshman-year experience course continued their enrollment to the fall term of their second year at a higher rate than students who did not participate in the course” (p. 292). Those who took the course also tended to have higher grade point averages than those who did not. The researchers believe that these results may reflect the higher motivation of students who elected to take the course. Sidle & McReynolds also feel the freshmen seminar course gives the institution the opportunity to positively influence students who are enrolled. For example, students can learn about resources the university has to offer as well as develop relationships with faculty. Additionally, freshman seminar courses offer a student-centered format. The students in this study felt that the course helped them understand the purpose of higher education and enhanced their belief that they could succeed as students.

Schnell & Doetkott (2002-2003) researched the long-term impact of freshman seminar courses. These courses share four common assumptions: students need to identify with the institution and with peers, seminars encourage bonding among students as well as between faculty and students, certain skills needed in college can be taught, and faculty need to be adequately trained to teach these types of courses. Schnell &

Doetskott found that first year seminars not only increased retention to the second year but also “increased retention over a period of four years” (p. 387).

Freshman seminar courses can aid in early adjustment to college, which may be a factor in persistence. Grayson (2003) wrote that “early adjustment might contribute to desired educational outcomes” (p. 411). He found that students who adjust early have an advantage in credit completion over those who do not adjust. Freshman seminar courses that teach study skills, encourage relationships among peers, and help students identify university resources may aid students in their adjustments to college.

Another factor that may prevent college freshmen from adjusting to college is loneliness. Nicpon, Huser, Blanks, Sollenberger, Befort, & Kurpius (2006-2007) studied the relationship between loneliness and social support with persistence. They believe that the “first semester of enrollment [is] important for the likelihood of students staying in college and stress...the value of social integration (p. 346). As a result, loneliness may result in lower persistence. These researchers found an “interrelationship between loneliness, friend and family social support, and academic performance and persistence for beginning college students” (p. 348). The results of their study showed that if students perceived more social support, they were less lonely, and as a result persisted at greater levels. Programs that enable students to connect with each other, such as freshman seminars and learning communities, may have a positive influence on student persistence.

Keup & Barefoot (2005) also explored the how first-year seminars affected student outcomes. They believe this study is particularly important as the student body is

becoming more and more diverse, and some students may not be academically prepared for the rigors of college. The researchers state that most freshman seminars have similar goals. These include helping students achieve a sense of community, encouraging students to become involved in university life, and helping students become academically and socially integrated. In their study they found that “first-year seminars are associated with enhanced communication with faculty, particularly through informal interaction” (p. 22). They also found that students who took a first-year seminar class demonstrated sound academic practices such as discussing academic content with fellow students outside of class time, participating in class more often, and forming study groups. Furthermore, negative academic behaviors such as coming late to or missing class decreased. Keop & Barefoot’s research yielded other important results. They also found that first-year seminar students attended campus-sponsored events and were able to form close ties with other students more often than students who did not take a first-year seminar course. As identified by other research, these connections to the university as well as to other students may increase persistence.

Lang (2007) is also concerned about the fate of underprepared students at colleges and universities. He believes these students can be helped by first-year seminar courses. Lang’s hypothesis stated that “first-year experience course completers would achieve higher GPAs and accumulate more credit hours than their nonparticipant counterparts” (p. 12). His results were somewhat problematic in that students who completed the first-year seminar course did perform better than their counterparts during the semester in which they were enrolled in the course, but in subsequent semesters,

their GPA fell below that of students who did not participate in the first-year seminar course. However, those who took the class did persist at higher rates than other students.

Jewler (1989) listed several elements of an effective first-year seminar program. These include writing papers, conducting library research, investigating careers and majors, using tutoring centers and counseling centers, and learning the value of relaxation and peer relationships. He also believes that to be fully effective, seminar courses must be student-centered which will help them develop holistically. When students develop in this manner they “are more likely to survive the freshman year, and perhaps the entire college experience, at a greater rate than those whose development is more limited” (p. 201). Jewler (2005) also believes that, as a result of a freshman seminar course, students will find their college experience more meaningful and perhaps be more likely to become productive adults. To this end, group interaction is important in these classes as this lends itself to helping students learn what they need to know about themselves, the campus, and college in general.

Fidler & Hunter (1998) also studied how seminars help students succeed. As other researcher, they found that these courses are associated with increased retention rates. One reason for this increase may be a reflection of the quality of student-faculty relationships that seminars foster. Additionally, freshman seminars “integrat[e] freshmen into the campus social system” (p. 221). This may help students in their transition from high school to college. Fidler & Hunter (1998) also found that freshman seminar courses are associated with improved academic performance. They believe that this is true regardless of pre-college experiences and level of preparedness.

First-year seminar courses may be especially important to culturally diverse students. Engberg & Mayhew (2007) believe that if multiculturalism is included in the freshmen seminar curriculum, students may become more aware of social justice issues. In fact, “uncovering a relationship among first-year success courses and student learning and democratic outcomes may shed light on how such courses improve retention and prepare students for their future roles as citizens and workers in an increasingly diverse society” (p. 242). These researchers believe that a freshmen seminar course should delve into social justice issues, transitional issues, and social identity, as well as provide students the opportunity to socialize with peers who are different from them. Engberg & Mayhew feel that this type of interaction can help students grow cognitively as well as emotionally. They believe that “students who are exposed to multicultural curricular content and experiences during their first-year success course will make greater developmental gains on student learning and democratic outcomes than those in courses with less emphasis on multicultural content and experiences” (p. 245).

Derby & Watson (2006-2007) studied the effect of freshmen seminar courses on African-American retention. They found that this course did, in fact, increase persistence. Because this course was structured to increase students’ awareness of how a college works, help them set goals and interact with faculty and staff, students felt less of a disconnect from the college. Although the researchers found that “enrollment in an orientation course of this nature can help some students matriculate to successful degree completion and re-enrollment, the results of this study were inconclusive for African-

American students due to small sample sizes” (p. 387). However, there is reason to believe that freshman seminar courses will benefit students from all backgrounds.

Freshmen seminar courses may also assist Hispanic students in succeeding in college. Colleges and universities must “devise strategies and policies that attract and retain minorities as well as facilitate their progress in achieving their academic goals” (Justiz & Rendon, 1989, p. 262). Freshmen seminar courses may do just that. Hispanics students experience many barriers to their success in college. These include being first-generation college students, working, being poorly prepared academically, having cultural or language barriers, and being reluctant to leave their hometown. Colleges and universities can help alleviate some of these barriers by front loading academic skills, providing mentors, developing an advisement program, and creating learning communities. Freshman seminar courses can provide these programs.

INTEGRATED CUURICULUM

Learning communities which employ an integrated curriculum may be more beneficial than learning communities which do not. TAMIU uses one of the most basic forms of integration for its learning communities, but an integrated curriculum can take many forms including the Open Core, in which students and teachers choose the subject matter to be learned in “the context of problems that the class determines should be addressed” (Hinde, 2005, p. 106); the Prestructured Core, in which the problems to be addressed are predetermined based on the needs of the students; the Broad Fields, in which thematic units are developed; the Fusion design, in which two or more subjects are merged into one new subject; and the Correlation Model, in which relationships

between subjects are developed. Similarly, Fogarty developed ten levels of integration. A fragmented curriculum is one in which the disciplines are clearly separated; connections are not made for students. A connected curriculum connects topics within a discipline; in a nested curriculum, “social, thinking, and content skills are targeted within a subject area”(Lake, n.d., p.1). In a sequenced curriculum, similar ideas are taught together, but the disciplines remain separate; a shared curriculum involves team planning, for two subjects focus on the same topics and skills. A webbed curriculum uses a theme as a basis for instruction in many subjects. In a threaded curriculum “thinking skills, social skills, multiple intelligences, and study skills are threaded throughout the disciplines” (Lake, n.d., p.4). In an integrated curriculum, concepts that are found throughout several disciplines are taught using common skills; an immersed curriculum has the learner integrating information by viewing it through a common perspective. Finally, in a networked curriculum “the learner directs the integration process through selection of a network of experts and resources” (Lake, n.d., p.4). There is much overlap in the various models presented, which can lead to confusion as to what is integration and what is not. Other aspects that have been included as part of an integrated curriculum include team teaching, learning communities, problem focus courses, collaborative learning in projects, and integrative portfolios (Klein, 2005).

Retention research is of vital importance, especially at institutions that serve predominately Hispanic students .Although there are more Hispanic first-time freshmen than any other minority group, they are retained at lower rates than either blacks or Asians. For example, in the Fall of 2002, 11, 355 Hispanics and 6,791 African-

Americans were enrolled as first-time freshmen at public Texas colleges. In contrast, the one year retention rate for African-Americans was 70.3 % but only 68.06% for Hispanics (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2003). On a national level, in 2002, 74.7% of African-American students were retained, and 75.7% of Hispanics (Seidman, 2005). Clearly, retention is a vitally important issue for minority populations, especially in Texas. Using learning communities with an integrated curriculum may help these students stay in school longer. The research suggests that students will learn better if they can make connections between disciplines. When students deal with information holistically, it “enables [them] to retain knowledge, develop higher-order thinking skills and achieve deeper understanding” (Ignatz, 2005, p.39). In their study of brain-based learning, Caine and Caine stress the importance of patterning; information must make sense if the brain is learn it, and often, fragmented bits of information do not make sense. They also found that the brain “performs many functions simultaneously” (1995, p.44). In order for optimal learning to occur, the integration of multiple resources is necessary. Klein believes that an integrated approach is essential if students are to be able to function in the real world. With an integrated curriculum, students can make connections and apply knowledge rather than just learn facts in isolation. With this, students are able to make meaning and “foster the ability to adapt knowledge in unexpected and changing contexts” (Klein, 2005, p.9). Other studies have shown that integration is effective in that students who are in integrative programs have performed as well or better on standardized tests than students enrolled in a more traditional curriculum (Vars, 1991). Other research has indicated that students are more engaged when the curriculum is

integrated, and that students and teachers have more positive attitudes toward learning (Hinde, 2005). If integration is an effective way to help students learn, it may result in higher grade point averages, lower rates of D's, F's and W's and lower numbers of students on academic probation. If this is the case, retention will increase. Unfortunately, there is very little research on integration in higher education. Previous studies indicate that an integrated curriculum is beneficial at the primary and secondary level, so it should also aid students in higher education, also.

One subject that has often been integrated is social studies. Since social studies has often been ignored in the age of standardized testing, some authors feel social studies should be integrated with reading or English in order for students to receive more exposure to the subject. For integration to be successful, teachers must have adequate knowledge of the content area as well as knowledge of integrative techniques. Activities must reflect social studies content and not simply be thrown in for the sake of integration. The integration of history and English can promote inquiry questions and "provide [students] with opportunities to make their own connections" (Monaghan & McConnell, 2005, p. 23). For example, if students are studying slavery, they can read and reflect on protest songs and poetry. One study found that once students made connections between history and literature, they began to look for linkages between other disciplines as well (Monaghan & McConnell, 2005). Social studies has also been integrated with science. In one program, Chinese culture served as a thematic unit. In social studies, students studied Chinese customs and cultures, and in science they studied silk worms, how light travels (based on Chinese lanterns and architecture), and the

phases of the moon. Sorel found that when the curriculum is integrated children feel that “history makes sense and science becomes relevant” (2005, p. 25). However, there are drawbacks to social studies integration. Often, social studies projects become time consuming art projects and lose educational value. In fact “most of the problems occur with forms of integration that are not inherent in the topic and thus involve integration for integration’s sake” (Alleman & Brophy, 1993, p. 287). Activities that have no educational value do not belong anywhere in the curriculum. For integration to be effective, it should directly address social studies content and have a significant social education goal as the primary focus.

Science can also be integrated with mathematics. Typically science and math are integrated, but math can also be effectively integrated with language arts. Science and math are usually integrated because it “is an approach that recognized the commonalities between [them]” (Berlin & Lee, 2005, p. 15). With math and science, as with the other subjects, there is concern that one subject will not be dealt with as effectively. Hurley found six forms of integration between math and science. Sequenced integration occurred when math and science were taught separately but in sequence; parallel integration is when they are taught at the same time using parallel concepts. Partial integration occurs when math and science are sometimes taught together and sometimes separately; enhanced integration is when either math or science is the major discipline of instruction with the other apparent throughout the lesson, and total integration occurs when math and science are taught together with equal value and instruction time being placed on both disciplines (Hurley, 2001). She found that when total integration

occurred, it had a large significant impact on what students learned in science and a small positive effect on what they learned in math (Hurley, 2001). So, it appears that integrating math and science is “a way to enrich science and mathematics learning experiences and improve student understanding of and attitude toward these disciplines”(Berlin & Lee, 2005, p. 16).

Other studies have found that language arts and science can be effectively integrated. Feng et al. found that students showed academic gain in writing, grammar and scientific research skills. More importantly, they discovered that with integration, teachers used more higher order questions, student discussions and project work (Feng, et al., 2005). These skills are important because they will help students learn in the future.

One area that is specific to higher education is the integration of English and library skills. Since we live in the information age, “the ability to find information, evaluate information resources, and use quality resources to write and present research effectively is critical”(Samson & Granath, 2004, p. 149). Samson and Granath found that college freshmen were able to develop these skills when they were integrated with first year English. The approach they studied required collaboration between librarians and faculty. Their results indicated that students who learned library skills within the context of their English class performed better on a library skills test than did those who did not receive integrated instruction. They also found that integration helped students “gain a sense of community” (Samson & Granath, 2004, p. 154), an important issue in retention. Texas A&M International uses an integrated library and freshmen seminar program.

Students enrolled in the freshmen seminar class spend two weeks in the library where the librarians provide research instruction. Since these students are already in a learning community, it may be possible to integrate what they are working on in other classes with the research skills they will be learning. Henry, Castek, Roberts, Coiro, & Leu found that “the use of technology in the classroom [can] enhance motivation...and provide important opportunities for students to develop new literacy skills” (2004, p. 28).

Many schools have chosen integration as a way to include more art in the curriculum. Vesta, Stuhr, & Ballengee-Morris studied the effect of integration on three components: unit foundations, role of inquiry based-instruction, and assessment (2006). In the unit foundation level, teachers must find out what students already know and what they need to learn. Concepts to be studied should be relevant to students’ lives and involve the community. For example, in one school, when the students studied Kwanzaa, a visual art project was also created. The second component, inquiry-based instruction, is also essential because it “encourages integrative thinking, action, and reflection” (Vesta, Stuhr & Bellengee-Morris, 2006, p.10). In this way, students are encouraged to make connections between subjects. Other studies have shown that art can be integrated with science and other disciplines because it “crosses disciplinary boundaries to reveal conceptual connections” (Marshall, 2005, p. 227). In a post-modern world, this connection making becomes increasingly important as interdependence negates the need to study subjects in isolation (Slattery, The Center for a Post Modern World). In art, as with other subjects, integration is not simply providing images during

the study of other subjects. It involves making connections on the conceptual level by moving beyond the concrete and into the abstract (Marshall, 2005). Marshall also found that integrating art promotes transfer, a key to learning.

Research has indicated that business colleges are becoming more interested in integration. Since organizations rarely deal with only one aspect of business, schools have been called upon to produce students who can deal with many aspects. In fact a major criticism of business schools is that “students obtain a relatively narrow perspective of the organization and are not well equipped to handle crossfunctional problems (Cannon, et al., 2004, p.93). In other words, students have difficulty solving real-world problems. To remedy this, some colleges are turning to integration. Cannon, et al. found that integration enhanced student learning although it is difficult to implement due to faculty resistance (2004). Lorents, Morgan, and Tallman studied a business program that integrated finance, management information systems, and production management (2003). The goal of this program was “to increase student understanding of how concepts in different courses are integrated and how these concepts interact in developing solutions to key business problems” (Lorents, Morgan, and Tallman, 2003, p.136). They found that students who took the courses as a block (integrated) performed better than those who took them in isolation.

Although many schools, the University of Oregon, the University of Washington, and the University of Texas, to name a few, offer an integrated curriculum in the form of freshmen interest groups, few studies exist that examine the impact of these groups on student GPA and retention. The few studies that do exist tend to focus on how freshmen

interest groups or learning communities impact the first year experience including academic and social engagement (Tinto & Goodsell, 1993). While engagement is undoubtedly important with respect to retention, GPA is critical. If students do not have a high enough GPA their first term, fall to fall retention is unlikely. Therefore, more studies must focus on how learning communities, freshman interest groups and an integrated curriculum can help students attain a high enough GPA to remain in good standing at their institution.

Texas A&M International has employed a simple integrated curriculum. For example, in college reading, a developmental course for students who have not passed the THEA, the history text is used to teach reading skills. In order to gain skills in defining vocabulary, finding main ideas and supporting details, and making inferences, instructors use the text from the first semester of history. Since these students are blocked from history until they pass the THEA, this serves as their first exposure to college level reading and thinking skills. Since the program was implemented, student grades in History 1301 have improved. In 2004-2005, 26.67% of the students who took developmental reading earned a 2.0 or higher in History 1301; this represents a 10% increase over 2003-2004 (Programs for Academic Support and Enrichment, 2005 Annual Report). Since “developmental education can be thought of as a bridge between students’ familiar worlds and the unfamiliar world of college” learning communities with an integrated curriculum might be particularly helpful for this group as they try to develop “tools needed to negotiate and contribute to the academy” (James, Bruch, & Jehangir, 2006, p. 10).

Currently, all freshmen are enrolled in learning communities; most attempt to integrate their curriculum, at least minimally. Instructors meet at the beginning of the semester to plan the number and nature of assignments. For example, in English, the department requires three papers: a personal essay, a narrative essay and a review. As the history instructor wanted four papers, writing about an image was also included. For each essay, students were given several topics from their history class. For example, when writing a profile essay, students could select from Thomas Jefferson, Abigail Adams or Tomas Sanchez, the founder of Laredo. Students used guidelines from their English class to produce essays that displayed their knowledge of history. Also, when studying specific essay types in English, students used examples from their primary documents text in history, so if they were studying narratives, they looked at narratives written by historical figures. Papers went through several drafts in English. The final draft was then submitted to the English instructor for grading. The English instructor graded for form and grammar, but not content. Once the graded paper was returned to the students, they were given the opportunity to revise it. They then submitted it to the history professor who graded for content. Students received a grade in English and a grade in history for the same paper. In freshmen seminar class, students learned reading, note-taking, test-taking and critical thinking skills. All of these skills were practiced using their history notes and texts.

In higher education, learning communities can be used to integrate curriculum; however, it is a difficult process. Even though studies show integration is effective, professors may be reluctant to take on additional responsibilities. In short, integration at

TAMIU had the same barriers as it did at other universities: faculty resistance, teaching load and resource issues, and the strong influence of individual disciplines (Cannon, et al., 2004).

PEER MENTORING

Peer mentors are a key part of the first year experience at Texas A&M International University. All freshmen are required to meet with a peer mentor for thirty minutes every other week for the entire academic year. Mentors are junior or senior students who have attained a GPA of at least 3.5. In addition to their academic success, most mentors are involved in numerous extra-curricular activities. Mentors are given a two-week pre-service training and are required to meet weekly with their supervisor, a licensed professional counselor who also holds a doctorate in education. Components of the pre-service training include an overview of mentor duties and responsibilities, work policies and procedures, and overview of both the Freshman Seminar requirements and learning communities, and an explanation of the different assessments given to students. The training also contains a component about who freshmen are and how to work with this population. To clarify these issues, case studies are examined. In addition, students attend a session with the Director of the Counseling Center who discusses mental health issues and how to identify when a student may need counseling services. Staff members from the Study Abroad program, the Testing Center, and Freshman Seminar instructors are also on hand to discuss their roles in the Freshman Seminar course.

Peer mentors have several responsibilities. They serve as a student advocate for the interests, needs, and rights of first year students, and act as a mentor for academic

and leadership involvement. Additionally, they aim to help students adjust to college life and become academically successful. While mentors are open to discussing whatever needs the mentee may have, they also have an agenda which guides the meetings, a tactic which Long (2002) finds helpful. The agenda may include discussing time management skills, explaining the university's technological and physical resources, demonstrating study methods, discussing academic progress, and introducing student services, clubs and organizations. Additionally, mentors discuss test-taking strategies and financial aid and/or scholarship implications of failing or withdrawing from courses. The goal of the mentoring program at TAMIU is to have students develop both cognitively and emotionally to that they are able to achieve academic success.

Mentoring can be defined as “a process that allows leaders in the field to share their experience, vision and enthusiasm for the profession with colleagues who have exhibited leadership qualities and the potential for greater productivity and achievement” (Long, 2002, p. 94). The mentoring relationship is mutually beneficial; both the mentor and the mentee profit. When properly executed, the mentoring relationship can result in the personal and cognitive growth of both parties. Frierson (1997) writes that mentees' growth may include greater proficiency in that they learn how to apply skills and function independently. Mentors may gain both extrinsic rewards and intrinsic rewards such as personal satisfaction and validation (Warren, 2005).

Lee, Theoharis, Fitzpatrick, & Kim, et al. (2006) offer several strategies to increase the likelihood that the mentoring relationship will be a successful one. First, both mentor and mentee must prepare for the relationship. Each party must assess his or

her own strengths and weaknesses while preparing to build a comfortable mentoring relationship. Secondly, the mentor and mentee should share their professional vision. Third, both parties should focus on effective communication with the mentor concentrating on both verbal communication styles and listening skills. Fourth, both mentor and mentee should build a network of support. Mentees who are new to the school or place of business need to know where to find supplies and who to contact for information. The mentoring relationship should also involve the sharing of knowledge, collaborative problem solving, and caring and constructive feedback (Lee, Theoharis, Fitzpatrick, & Kim, et al., 2006). Mentoring is different from other reciprocal relationships in that it “is about creating an enduring and meaningful relationship with another person, with the focus on the quality of that relationship including such factors as mutual respect, willingness to learn from each other, [and] the use of interpersonal skills” (Salinitri, 2005, p. 858).

The mentoring relationship can also lead the cognitive development of the protégé. King and Kitchener (1994) have identified seven stages of reflective judgment. These stages can be broken down into three categories: pre-reflective thinking, quasi-reflective thinking, and reflective thinking. Pre-reflective thinking contains three stages. In stage one, a person has a single-category belief system. Stage two is “characterized by the belief that there is a true reality that can be known with certainty but is not known by everyone” (p. 51). In the third stage, a person feels that there are some truths that even authorities cannot explain. The next category, quasi-reflective thinking, contains two stages. In the fourth stage, a person realizes that truths are not certain, and in the fifth

stage, a person finds knowledge to be contextual and subjective. The third category, reflective thinking, also has two stages. The fifth stage is characterized “by the belief that knowing is a process that requires action on the part of the knower” (p. 66). Finally, in the sixth stage beliefs are justified by garnering evidence from different perspectives, and knowledge is constructed. Arredondo and Rucinski (1998) found that mentoring has shown “promise in fostering change in cognitive stage levels” (p. 324).

One type of mentoring, peer mentoring, is often used in educational settings and has special characteristics. Peer mentoring has been defined by Miller (2002) as when people of similar age and/or status taking up the mentor/mentee relationship. Peer mentoring may be employed “when the mentee is about to embark on an educational transition” (Miller, 2002, p. 122). According to Miller (2002) peer mentoring has several advantages for the mentees including learning more from the mentors than they would from adults. The mentors also experience advantages such as developing personal qualities, including self-confidence and responsibility, and developing communication skills. As with other mentoring relationships, the peer mentoring relationship can be advantageous to both parties.

According to Boswell (2004), “the partnership established by the mentoring experience requires short-term skill-development activities, lifelong-learning expectations, role development, and professional development” (p. 46). One of these skills is reflection. In order for the mentoring relationship to be productive, it must be reflective. In *The Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schon (1983) discusses Technical Rationality, knowing-in-action, and reflection-in-action. The overall theme of this book

is that in order for professionals to succeed in modern life, they must move from technical rationality to reflection-in-action. Technical rationality does not work as well in a dynamic, diverse society because problems rarely fit neatly into certain categories in which the professional has been trained. New problems and new situations come up everyday, and professionals must use the knowledge they have to reframe the problem and come up with creative solutions, to “figure out how to solve unique problems or make sense of puzzling phenomena by modeling the unfamiliar on the familiar” (Schon, 1983, p. 186). Being able to think on one’s feet is imperative. Additionally, the professional, or the mentor, must include his or her clients, or mentees, in the quest for a solution. Both mentor and mentee must work together to solve issues that come up in the course of everyday life. In mentoring, reflection-in-action is especially important. Mentors who refuse to reflect on their practices or reframe the problems of their mentee in such a way that they can be solved will not be an effective mentor; in fact, “unreflective practitioners are equally limited and destructive” (Schon, 1983, p. 290). This type of reflective activity can lead to changes in cognition. If mentors must use their knowledge in creative ways and come up with solutions to ill-defined problems, they will be moving closer to King and Kitchener’s reflective thinking stage. Likewise, if mentees are expected to engage in this process with their mentors, they will benefit cognitively as well.

Conferencing, journaling, and employing an indirect communication style may also be beneficial to the mentoring relationship. In one study (Arredondo & Rucinski, 1998), mentors observed the mentee’s practice. The mentor and mentee then had a

reflective conference about the observation. After the conference, the mentee reflected on the experience using a structured journal format to which the mentor responded. The mentors were instructed to use a non-direct communication style which included paraphrasing, asking probing questions, and pausing. The researchers' goal was for the mentoring relationship to have an effect on the cognitive development of both the mentor and the mentee. Arredondo and Rucinski (1998) found clear evidence of changes in cognitive development with journal "statements reflecting a view of knowledge as contextual, combined with justification of beliefs" (p. 321). To be reflective, it is important that the mentee feel that he or she is involved in solutions to problems rather than being given directives by the mentor. If the mentee simply receives instruction and answers from the mentor, he or she will not be allowed to grow. Conferencing may be particularly effective as it will allow a trusting relationship to develop between the mentor and the mentee. The most important aspect of both conferencing and journaling is that the mentee feel involved in the relationship, and that he or she has something to contribute to it.

If the mentoring relationship can lead to cognitive development, it can lead to moral development as well as these two are related. Moral development is connected to democracy and the realization of the need of a just society. People who have developed moral reasoning will find unjust treatment based on race, ethnicity, gender, class or sexuality to be reprehensible. There are many ways in which the mentoring relationship can lead to moral development. If the mentee is of an oppressed group, the mentoring relationship can help the mentee find his or her voice, which is empowering. However, if

the mentee is to gain moral development, he or she must be at higher cognitive stage (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). The mentoring relationship can also help the mentee with identity formation. In order to understand our life experiences we must “explore the complexity of the identity we create for ourselves and the identities imposed on us by family, government, religion, social convention and schools” (Slattery & Rapp, 2003, p. 157). Mentees may learn that judging people on what they perceive as their identity is immoral (Slattery & Rapp, 2003). If the mentee is to grow, he or she must gain moral development in order to fight for a just society.

While reflecting, journaling, and conferencing may be beneficial skills for mentors and mentees to possess, there are also barriers to the mentoring relationship. Some of these concerns are ethical. According to Warren (2005), one of these concerns is that the mentoring relationship “may lead to romantic or sexual involvement between the mentor and the protégé” (pg. 143). This may be especially true of the peer mentor relationship since the mentor and mentee are likely to be of the same age and in the same stage of their lives. Warren (2005) also points out another concern: the mentor may become more of a friend than a mentor which may affect the mentor’s ability to provide appropriate help to the mentee. In order to avoid these problems Welfel (as qtd. in Warren, 2005, p. 145) offers several suggestions to mentors. These include refraining from sharing personal matters with the mentee, ensuring that time spent together is professional, and clarifying the boundaries of the mentoring relationship.

Another barrier is the level of comfort a mentee has with his or her mentor. Salinitri (2005) found that mentees did not often discuss feelings of self-efficacy. In

fact, mentors and mentees rarely discuss “feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, or anger” (p.866). This problem may be compounded in a peer mentoring relationship. If the mentor and the mentee are close in age and attend the same college or university, the mentee may feel embarrassed in discussing personal problems, especially since he or she may see the mentor in social situations or on campus.

Smith (2004) sees additional problems with mentoring on college campuses. One problem lies in the idea that most college mentoring programs do not teach mentees how to “interpret the unwritten and unspoken rules of the higher education system” (p.49). Again, this may be especially problematic in a peer mentoring relationship. If the mentor is employed by the college or university, he or she may feel loyal to the institution. This may prohibit him or her from imparting information to the mentee that may put the university in a negative light.

Another barrier in the mentoring relationship is related to the gender of the mentor and mentee. Chesler and Chesler (2002) found that the typical mentoring relationship is more suitable for males because its emphasis on “technical and instrumental issues is well suited to the preponderance of traditionally-socialized men” (p. 50-51). Chesler and Chesler (2002) also found that young people prefer to work with people like themselves, so girls generally prefer working with other females. They also found that among peers, same gender mentoring can be particularly helpful to girls as it “builds community and de-emphasizes seniority and hierarchy” (p. 52). Females may not respond as well to male mentors for many reasons. Differences in communication

styles could lead to misunderstandings, or the mentee may simply not feel comfortable discussing some matters with a mentor of the opposite sex.

Finally, race and ethnicity may become a barrier in the mentoring relationship. Miller (2002) questions whether or not the mentor and mentee must be from the same cultural background in order for the mentoring relationship to be an effective one. He found that “mentors and young people did not have to be from the same racial and cultural background to benefit from mentoring, unless there was a special need for the cultural development of the mentee” (p. 95). Miller (2002) found that other things in the mentoring relationship, such as skills of the mentor, were more important than racial, ethnic, or cultural background. Even so, there are several benefits to cultural matching. One, the level of trust may be higher between mentor and mentee if both are from the same cultural background. Secondly, mentors who have suffered the same disadvantages as the mentees may have more insight into mentees’ problems (Miller, 2002). The main issue with cross cultural mentoring is that the mentee must feel comfortable enough with the mentor to establish a relationship with him or her. If this is not possible with a culturally different mentor, then every effort should be made to find a mentor who is of the same background as the mentee. In the TAMIU program, this has not been an issue as a great majority of both mentors and mentees are Hispanic.

The mentoring relationship is a reciprocal one, with advantages for both the mentor and mentee. It allows both parties to grow as people, professionals, and/or students. In a good mentoring relationship, there will be trust between mentor and mentee. Additionally, cognitive and moral development will occur. Mentors and mentees

must learn to be reflective, and practice indirect communication. Despite its limitations, mentoring continues to be an effective tool for retaining professionals and students.

ACADEMIC ADVISING

Academic advising may also be an important component in freshman success. In the TAMU first-year success program, advising may happen on several levels. All first-time freshmen are advised by a staff member in the Office of Recruitment and School Relations. Once they are enrolled in the Freshman Seminar class, students may be advised by their peer mentor. Although advising can take place at any time, mentors focus on advising during the week or two preceding Spring registration and then again before Summer and Fall registration. Peer mentors will aid students in obtaining and reading their degree plan as well as help them register for courses. Much informal advising also occurs. Since mentors are upper-division students, they often share their experiences with certain classes and/or professors. Students also have the opportunity to see a faculty advisor from their college if they wish.

Lowe and Toney (2000) found that academic advisement has a significant impact on retention rates. Enrollment decreases among students who were dissatisfied with the advising they received or who were poorly advised. They believe that the “goal of the advisor...is to assist the student in the successful negotiation of the university system (p. 96). Their study found that frequency of contact was the key to a satisfactory advising experience. Regardless of the type of advisor (faculty, staff, or student) it was the number of times student met with their advisor that mattered. According to Lowe and Toney (2001), an advisor does more than just help register students for classes; he or she

“serves as a facilitator of communication, a coordinator of learning experiences, and a referral agent” (p. 1030). Importantly, these researchers believe that a peer advising system can do just as well as one that utilizes faculty or staff.

Campbell and Nutt (2008) state that “academic advising plays a critical role in connecting students with learning opportunities to foster and support their engagement, success, and the attainment of key learning outcomes” (p. 4). They believe that advisement is a form of learning for students. Through advisement, students will become more engaged in their learning, thus making it more personal and satisfying. If this occurs, students will more likely be retained. Campbell and Nutt (2008) also feel that advising for first generation college students is especially critical, an important fact for a university such as TAMU where many students fit this profile. As with Lowe and Toney, Campbell and Nutt feel that academic advising should be more than simple class registration; supporting social and intellectual growth is also important. In fact, they claim that “through academic advising, students learn to become members of their higher education community, to think critically about their roles and responsibilities as students, and to prepare to be educated citizens of a democratic society and a global community. Academic advising engages students beyond their own world views, while acknowledging their individual characteristics, values and motives as they enter, move through, and exit the institution” (p. 5).

SUMMARY

Learning communities provided many advantages; one of the most important is that it allows students to form peer groups. When students are able to make friends, they feel more connected to the university, which may aid in retention. Learning communities also provide for shared learning and collaboration. In this way, students are able to co-construct knowledge which may make them feel as if they have a voice in the educational process. This may be especially important among minority students who may not have experienced this before. Another advantage of learning community is that of group commitment. When students get to know one another they are more likely to be committed to each other and their academic career. This may lead to better attendance, homework completion and test scores. Finally, if relationships are established, students may be more highly motivated to do well.

Freshman Seminar classes have been shown to increase persistence. Some researchers have found that Freshman Seminar classes can lead students to have a deeper understanding of content in their other courses, particularly if the courses are theme-based. Freshman Seminar courses also aid in learning by providing study skills, encouraging academic engagement, and helping students adjust to college. Since these classes are typically small, students are more likely to engage in active learning, making the course more student centered.

Using an integrated curriculum has also been shown to be helpful to freshman. There are many different forms of integration, but all seem to provide a deeper understanding of the content being learned. An integrated curriculum may also help

students connect their school world with the outside world, an important point if students are to be retained. When students realize the worth of what they are learning, they may be more likely to persist. Finally, because students are able to see connections across disciplines and between school life and their lives outside of school, an integrated curriculum may encourage a more positive attitude toward learning.

Peer mentoring may be an important component during the freshman year. Mentors may serve as academic advisors, in addition to being an advocate for the interests, needs, and rights of freshmen. While the main purpose of the mentoring session is to help students develop, the mentoring relationship helps both parties grow. However, there are some barriers to the mentoring relationship. These include mentees feeling comfortable with the mentor, differences in gender between the mentor and the mentee, and the mentor or mentee seeing the other as a friend rather than someone in a mentoring relationship.

Advising is also an important aspect of the first year. Advising should be an ongoing activity, not something that only occurs immediately before registration. Advising can have an impact on retention rates. One of the most important parts of the advising process is frequency. Studies have shown that students who frequently see their advisor during the academic year have higher retention rates than those who do not. The type of advisor, either staff, faculty, or another student, does not seem to affect how satisfied a student is with his or her advisor.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

METHODOLOGY

For this study, I plan to use a case study involving one learning community class. The class has nineteen students eligible to participate in the study. Seventeen are first-time freshmen, and two are sophomores. All are between the ages of eighteen and twenty with twelve eighteen-year-olds, eight nineteen-year-olds, and one twenty-year-old. There are sixteen females and three males; all are Hispanic. Six spoke English as their first language, five spoke Spanish, and eight learned English and Spanish at the same time. Twelve chose English as their language preference, while two chose Spanish, and five chose a mix of the two languages. As for parental educational status, five students had mothers who did not graduate from high school, three had mothers who had a high school degree, five had mothers with some college, four had mothers with college degrees, and two had mothers with graduate degrees. With respect to paternal educational levels, nine did not graduate from high school, three had high school degrees, five had some college, one had a college degree, and one had a graduate degree. Of the nineteen students, six were the first in their families to attend college. Majors varied, with twelve students being education majors, three undecided, two nursing, and one dance. All but one had participated in learning communities the semester prior to the study, and all were enrolled in a learning community during the study. One student scored between a 400-500 on the SAT, two between 601-700, three between 701-800, five between 801-900, three between 901-1000, one between 1001-1100, and two

between 1101-1200. Two students took the ACT and scored 17 and 18. Based on SAT or ACT scores and parental education, students in the class have a wide range of pre-college academic preparation. According to Stake, (2005), “a case study is both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry” (p. 444). For this study, I am interested in ascertaining the perceptions that Hispanic students have about learning communities, not just the academic outcome of their involvement. The case study will focus on if and how learning communities provide a valid educational experience for culturally different students.

Stake (2005) identifies three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and multiple. If the researcher wants to gain a deeper understanding of a particular case, this is an intrinsic case study. In an instrumental case study, the researcher wishes to study a particular case in order to generalize to other cases. In a multiple case study, the researcher studies several cases in order to investigate a population. Furthermore, a case study serves several purposes. It can seek the particular in the ordinary by examining the nature of the case, its history, and its setting; it can be organized around a particular issue; or it can be studied within its historical, physical or cultural context (Stake, 2005).

Cases are usually selected through purposive sampling, and researchers may “choose that case from which [they] feel [they] can learn the most” (Stake, 2005, p. 451). This may be the case to which the researcher has the most access. Researchers often examine the individual’s or group’s interaction with others and their environment. Data is gathered by observing and recording these interactions. In addition to observation, data collection may involve conducting interviews and collecting artifacts.

Because case studies are qualitative, triangulation, “a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (Stake, 2005, p. 454), is particularly important.

Mertens (1998) defines a case study as “one type of ethnographic (interpretive) research that involves intensive and detailed study of one individual or a group as an entity, through observation, self-reports, and any other means” (p. 166). She lists five steps in conducting a case study. These include developing a research question, identifying the propositions, specifying the unity of analysis, establishing the logic between the data and the propositions, and explaining the criteria for the interpretation of the findings. Mertens suggests that how and why questions are appropriate for a cases study. In my study, I will be looking at how the Freshman Seminar class, an integrated curriculum, and learning communities affect students as far as their perceptions about the university and their connectedness to it. Propositions are similar to hypotheses in that they “state why you think you might observe a specific behavior or relationship” (p. 167). In my study, I think I will find that students feel the freshman year experience, particularly learning communities, allow them to make connections to other people as well as to the university.

McMillan (2000) defines a case study as “an in-depth analysis of one or more events, settings, programs, social groups, communities, individuals, or other ‘bounded systems’” (p.266). He defines five different types of case studies: historical, observational, life history, situation analysis, mutlicase, and multisite. A historical case study looks at an organization’s development over time, an observational case study

mainly utilizes participant observation, a life history is first-person narrative, a situation analysis deals with a specific event from different perspectives, a multicase study is one in which different entities are studied, and a multisite case is one in which many sites are studied. The type of case study which best fits my research is a situation analysis because events (being in the Freshman Seminar course, using an integrated curriculum, and taking part in a learning community) are studied from the perspective of many different students in a single class. I chose to do a case study for my research because I wanted an in-depth look at students' perceptions about their first-year experience. I chose a class rather than an individual because I wanted to evaluate those perceptions from the viewpoint of different types of students.

Flyvbjerg (2004) discussed five misunderstandings about case-study research. These include: 1) theoretical knowledge is more important than practical knowledge, 2) case studies are not valuable because they can not be generalized, 3) a case study is only helpful in the hypothesis stage of research, 4) case studies tend to confirm the researcher's preconceived ideas, and 5) theories are hard to generate from case studies (p.421). Flyvbjerg goes on to rectify each of these misunderstandings. First, he believes that people need to achieve practical knowledge before they can achieve theoretical knowledge, and in that way, case studies are valuable. He states that "the closeness of the case study to real-life situations and its multiple wealth of details are important" because it helps the researcher understand that "human behavior cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rule-governed acts found at the lowest level of the learning

process, and much theory” (p. 422). He also believes that case studies help the researcher in his or her own learning process in how to do good research.

As for the problem of case studies confirming a researcher’s preconceived ideas, Flyvbjerg offers that “researchers who have conducted intensive, in-depth case studies typically report that their preconceived views, assumptions, concepts and hypotheses were wrong” (p. 429). Flyvbjerg feels that case studies are just as rigorous as quantitative methods albeit in a different manner. In fact, he believes that case studies, because they allow the researcher to place himself or herself directly in a situation, represents one of the highest forms of learning.

METHODS

For my instrumental case study, I plan to interview, individually, several students in the learning community, focusing on their perceptions of the advantages or disadvantages of participating in the learning community. I will also interview students about their perceptions of the freshman seminar course as well as the use of an integrated curriculum. Because I want to get an in-depth understanding of students’ perceptions about their first-year experience, I chose to do a semi-structured interview; specific questions will be asked, but they are open-ended and students may answer however they wish. According to Rapley (2004), “interviewing can be used as a way to enable previously hidden, or silenced, voices to speak” (p. 25). I feel that this is particularly important when studying freshman. Many freshman enter college either not knowing what to expect or expecting to be told what to do as they had been in their previous educational experiences. Many may feel that, other than the choice of major, they do not

have a voice or the right to actively engage in their educational careers. Many first-time freshmen are simply told what courses to take from an advisor, but they do not understand why they must take such courses. At TAMIU, most freshmen do not understand why they must take Freshman Seminar, why they must be enrolled in a learning community, or what the advantages of an integrated curriculum are. In this study, through interviewing, students were given the opportunity to explore the questions of why the University has instituted these measures.

Rapley (2004) believes that interview data reflects a reality that is constructed by the interviewer and the interviewee. The researcher has more involvement in the process because he or she must work to build a cooperative relationship. If this relationship is not established, the interviewer may not be able to glean rich data from the respondent. Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2006) define an in-depth interview as one which “assumes that individuals have unique and important knowledge about the social world that is ascertainable through verbal communication” (p. 119). In order to obtain this information, the researchers must build a relationship with the interviewee. The researcher must be an active listener in order for the interview to produce a wealth of knowledge. Since respondents are allowed to tell their stories, they are seen as experts. Rather than the interview being seen as the expert, he or she “becomes an advocate and partner in the study, hoping to be able to use the results to advocate social policies and ameliorate the conditions of the interviewee” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p.696). In my research, I hope to understand the perceptions of my students in order for them to be more successful as students so that they may be able to continue their education.

An in-depth interview relies on the “co-creation” of meaning (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 134). The interview “focuses on facilitating a coconstruction of the interviewer’s and an informant’s experience and understanding of the topic of interest and not necessarily on the context of that understanding” (Miller & Crabtree, 2004, p. 188). In my research, much of what I thought I knew about the first-year experience had to be re-examined after I interviewed my students. Some of the things I thought were helpful for students were actually not. In my role as interviewer, I had to be prepared to revise my agenda and my understanding of the first-year experience and create a new understanding based on what my respondents told me. Interviewing should encompass not only what and why people believe something, but also how they come to believe it. Researchers “must be able to take the role of the respondents and attempt to see the situation from their viewpoint rather than superimpose his or her...preconceptions on them (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 708).

Another important issue in interviewing is that of reflexivity. Reflexivity is “a process through which a researcher recognizes, examines, and understands how his or her own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 141). As an instructor, I must be aware that my views of the Freshman Seminar course and learning communities were probably vastly different than those of my students. It is important to be aware of these differences in the interviewing process. One way to “accentuate reflexivity in interviewing is through narrative, where in trying to understand the ‘other’ we learn about (our) ‘selves’, reaching...the circle of understanding” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 714). In-depth

interviewing cannot be value-neutral; the interviewer and the interviewee have distinct backgrounds and values. The knowledge gathered from an interview is co-constructed and serves as a learning experience for both parties.

I will also collect artifacts from students, including journals from the freshman seminar course. Like the interviews, the journal entries will focus on the students' experiences in a learning community. Writing is important because "language does 'reflect' social reality, but produces meaning, creates social reality" (Richardson, 2004, p. 476). According to Richardson (2004), language helps us construct ourselves. She suggests that there are two important things with regard to writing. One, "it directs us to understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times" (p. 476). Also, through writing, students are able to address a particular topic to a particular audience instead of trying to say everything to everyone. Through journal writing, students are able to construct their own reality; the researcher is less of a factor.

ANALYSIS

I will use an interpretative approach to analyze the data I collect which will allow me to "uncover patterns of human activity, action, and meaning" (Berg, 2004, p. 304). I will use interviews to find out students' perceptions of the academic and social support they receive from other students in their learning community. For this portion of the study, I will use semi-structured interview questions as a guide. Participant answers to interview questions as well as participant artifacts will be analyzed using content analysis procedures to count concepts, which "involve words grouped together in conceptual clusters (ideas) that constitute, in some instances, variables in a typical

research hypothesis” (Sanders & Pinhey as qtd in Berg, 2004). Initially, open coding will be employed to create these categories. When using open coding, four guidelines must be followed. Researchers must ask the data consistent and specific questions which will help him or her keep the original research questions in mind. The guidelines also suggest that the researcher analyze data closely and carefully, creating many categories which will eventually be narrowed down. In addition, the researcher should frequently interrupt the coding process in order to analyze how the categories relate to theory. Finally, the researcher should never assume relevance of any variable unless the data show it to be so (Berg, 2004). Once open coding has been completed, I will utilize axial coding to further analyze each broad category. This method will allow me to see patterns and linkages between broad categories and sub-categories as well as linkages to critical and sociocultural theories.

One secondary source of data will be used. At the end of the semester, students are asked to evaluate their student mentors. The questionnaire contains fifteen statements, and responses correspond to a Likert scale of 1-9, with 1 being strongly agree and 9 being strongly disagree. There is also an open-ended question which asks students to make recommendations. This questionnaire was created by the director of the mentoring program in order to assess the mentors’ performance. Most questions deal with the relationship between the mentor and the student as that is the aspect of mentoring this department wishes to stress. Studying data collected for another reason “allows both for reinterpretation and also for new questions of the data. New themes can

be studied” (Corti & Thompson, 2004, p. 332). Rather than looking at the data from the mentor’s point of view, I will be examining it from the students’ perspective.

Although nineteen students participated, answers to some questions total less than nineteen and some more. In cases where answers totaled less than nineteen, some students chose not to answer that particular question. In cases where responses total more than nineteen, some students gave lengthy and varied answers. This may have led to their responses being coded into more than one category.

The Institutional Review Board at the institution where the interviews and participant observation will take place will be petitioned for approval.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The first interview administered to students pertained to their perceptions about learning communities. Responses were first coded by negative or positive responses. These responses were then coded into further categories. The questions were as follows: *How do you feel about the requirement that all freshman enroll in a learning community?*

Five students responded negatively to this question. They felt it was “pointless” , or they simply did not like that it was a requirement. One student responded that “it won’t be as successful if you have to take a class you don’t like, or [with] the group [of] students you don’t [like], ... you are forced to take it anyway”. In other words, when students sign up for a learning community they must take certain classes with the same group of students. This particular student felt this was a good idea if the person liked the classes and students who were enrolled in that community, but it would not be as successful if the student were unhappy with either.

Four students liked the learning community requirement because they believed it helped them for the college experience. One student responded that “it is a good thing because this way freshmen will get used to and more comfortable in college”. Five students like the idea of learning communities because it helped them make friends. One student felt “it’s good because you get to know people that have the same classes with you and make new friends”. Responses to later questions confirm that making friends is

of vital importance to college freshmen. An additional seven students felt that the learning community requirement was a good idea, but were unable to elaborate any further.

How has being in a learning community enabled you to make friends at the university?

Five students responded that students are able to help each other with classes and that has enabled them to become friends. This question yielded responses such as “whenever I need help, I feel more comfortable asking someone from my class in my learning community, than someone who is not”. An additional ten students responded that simply seeing the same students for three classes enabled them to become friends. One student responded, “By seeing the same people in the majority of classes, of course friends are going to be made”. Another felt that she had “become close friends with some of my classmates because we take most of our classes together”. Three students felt that learning communities enabled them to make friends because they had common goals and/or majors as other students in their classes. Finally, three students responded that learning communities did help them make friends, but they did not go into further detail.

Do you feel at ease with the people in your learning community? Why?

All students responded positively to this question. Four felt at ease because they had the same goals as others in their learning community. One student wrote, “we all have similar goals and they are friendly”. Another student felt that students “usually engage in lectures and assignments together, so we are pretty much used to each other”. An additional four students reported that they felt at ease because students in the

learning community help each other. One respondent stated that “we get to help each other out whenever we have any questions”. Eight students reported feeling at ease simply because they had become friends with others in their learning community. One student stated “because I have them in most of my classes, they know how I am”.

Another student felt at ease because “you develop a confidence because you know each other”. One student felt at ease with only some of her classmates because most of them were education majors, and she was criminal justice. Three students responded that they did feel at ease with the other students, but did not say why.

When you miss class, how do other students in your learning community help you catch up on any missed work?

Two students responded that they did not ask for help, and two responded that they had not missed. Of the remaining students, responses were coded into various categories. Six students reported that their classmates would tell them about homework or any upcoming due dates. Responses such as, “They tell me what we exactly did and what homework or assignment we will be doing next time” were common in this group. Six students claimed they could get notes from their fellow students if they missed class: “When I miss class it’s very easy for me to catch up with the work because my friends pass me the notes or I can just call them right away to know”. Three students responded that they would contact someone from their learning community and ask what they missed.

If you prefer to go to the Writing Center, CASA (the tutoring center), or LAC (the learning assistance center for education majors), would you choose another student from your learning community? Why?

One student answered that he did not know, and six reported in the negative because they either prefer to go alone, or they would go with a friend outside their learning community. One student in this group chooses not to go with someone from the learning community because “I would just talk”.

However, most students reported that they would go with someone from their learning community. Five responded that they felt it was a good idea because they are working on the same assignments. One student said, “I would choose to go with them because we can both sit with a tutor and listen and learn from each other”. An additional seven students reported they would go together because they are friends. One student responded, “I feel comfortable with them, and we share the same classes”. Two students responded that they would go with another student from their learning community, but did not say why.

Do you study outside of class with other students from your learning community? Why?

Seven students reported that they prefer to study alone, and two responded that they have different instructors and/or courses for most of their classes. One student said he prefers to study alone, “but if some one needs help or if I need help I look to [another student] like a tutor to help me out”. Four students liked to study together because since they have the same class, they can have a discussion about it and get different points of view or share notes. One student said that “we all go to a study room in the library.

“When a test is coming up we all get together and study. We think this is easier because we have discussions”. Two students responded that they like to study together because they feel they can help each other better that way. One student responded that he will study with other students because it may help them pass. Additionally, two students reported that they study with others simply because they are friends. Finally, three students responded that they like to go to the Learning Assistance Center and study together there.

Do you go out with other students in your learning community for non-academic reasons?

There was a range of responses to this question. Eight students responded no, but with some qualifiers. For example, one responded, “not yet”, implying that he or she would be willing to; one responded that he hadn’t, but that “I wouldn’t mind”; one said that she didn’t go out with them, “but I’ve seen them out and hang out with them for a while”; and two said they don’t really go out with anyone. This would seem to indicate that although they do not currently associate with other students for non-academic reasons. they would be open to the idea. Three students reported that they sometimes go out with students from their learning community, and eight reported that they regularly go to eat or to the movies with others from their learning community. Two students said that they do see their classmates outside of the classroom, but mainly for academic reasons.

What are some ways that students in your learning community have helped you academically this semester?

Three students stated that their classmates had not helped them academically. Six reported that their learning community classmates have served as study partners or tutors. One reported that “they made me tutor them so I learned also”. Another responded that “Learning communities make it easier to make study groups and sometimes if you miss out on something they can fill you in on the subject”. Ten students reported that other students have simply been helpful in a variety of ways. One student said, “they let me borrow their books...because my car with all my books and belongings got stolen”. Another student reported that “When I missed class, they helped me with my assignment and homework”. Many responses in this category dealt with getting homework and notes when a student had been absent. One student responded that she had been helped academically because “I’ve gotten closer with a couple more girls and guys that cheer me up when we’re at the same level in a class”. This response would indicate that social support is an important part of academic achievement.

Is it an advantage to see the same students every day? Why?

Eight students responded positively because it helps them in their classes. One said, “In a way it is because you get to learn from each other and at the same time you also help each other”. Another responded, “Yes, because familiarity assists in learning material”. An additional nine students felt it was an advantage because they became friends. One student felt that “it is much less awkward and it doesn’t make you feel alone”. Another reported that “they become sort of a support group”. Four students felt

that seeing the same students every day could be both an advantage and a disadvantage. To make this point, one student said, “Yes and no. Yes because you get to know them more and no because you need to get to know other people”.

How have members of your learning community supported you during the course of this semester?

Seven students reported receiving emotional or social support. Responses included: “They have supported me by helping me out when I am afraid of failing a class”, “Yes, at a point to where they’re behind you if you need help in anything”, and “Some students usually say ‘It’s okay, you’ll do fine, or don’t worry’”.

An additional ten students reported that they felt supported academically. For example, one respondent said, “When it comes to turning in assignments they are somewhat of a motivation to turn it in on time”. Other students said they were supported academically by studying together, helping each other with homework, preparing for exams, or “by pushing me”.

Do you think being in a learning community has helped you adapt to the university? If so, how?

Two students responded that it had not helped them adapt. Four said it had helped them because students in the learning community had common problems, and being in a learning community made it easier to ask for help. One student responded, “In a way it has because sometimes what you don’t know someone else might”. Another said, “Yes it has so much. I am a shy and quiet person and I don’t like to ask for help but I have learned that it is good to seek for it”. Nine students felt being in a learning

community has helped them adapt because they were able to make friends more easily. One student said it helps “because knowing and being comfortable with other students helps”; another responded “Yes, because I know people in my major and more people overall”. Four students felt being in a learning community helped them take advantage of university resources. Students reported finding it easier “to go about your classes and university functions” and knowing “where all the important places are, and all the important information about the university”. One student reported feeling “more like a ‘college student’”.

Students were also asked to write two journals about their experiences in a learning community. The first prompt they were asked to respond to was as follows:

Do you think learning communities have helped you academically?

Only one student responded in the negative. She felt that learning communities were not useful as one could study with “anyone else you know and have classes with”. However, fourteen students found at least some aspects of the learning community a positive experience. Two students felt that learning communities presented opportunities for new ways to learn because they are “introduced to new people and new things”. Fourteen students felt that learning communities enabled them to get academic help from their classmates either by reminding each other of assignments and due dates, or by giving students who had missed class the notes from that day. One student wrote that they “can help each other with homework, study for tests, or share notes and discussions”. Another wrote that being in a learning community helps her to “always turn everything in on time because we constantly remind each other and our work is

better because we help each other”. Seven students believed that learning communities were helpful because it enabled them to form study groups easier: “Sharing classes with the same people help form study groups and interaction”. Five students mentioned that learning communities help them get to know people with common goals, especially for those students who were placed in learning communities by major. One respondent wrote that since many in her learning community were education majors, they could “relate to many things within our class”; another responded that they “help each other strive for better grades”. One student wrote that the competition with the learning community helped him keep his grades up. He felt that students in his learning community “push you in your studies by competing for the higher grade between friends”. Finally, one student felt that being in a learning community made class presentations easier: “when you have to present in front of class you don’t feel that nervous because you already know most of the class”.

The second journal posed the following question:

From a social aspect, what has your learning community experience been like?

Four students answered that they’d had a negative experience. Of these four, two felt it was a disadvantage to see the same students in three classes. One student responded that she “didn’t like it because you had the same people over and over again in all your classes and I wanted to meet new people”; the other wrote, “I feel I’m in the same group all the time and haven’t truly experienced the university life style”. The other two students who responded negatively seemed to feel the people in their learning

community did not share the same goals. They both felt that their classmates distracted them from getting their work done.

Nineteen students reported a positive social experience from their learning communities. One student simply stated that being in a learning community made class more “fun overall”. Four students mentioned that learning communities helped them build relationships. One student commented that “I feel it’s easier to enjoy a class with people you know and sometimes makes you look forward to it”; another wrote that “I met a lot of people and build relationships with them”. Ten students felt learning communities helped them make friends. One student reported that she “loved it since I love making friends this was the best experience ever”. Another said she met “a lot of people who are now my good friends”. Six respondents said they just enjoyed the experience of meeting new people. For example, the great majority of our students are from Laredo, making it difficult for out-of-town students to meet people. One out-of-town student wrote, “I am not from Laredo, I don’t really know people from Laredo until I got here. The learning community helped a lot because I was always with the same people and got to know them very well”. Six students also felt that learning communities made a difference because they were able to meet people who had common goals and/or majors. A student wrote, “I related to all my classmates because we all shared the same goals in life, which is to teach the future. We had like a bond with everyone in that class”. Another reported that she “liked the fact that most of the students in there were education majors, just like myself”. Lastly, four students responded that they felt the learning community functioned as a support group. One student wrote, “We became real

good friends, we laughed, we whined, we cried because we were failing bio, and we cheered because we passed our classes. All of us formed a bond and became a family, we not only talked about our academics, but we also spoke about our problems and concerns”. Another reported that “we have our own little support group within our classes”.

FRESHMAN SEMINAR

Because Freshman Seminar is the cornerstone course in all learning communities, students were also interviewed about their perceptions concerning this course. The questions were as follows:

Do you feel you have benefited from the Freshman Seminar course? Why or why not?

One student felt that he benefited from the self assessments done in this course. He said, “I’ve learned more about who I am and my designation here at TAMIU”. Three students felt they benefited because the course helped them make friends at the University. One student reported that she “benefited from my awesome classmates. They are a great help”. Five students felt the information about University resources was the greatest benefit. One student commented that “This class has been beneficial to me because we get people to come and talk to us about different things like financial aid”. Finally, twelve students felt the course gave them valuable study skills. For example, “it helped me benefit from learning how to take notes, and how to organize myself and my thoughts better”; “I have learned how to study and how to improve my grade”.

Do you think there is anything you have done as a result of your Freshman Seminar course to enhance your academic experience that you would not have done otherwise?

Two students reported that there was nothing they would have done differently had they not been enrolled in Freshman Seminar. Three students reported that had it not been for this course, they would not have gone to meet with their professors during office hours. One said, “The professor meetings. I would have never talked to professors if I wasn’t required, but it did help me to know how I’m doing in these classes”. Two students believed they would not have learned how to use the library; “I don’t think I would have learned how to use the library as efficiently as I do”. Two students mentioned the importance of studying. For example, one student reported, “I took more pride in studying because my seminar teachers and mentor tell me that I need to study, and I do”. The majority of students, twelve, responded that they would have never gone to the Writing Center, CASA (tutoring center), or LAC (Learning Assistance Center) if they had not taken the Freshman Seminar course. One student said, “Going to the tutoring center had helped me a lot because otherwise I would not have gone if it was not required to do so”. Another reported that “because we are obliged to complete some hours at CASA for our grade in this class I found that kind of helpful. The tutors have helped me with my work for English. One student felt she would not have done many things had she not been required to by this course: “I think that I would still be kind of lost and I would not have pushed myself as much to go to any centers or meetings”.
What have you learned about the University from the Freshman Seminar course?

Four students felt they learned valuable information about the library: “how to use ProQuest and all those other library materials”, “I learned how to use the TAMIU databases”, and “The library; I shouldn’t be afraid to go and get help”. An additional nine students felt the Financial Aid presentation was most helpful. One student said that she learned about “all the [GPA and hours completed] requirements we need so we can stay in the University. Also, all the information about financial aid”. Another commented that he learned “to do my FAFSA ahead of time”. Four students found the Health Center presentation especially helpful; some students had just learned that “we have a clinic”. Two students mentioned that they Study Abroad presentation was beneficial, while one mentioned the Career Services presentation as particularly helpful. In fact, she “learned about the work study we can do here on campus”. An additional four students learned the importance of meeting with professors: “I learned that it is very important to have professor meetings and to study hard before a test”. Two students believed learning about registration was a helpful component of the Freshman Seminar course: “I learned about registration, the library databases, books, professors, and tutoring”. Three students also mentioned that they found information about campus activities and clubs useful. One said, he “found out about certain organization I didn’t know we had”. Another reported “there are many activities to do here”.

What, if anything, have you learned about yourself in Freshman Seminar?

One student felt that he did not learn anything about himself. Others, however, felt that they learned a great deal. Four felt that they had some issues that needed to be corrected in order to be successful in college. One said, “The difference between last

semester and this semester is that I have matured. I have learned from my mistakes and use that as an advantage toward my academic goals". Another said, "I've learned that I still need to let go of bad habits like procrastination. I turn in my home work on time, but not to a good level of progress". Yet another respondent commented that she learned "to take everything seriously, and not joke around with college because then at the last minute you will be crying. Also, to be more responsible and I also take things more seriously now". Three students said they learned that they were actually more assertive than they thought they were: "I've learned that I am an aggressive leader". An additional three students felt that they learned they could succeed in college. One reported, "I learned a lot about myself thanks to all those quizzes we get to do. The Color Code, the test-taking, etc. I also learned that I can achieve more than what I think I can". The second student said, "I learned that if I want something so bad I can most likely achieve it". Finally, the third responded, "That if I am pushed I can exceed much more. Not only that but I love that teachers can count on me to do my work and do it well". Three students said they learned how to manage their time better. One commented, "I have learned I need to work on how to manage my time more and study more. Three students felt that they received more insight on certain personal characteristics. One said she learned "that I shouldn't be shy for anything if I have something as a concern or questions. I should speak up and not be shy". Another said, "I've learned that as odd as I am, there is hope for me yet. Also, I happen to be the way I am because of the traits I exhibit, not necessarily alien because of them". Two students mentioned learning about their stress levels: "I've learned how to deal with stress and my personal problems".

One person said she learned what she didn't know: "I have learned about myself that I wasn't as knowledgeable about college as I thought I was. There was some basic things I didn't know about such as financial aid things".

What have you learned about University resources?

Three students answered that they did not know or that they did not learn anything about the resources. Four students reported that they learned about the library. One commented that "the library proved to be more help than I actually thought it would be". Another said, "I learned to use the databases that are crucial for our English class". Three students said they actually learned how to access and use the resources available to them. Ten respondents said they learned that university resources were there for the students and were beneficial or helpful to the students. Some comments included:

"I have learned that there is always someone to help you in anything you need".

"They are all very useful. The library is awesome, I like going to the gym a lot, and I've been to the health clinic and [they] helped me get excused from work".

"I learned that there are a lot of resources available to help students pass their courses".

Why do you believe the University instituted a Freshman Seminar course?

Although most students believed the course was for the students' benefit, one student believed the University simply wanted "to have a higher retention rate and to get more /or money". Two students felt it was instituted to teach incoming freshmen skills they need for college or resources they need to know about: "I think they did this to teach students about the different things that are available to them. For example, CASA, LAC, and the Writing Center. I also think so that you can meet people and share. The

majority of students, nineteen, believe the course was initiated to ease the transition from high school to college. Some comments include:

“To help freshman succeed their first year of college”

“The Freshman Seminar course was probably instituted to lead freshmen through the good way because many freak out and want to drop out and not achieve their education”.

“To make it easier for us to get through the first year”.

“Since college life is such a big change from high school life, I believe these courses helped me and other freshmen succeed”.

“I believe the University instituted this course because they wanted for freshmen to feel welcome and supported by the University. They also wanted to give students extra help”.

“Because most freshmen don’t know their way around college life and freshmen year is very important because it is when you truly see yourself as an independent person; however, some of us seem to go over our heads, then we need this course to keep us on track”.

What would you change about Freshman Seminar if you could?

Two students believe the course should not be a requirement: “Delete it. As much as it helps, it is an extra course that some may not be able to afford without scholarships or financial aid”. Two students would delete the peer mentoring requirement. Three students responded that they would not make attendance at a tutoring center mandatory. One student said the course “should not require students to visit the LAC if they are not failing”. One student requested more guest speakers because “it shows people really care [when] they take time out of their busy schedules to

come and speak to us”. One student wanted “more time to study for other courses for exams”. Three students desired additional discussion time, so they could “talk about our experiences so we can learn from each other”. Finally, nine students reported that they would not change anything about the course.

Has the Freshman Seminar course made you feel a part of the University? Why or why not?

Two students felt that the Freshman Seminar course did not make them feel a part of the University. One said, “I feel it would have been the same with or without it”. Seven students felt that they were more involved in the University as a result of this course. Some of their comments are as follows:

“Yes, it has because the class kind of lets us know what is going on in the University, so we get a better idea”.

“Yeah, it pretty much did. I feel like I live here now”.

“It has made me feel a part of the University because it gets us involved with everything we do”.

Seven students responded that the course made them feel more a part of the University because it taught them about skills needed in college as well as about University resources. One student said, “Yes, because it gets us involved in Career Services and helps us know about Financial Aid, and the Nurse’s office, and everything else you need to know”. Four students believe the course helped them because it enabled them to make friends: “I never really thought about that, but I guess it has simply by meeting new people I feel part of the community of students”. One student

commented on her mentor meetings: “Yes, I feel really involved by going to mentor meetings. Mentor meetings are great!”

In addition to interview questions, students were asked to respond to a question in a journal entry. The question posed was as follows: *Do you think the skills and/or knowledge you gained in the Freshman Seminar course helped you succeed in your freshman year? Why or why not?*

Two students did not believe that the course had helped them succeed. One wrote, “I don’t believe it [the course] was the main reason that caused me to succeed within my freshman year...because they mostly provide us with need-to-know information”. Nine students responded that they class helped them because of the study skills that were covered during the course of the two semesters. One student wrote, “The many techniques used for studying, test taking, and note-taking have been very helpful in making everything much less complicated and more organized”. Another responded, “When I first took this class last semester, it did help me with...study skills, and of course help me prep for the next exam.” One other student mentioned exam preparation as a benefit of the course as well. Three students wrote specifically of time management. One found that the course “improved my study habits and my decisions with time management”. Seven students felt the Freshman Seminar course’s self assessments were beneficial. Some of there comments include:

“This class helped me to know a little better in understanding myself and what type of person I am”.

Our professor “enlightened us to find our purpose and a meaning to each class we take”.

The course “has made me think about life instances that I normally wouldn’t care about”.

“The [tests] helped me understand myself better and take into consideration being as weird as I am is potentially not a bad thing, depending on what I make of myself in the future”.

Sixteen students felt the communities helped them succeed by teaching them about University resources. Of these sixteen, eleven mentioned Financial Aid, five Study Abroad, one the TAMIU Police Department presentation, five the tutors, four Career Services, and two the library. Student comments were varied.

“The University services section has made me aware that they exist as services. They allow me the luxury of knowing that I am not alone at my university, so TAMIU is not as scary as it could have been were it not for those services”.

“I think yes because everything that I know about Financial Aid, Study Abroad, how many hours I need to pass to the other grade level, what the library offers, and so on have made my first year a breeze”.

“Some topics such as financial aid and study abroad was very informing and helpful”.

Four students felt that learning about critical thinking and problem solving helped them succeed their first year. One wrote that the class “helped me be a better thinker, note taker, and how to solve my problems in general”. Another felt she learned “to think critically and make solutions, more like come out with possible solutions to problems for an everyday college student.

One student wrote that the professor meetings are what helped her succeed: “Most of my professors wouldn’t know [me] until I went with them for professor meetings and got a chance to talk to them”. One student responded that group activities and discussions within the class helped her in her freshman year. She wrote, “Most topics that are discussed usually opened my eyes to see what I was doing wrong in each class and how to improve my grade”. Another said that “the fact that we do a lot of group activities help us to become friends with our classmates”. Finally, two students felt that the Freshman Seminar class helped them succeed because they did not feel alone. She wrote that this course “always answer[ed] my questions and made me feel more secure. They were like walking up stairs. Each step I took was because someone helped me to go through it”.

INTEGRATED CURRICULUM

The next interview asked students if their professors in the Freshman Seminar class or their professors in any of their learning community classes had attempted to integrate the curriculum. If they answered yes, students were asked to report their perceptions of this practice.

How does your Freshman Seminar instructor integrate materials from your other classes into this (FS) class?

Twenty students responded that their Freshman Seminar teacher allowed them time and assisted them in reviewing material from other classes, especially prior to a test.

“She helped us review for our History test which was the last one before the final. I actually passed the History test for the first time!”

“We study in the Seminar class and have discussions for our other classes”.

“For both semesters of Freshman Seminar they teachers helped the class with other courses by reading, talking, and asking questions”.

“Last semester we studied Biology as a class, which was good because we helped each other a ton”.

“In my Freshman Seminar I got a lot of help for my biology course because we would review for tests, just as we did this semester for history”.

Three students felt that the Freshman Seminar class integrated specific study skills that were helpful in other classes. One student said, “We went over good study habits which obviously would help, but as for actual content, very little”.

Do you find this practice helpful? Why or why not?

Sixteen students felt that integrating other course material into the Freshman Seminar course helped them to understand the material better.

“Yes. I sometimes may find out things I may not have known about certain things”.

“Yes because it gives us more time to study and she [the Seminar teacher] shows concern for our progress”.

“Yes because we get to go over material that we may not have understood real well”.

“Yes because it actually got me to think”.

Four students believed that this practice helped them achieve better grades. One said, “Yes, if it weren’t for those reviews, I wouldn’t be doing as good as now”. Another

responded, “Yes, because it gets up prepared for our tests, and helps us get a better grade”.

One student found the discussions helpful simply because “if we have questions we can also ask a classmate”.

Do instructors in your other learning community classes also integrate material from other courses? How? If yes, do you find this practice helpful? Why or why not?

The majority of the students, thirteen, replied that their other instructors had not attempted to integrate material from other courses. Three students answered that their English and Biology instructors had integrated the curriculum, but the students did not find it helpful. Their responses are as follows:

“English had two reading assignments that did cover Biology”. This student’s response as to if it was helpful or not was, “Not really because we didn’t use it in Biology”.

“Yes, last semester in English we went over matter of Biology”. When asked if he or she found this helpful, the student answered, “Yes, it is, but I don’t like it”.

The last student responded, “One time in English 1301 tried to combined an essay toward dealing with Biology from our professor. It wasn’t good. [It] confused me”.

Two students answered that their professors had attempted to integrate material from other courses and it had helped them connect the material.

“In my history class we talk a lot about government and it is helpful in that class”. When the student was asked if he found that practice helpful, he responded, “I do because you can relate the material”. The other student responded, “Yes, play and play [Play and Play Environments, an education course] has really helped my integrate material for the

young child course. I was able to learn more by making connections between both classes”.

One student found integration helpful because it helped her understand her major better: “It was very helpful because everything was related to my major”.

Four students found the practice helpful because it served as a review for other classes.

One student said, “Yes, we might read something similar to what we are reading in another course,” and it is helpful “because it is like review”. Another responded, “This semester I’m taking Government and History, which are related subjects. So sometimes they do integrate the same material, but not all the time”. He found this practice helpful “because it is somewhat reviewing the material again”.

Do you feel that integrating material in your learning community classes helps you understand the material better? If so, in what way?

Three students felt that this was not so, and one felt “it depends on what we’re studying”. Two students believed that it was helpful in that it helped them get their questions answered. One said, “Yes, because you might have questions and they might help you get them answered”. Another responded, “Yes, because we get to interact with other students and ask any other questions we might have”.

Five students felt that integrating material helped them to better relate the information from other classes.

“Yes, for example my Government and History classes relate, and [it] has helped me understand”.

“Yes, because a lot of the information related. I can go back and look at my history notes to help me out for government”.

Nine students felt that integration served as a review for other courses. Some responses include:

“Yes, we can spend more time on difficult material”.

“Yes, because the more times I hear something the better I understand it”.

“Yes. It helps because you get to better comprehend the content”.

“Yes, because like I said it is much like reviewing the work and letting it stick to your head”.

Do you feel that integration of material helps you see connections between the different disciplines? How?

Responses to this question varied greatly. Four students felt that English could help them in other courses. One student responded, “Sometimes there is, like Speech and English when it comes to writing”. Another said, “English will always be helpful for my other classes where I have to write essays”.

Four students found a connection between government and history. One student responded, “There is a slight connection in some of my classes History and Government have a major connection”. Additionally, three students felt that integration was helpful because it helps relate the different disciplines to each other. One said, “Yes. It helps relate on thing to another. They might be different but their all the same”. Another replied, “You see links and similarities”. One student felt integration was helpful because “we get info from different perspectives”. Finally, five students did not find that

integration of material helped them see connections between different disciplines. One student replied, “Not really, because all of them are different subjects, and Math will not have a connection with English, or English with History”.

Does an integrated curriculum help you see connections between your school life and your life outside of school? If yes, how?

Ten students felt that an integrated curriculum did not feel that this was so. Four students responded that some of their courses did relate to issues outside of school. One student said, “Dr. Pirtle’s lessons and talks did help me with my life perspective”. Others replied that “Government is important in today’s political issues”, and “Speech helps me with skills needed for jobs and other classes”.

Two students reported that “it helps you connect things in life that might be related”, and one said, “this helps me look at school and life different”. Furthermore, one student found that some of the skills she learned in Freshman Seminar helped her in her life outside of school: “I learned how to manage my time and use it wisely”.

If you answered yes to the previous question, can you give an example of how participating in a learning community with an integrated curriculum has helped you connect what you are learning in school to your life outside of school?

Responses are as follows:

“We learn how to manage time. Our school time as well as my outside of school life”.

“Being a student trainer, material learned in anatomy has helped in student training and vice versa”.

“I have met different people with the same views of me about going into teaching. And talked about subjects so far that I have learned”.

“Basically, you are actually learning the subjects and sometimes you can use it outside school. You can share to other people what you have learned”.

“In class, the instructor helps us relate things to life, and all the things are true”.

“Well, speech...helps with my job and other courses”.

“Once we went over our budget and showed us how to budget our money. The tips were very helpful”.

“It helped by learning more and understanding things better. For example, at work I can help my coworkers with their homework”.

Students were also asked to respond in writing through a journal entry to the following question:

Has anything you have learned or gone over in one class helped you in another class?

Seventeen students responded that the two week library unit in their Freshman Seminar course helped them in their English class. Most students commented that they learned useful information about websites and data bases. Several comments are listed below.

“We learned about proper websites vs. false websites. I took my information and used it in my works cited page in English 1302.”

“The library portion of this class has helped me inordinately. It has helped me in selecting sites that are trustworthy and not false, in shortcuts to searching for material on line, and how to be an effective researcher. For my English 1302 class, especially, have I

found the library class to be extremely useful as research is an integral part in writing essays”.

“In both University 1101 and 1102 I have learned to use the library sources for my English 1302 class”.

“This class has also taught me new skills when it came to research. I’m aware of fake sites, ways of getting what you need and just looking up for books online”.

“Some of the information taught to us at the library, I had to use for my essay in English class”.

“The library sessions we have had have been a great help in my English class. Research that is needed for my class has been found in the websites we were shown”.

Six students wrote that the note-taking skills they learned in Freshman Seminar helped them in other courses. One student wrote, “My Freshman Seminar sessions both semesters have taught us valuable skills in note-taking that I use everyday in every class”. Another responded, “The note-taking skills also help me a lot because now I am taking better notes and this way I get better grades”.

Five students found that test-taking skills learned in Freshman Seminar helped them prepare for tests in their other classes. One student wrote, “Another way it has helped me learn is about the test-taking skills. To watch out for what I think may be possible test questions and how to study for them”. Another said that the Freshman Seminar course “has helped me with the majority of my classes when it comes to test-taking skills”.

Two students felt that what they learned in history helped them in government and vice versa. A student responded, “I’m taking Government and History. Both are related subjects but each fills in the details that are missing. It is also somewhat of a review”. Another replied, “I am currently taking National Government and History 1301. Many of the things that we go over in government relate to what we are covering in history. I can go through those notes to review something or it would help me the opposite way, too”.

One student believed that the reading skills she learned in Freshman Seminar aided her in other classes: “Reading skills played a big role for me las year to seem interested and do stuff to keep you awake while you read”.

Finally, one student felt that her English and Anatomy classes were related. He wrote, “I was in a learning community with my English and Anatomy course. Several times we wrote essays that were about anatomy topics. This helped us review our anatomy lessons a lot more frequently. I remember one specific day in which we watched a funny, educational video. It helped us memorize bones and muscles so much faster. We then had to write a paper to show more repetition”.

PEER MENTORS

For peer mentor evaluations, students are asked to rate their mentors on a series of statements. An average cannot be reported since it is a Likert scale; however, responses will be reported. Results are shown on Table 1.

The questions are as follows:

1. I feel my student mentor provided me with choices and options.

2. I feel my student mentor understood me.
3. I felt encouraged to be open with my student mentor during our meetings.
4. My student mentor conveyed confidence in my ability to do well in this course.
5. I feel that my student mentor accepts me as a person.
6. My student mentor made sure I understood the goals of this course and what I needed to do.
7. My student mentor encouraged me to ask questions.
8. I feel a lot of trust in my student mentor.
9. My student mentor answers my questions fully and carefully.
10. My student mentor listens to how I would like to do things.
11. My student mentor handles people's emotions well.
12. I feel that my student mentor cares about me as a person.
13. I don't feel very good about the way my student mentor talks to me.
14. My student mentor tries to understand how I see things.
15. I feel able to share my feelings with my student mentor.

Please feel free to add any comments that you wish about the course, the instructor, student mentors, etc. We are particularly interested in knowing what we could do to make it more useful to incoming freshmen students, and whether or not it made a difference in the success of those who have taken the class. We appreciate all comments.

Table 1

Peer Mentor Evaluation Results

Question	Answer 1	Answer 2	Answer 3	Answer 4	Answer 5	Answer 6	Answer 7	Answer 8	Answer 9
1	33%	14%	24%	9%	5%	5%	9%	0%	0%
2	50%	20%	10%	5%	0%	0%	10%	5%	0%
3	33%	24%	14%	5%	9%	5%	0%	9%	0%
4	29%	24%	14%	9%	9%	0%	9%	0%	5%
5	52%	9%	14%	14%	0%	5%	5%	0%	0%
6	43%	24%	9%	9%	0%	5%	5%	5%	0%
7	43%	9%	14%	14%	14%	0%	0%	5%	0%
8	57%	9%	9%	5%	5%	0%	5%	5%	5%
9	57%	9%	14%	9%	0%	9%	0%	0%	0%
10	48%	14%	9%	14%	9%	5%	0%	0%	0%
11	24%	33%	0%	14%	19%	5%	0%	0%	5%
12	38%	14%	19%	9%	9%	0%	5%	0%	5%
13	5%	9%	5%	5%	5%	0%	9%	9%	52%
14	29%	24%	19%	9%	0%	9%	9%	0%	0%
15	38%	5%	14%	19%	9%	0%	9%	0%	5%

Comments for the open-ended question include the following:

“[The mentor] was very helpful and very understanding. I could truly trust him with my personal feelings. He did everything he could to shape me up into a better student and he strongly believed in me”.

“TAMIU has it down right”.

“Keep using this type of program for freshmen. I have enjoyed taking the University course”.

Students were also asked to respond to a journal question regarding their peer mentor. The question posed was as follows: *Do you feel your peer mentor has given you valuable academic information and/or support? Has he or she provided any sort of social and/or emotional support?*

Two students responded that the peer mentor did not help them in any way. One wrote, “My peer mentor doesn’t seem to me as if he has helped me throughout this whole year”.

Ten students found it helpful when the mentor gave them tips on how to study. Some of their comments are as follows:

“When I was at his meeting he would always give me tips on how to become a better student”.

“He has given me valuable information for History, Biology, and especially my Education classes”.

“He would give me tips on how to take notes and what I should study for in that certain class”.

“He also gives me advice on ways to study better and prepare for my tests”.

Five students mentioned that their mentor helped them with registration. For example:

“He has been good with information on academic like with registration and classes”.

“He then got me going for registration and we worked out a schedule for next semester”.

“I received most of his help when registering for next semester”.

Seven students reported that their mentor had given them information on classes and/or professors.

“He does mention professors and classes that have been helpful to him and others he knows”.

“He more or less has an idea on which courses are good to take with certain teachers”.

“[He] has given me information on which classes to take as a heads up on the professors and how they are”.

“He even gives me suggestions on what teachers are hard and how to deal with it and how to improve my grades”.

“Because he took these classes, he had a breakdown of every teacher I had including the way they teach, the way their tests are, how to study, and their overall personality”.

Four students reported that their mentor had provided them with emotional support throughout the year.

“When I was having problems at home she was very concerned and gave me tips on what to do. She also told me some tips not to get distracted from school”.

“One day that I got there for the meeting...I was really down and he asked if I wanted to talk about it. I told him about my problem and he gave me some advice and how he thought I should handle this because of school”.

“He cares whether or not I am passing, my GPA, my career plans, and even my girl problems”.

One student wrote, “He does what he can to keep me in track and pushes me to do better”.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are freshmen students’ perceptions of the academic support provided by learning communities at Texas A&M International University? What are freshmen students’ perceptions of the social support provided by learning communities at TAMIU?

The majority of students did feel as though the learning community had helped them academically; however, most of this academic help seemed tied to social support. Because the students felt comfortable with one another, they found it easier to go to each other for academic help. It was fairly common for students to share notes or ask each other for missed assignments. Because students had a closer bond with each other, they were more likely to help each other academically. Some students also felt that being in a learning community served as motivation to turn in assignments or to do well in class. For example, four Freshman Seminar classes fed into one History 1301 class. Within the history class, the professor divided up the students according to the Freshman Seminar course in which they were enrolled. Each group received a set of questions. They were to work on answering these questions in their history class, in their Freshman Seminar

class, and outside of class. Each group had to present their questions and answers to the entire history class. The professor awarded extra credit points on a sliding scale according to how well each group answered their questions and how well their answers were presented. This had the effect of drawing the individual learning community students even closer together. They were motivated not only to get themselves extra credit points, but points for their classmates as well. The students in each learning community were very competitive and strove to be the best group and were quick to defend each other from members of other groups.

This collaborative assignment was key for some students as it got them involved in history in ways that had never been available to them before. Rather than having an instructor both ask and answer questions, students were allowed to explore answers with each other which helped them construct their own knowledge.

Another important aspect of learning communities was the opportunity to meet people with the same goals and/or major. Although some learning communities were formed around certain majors, many were not. However, in the ones that were formed around a major, such as nursing or education, this served as a real benefit for students. For many students at TAMIU, they are the first in their family to attend college. This means they may not have role models or know people who have similar goals. In my study, this may be particularly true with male role models as only two students had fathers who had graduated from college. If this is the case, peers who share the same goals may take on even more importance. It may also be beneficial for students to be with others who have the same major. In my class, the majority of students were

education majors. This enabled the students to communicate more clearly with each other about their current courses as well as their future goals.

Students also felt the learning communities presented them with new ways to learn. Since Laredo is slightly isolated geographically and many students do not have the means to travel, college may be the first time they have the opportunity to meet students from other parts of or outside of Laredo. Many students stated that they liked the opportunity of getting to know people who were different from them. This type of interaction may have served to broaden their knowledge base by introducing them to new ideas. In the previous example concerning the history class, one question they group was always asked to discuss dealt with Mexico. Students quickly discovered that those who were not from Laredo had different views of the border and Mexico than those who had always resided in Laredo. They also found that opinions of recent immigrants differed from those who were more established in the United States. Being exposed to different ideas helped students learn to think more critically about their own positions.

One area that did not seem to be positively impacted by learning communities was the formation of study groups. Although some students did form such groups, most stated that they preferred to study alone. Students were willing to discuss assignments in class or get together to answer questions that were posed in their history class, but when studying for exams, students did not seem to see a benefit in forming study groups. This is unfortunate because the students who did study together felt as though this technique helped them fill in their notes as well as get other points of view. The reluctance to form study groups may be a result of outside obligations such as work or family

responsibilities. We have had similar problems at TAMIU with instituting Supplemental Instruction (SI). Although SI has been shown to be effective in numerous studies, attendance is very low when it is offered in College Algebra, a course with a very high failure rate. Either students cannot attend SI or study groups for the above mentioned reasons, or they fail to see the benefit in them. One goal of learning communities or the Freshman Seminar class could be to facilitate these types of groups in the hope that students will see more value in them.

As far as going to the various tutoring centers with members of their learning community, a little over half responded that the practice was helpful. Although six students stated that they would prefer to go alone, more students thought it was a good idea because they were working on similar assignments and could help each other. Students may be more willing to attend a tutoring center together because there is a facilitator (tutor) there to keep them on track or answer any questions they may have. Students may be less willing to form a study group on their own because they feel that their classmates are not any more knowledgeable than they are.

Finally, most students felt like the University required students to join a learning community for the benefit of the students. Most felt that the University instituted this requirement to help them adjust to college life and get the most out of the college experience. Since the learning community enabled them to make friends more quickly, they felt more comfortable on campus and were able to focus on their classes rather than finding friends. Fortunately, most did not see the requirement as a burden and were open to the idea that it could help them succeed in their freshman year. In fact, learning

communities seem to encourage students in that they believe the University wants them to succeed and will support them in any way possible. However, some students did not like the requirement because it ties one to the same students in three classes. If one does not get along well with that particular group of students, he or she will not have a good experience their first semester. Students usually take four or five classes per semester, so they will usually have at least one class outside of their learning community. This may help alleviate the problem.

The overwhelming majority of students believed that being in a learning community enabled them to make friends. A variety of reasons were cited for this including being able to help each other with classes, seeing each other every day or having the same goals as others in the class. All students claimed that they felt comfortable with the other students in their learning community. This aspect of being in a learning community seemed to be of vital importance to most students. Even though many students were from Laredo, they found themselves in classes with students from different high schools as well as from different cities. Making friends was also important to students who had graduated from high school in December as most of their friends remained in high school. Students felt that having friends to count on eased their transition into college. Students cited this as important because if they missed class, they felt comfortable enough with their fellow students to ask them for notes or any homework that was assigned. In this way, friendships are important in academic success.

Having a support group is also important to students. One student stated that her friends were there to cheer her up if she did poorly in class. Students felt they were in the

same position and were able to get social or emotional support from others in the class. Instead of being jealous when one student was doing better than the others, there was an expectation that the one doing better would tutor the ones who needed additional help. For example, one student did exceptionally well on every history exam. This student felt he had an obligation to tutor the other students.

Most students felt it was an advantage to see the same students everyday because it prevented them from feeling alone. Most students felt this helped them in their classes because they were unafraid to speak up in class discussions. Because everyone had a voice, they were able to learn more from each other than they otherwise would have. Some students also mentioned that being familiar with the students in their learning community helped them ask for help. Rather than being embarrassed, they recognized that if they had a question about something it was likely that other students had the same question; therefore, they were not afraid to seek help when needed. Additionally, one student felt that being in a learning community helped her overcome her shyness.

A few students felt that learning communities hindered their social experience at school. Because they shared three classes with the same students, they were unable to meet as many people as they otherwise would have. This may be especially problematic if a student does not like the others in his or her learning community or is distracted by others in the learning community as one student stated. From my experience, this can happen if a group of friends from one high school enroll in the same learning community. That group already has a bond, so others in the class may feel left out. Similarly, if an entire class is introverted, it may be difficult to initiate discussions or

group work. It may be that in order for learning communities to be effective, a heterogeneous group should be enrolled.

The mentoring program may also provide social and academic support. Most students felt supported by their peer mentor. On a social level, students felt that the mentor understood their problems and concerns and made a genuine effort to help them, an important aspect in the mentoring relationship. Some students felt that their mentor truly cared about how they were doing in school and wanted to help with outside factors that might be affecting their educational endeavors. However, to the students, the most important aspect of being mentored was gaining academic help. Mentors are upper division students, so they have the experience freshmen lack, yet they are still very close in age to their mentees. Students felt like the most valuable information mentors had to share dealt with giving study tips, helping them prepare for tests, and explaining certain professors' teaching styles. Since TAMIU tries to match mentor and mentee by major, they have often had the same professors their mentees currently have. Mentors were also cited as being helpful explaining general university procedures and requirements such as registration and degree audits. According to the literature, students may feel more comfortable with their mentors if they were matched by gender and ethnicity as well as by major.

What are freshmen students' perceptions of the purpose of the Freshman Seminar course with respect to their integration and/or success at TAMIU?

Students responded quite favorably to this question. Many felt as though they knew more about University resources than they would have had they not been enrolled

in Freshman Seminar. Most of these resources can have a direct impact on students' success in school. For example, students felt that their presentation by financial aid was helpful. For many of our students at TAMIU, attending college would be impossible without financial aid assistance. Although they had received financial aid their first year, many did not know how to reapply or what the enrollment and GPA requirements were to keep their aid package. Some students did not realize they had to complete a certain number of hours in the Fall and Spring in order to retain their aid for the following Fall. This prompted discussions about summer school and the importance of maintaining a GPA of 2.0 or higher.

Additionally, students felt the Career Services information was also beneficial. Students took several career investigation tests such as the Meyers-Briggs as well as the Self Directed Search. After completing these tests, students attended a session at the Career Services office. There the counselor discussed the results of their tests, what they meant, and the various services offered at their office. This was of the greatest benefit to students whom had not chosen a major. With help from Freshman Seminar and Career Services, many who were undeclared were able to begin exploring options for a major. For those who had already decided on a major, this exercise tended to confirm their career choice. More importantly, after this session, some declared students decided to examine their reasons for choosing a certain major more closely.

One aspect nearly all students felt was important was the time they spent at the library. For two weeks, students are instructed by a librarian in ways of doing research at the library. They learn how to find books and journal articles, as well as how to evaluate

these sources. More importantly for today's students perhaps is the knowledge of how to evaluate a web page. Students were taught to look for who sponsored the web site, potential biases and potentially false information. Knowing how to use the library may give students more confidence when they have to use it for other classes either in their freshman year or beyond.

Self assessment is another aspect of the Freshman Seminar course. Students take the Color Code and the Meyers-Briggs, both personality tests; the Self Directed Search, a career test; the LASSI; and other learning skills assessments. Some students felt these assessments helped them to get to know themselves better. Some learned that they needed to improve on skills if they were to be successful in college, while others learned they had strengths they did not know they possessed. These types of assessments may help students feel that they are in control of their academic success rather than the University or faculty controlling it. In fact, students commented that it helped them find purpose in their classes and to care about things that previously did not seem worthwhile.

Finally, most students recognized that the Freshman Seminar course was important with respect to study skills. Usually students realize this after the first assessment which is meant to identify a person's strengths and weaknesses as a student. Many students state that they never had to read, take notes, or study for exams in high school, and they realize they may be weak in these areas. They felt that this course was beneficial to them because it helped them transition from high school to university life.

Students believed that the University instituted this course for the students' benefit and because it wants its students to be successful.

Additional resources students learned about in Freshman Seminar include the tutoring centers and professor meetings. At TAMIU, all students have access to at least two tutoring centers: The Center for the Advancement of Scholastic Achievement (CASA) and The Writing Center. CASA offers tutoring in all subjects except writing, and The Writing Center offers help in writing for across disciplines. Additionally, education majors have the benefit of the Learning Assistance Center (LAC) where they can receive tutoring in all subjects. Students in Freshman Seminar must attend tutoring for two hours each month at one or more of these centers. The majority of students reported that they probably would never have gone to any tutoring centers if it had not been required. Once there, however, most students felt that their academic experience was enriched. This situation closely parallels that of professor meetings. In the Freshman Seminar course, students are required to go see at least two of their professors during office hours. This assignment must be completed before mid-term. Students are given instructions on how to approach faculty members and a list of potential questions they might ask during their visit. Usually students are very apprehensive about meeting their professors, but once they do, they understand how beneficial it can be. Building a relationship with a professor can be an important part of academic success.

The issue of friendship was once again mentioned by students in the Freshman Seminar course. Although they are part of a learning community, there other classes may have fifty to one hundred students in them, making it difficult to make friends. However,

the Freshman Seminar courses are limited to twenty-five. This makes a close knit classroom environment more feasible. Because group work and class discussions fill most of the time in the Freshman Seminar course, students feel as if they know one another better. One student claimed that she did not feel alone at the University because of her Freshman Seminar course. As is stated in the literature, having social connections with the University can lead to greater satisfaction and higher retention.

Do students perceive that an integrated curriculum aids in connecting their school lives with their lives outside of school?

Students answered this question in two ways: they agreed that the Freshman Seminar course integrated material from their other courses, but they disagreed that the other classes in their learning community were well integrated. When asked how the Freshman Seminar instructor integrated materials from their other classes, all responded that learning study techniques and reviewing for their exams in Freshman Seminar was helpful. Others felt that the study, reading, and note-taking skills facilitated success in other classes. Most students agreed that this practice helped them learn the material better. As we know from the literature, integration can assist in deep learning. As a result, students generally believed that their grades in other courses were better than they otherwise would have been. Additionally, students responded that what they learned in the library component of Freshman Seminar aided them in doing research for their papers in English.

As for integration in their other learning community classes, students were much less positive. Only a few answered that integration had been attempted, and those few

did not understand why this was occurring or how it could be helpful. Students generally found attempts at integration confusing and not beneficial. The most cited source of integration was readings in English that dealt with biology (two of the three courses in the learning community). In this case, either the instructors did not truly integrate the assignment, or they did not make the connection transparent to the students. In order for integration to work, students must be able to see the value in integration. Simply assigning a reading in another subject will not help students learn the material better in either discipline.

Two classes that were mentioned as being successfully integrated were history and government. Students found the material in these two classes to be related and connections were easier to make. They believed that one course served as a review for the other, and that it was easier to understand the material since they were hearing it twice. A few students responded that if they had a question in one class, they could usually find the answer in the other. From this information, it seems that students are open to integrating material and find it helpful, but only if the connections between the classes are easily seen. Integration can occur in courses that are not as similar as government and history, but assignments must be well thought out, and students must see them as valuable and connected. Although some students claimed that integration helped them see connections between different disciplines, most felt that “Math will not have a connection with English, or English with History”. Clearly, the First-Year Success Program at TAMIU needs to improve in this area. As the literature suggests,

integration can provide for deeper learning, but if students do not see the value in it, this will not happen.

When asked if they saw connections between their school life and their life outside of school, the majority of students answered negatively. However a few students were able to make this connection. Some felt that their government class helped them understand today's political issues better while others claimed that speech and English gave them skills they could use at their jobs. This is another area TAMIU could improve upon. Many of our students have families and/or work outside of school. If students could use their lived experience in the classroom, they might find their education more meaningful. The opposite is also true; if they could connect what they are learning in school to their lives outside of school, this may lead to deeper learning.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of my study suggest that several areas in the First-Year Success Program could be improved. One, students clearly are not connecting with their mentors on a personal level. Although most students find their mentors adequate at providing academic advice, a close mentor/mentee relationship does not exist. Engaging in reflective thinking could strengthen the mentoring relationship among students and mentors, students and instructors, and instructors and administrators. If stronger mentoring occurs at each of these levels, student success could be enhanced. Two, students do not see the relationships between disciplines, nor the importance of integration. If instructors expect students to engage in deep learning, they must work with members of their learning community teams to design integrative assignments that will encourage deep learning. Third, the Freshman Seminar course can be improved by serving as a cornerstone course for the learning community, fostering student-professor relationships, and encouraging beneficial relationships through appropriate grouping of students. From my study, it is clear that students value the skills they are taught in Freshman Seminar; however, more could be done to incorporate those skills into the students' learning community courses. Equally important to students are relationships, with each other and with their professors. There are many ways the Freshman Seminar course could be restructured in order to facilitate these relationships.

MENTORING

One aspect of the Freshman Seminar course that could be strengthened is the peer mentoring. Currently, students see their mentor once every two weeks for thirty minutes. Based on the results of my study, I do not believe that this is adequate for students to form strong and effective relationships with their mentors; however, because of time and budgetary constraints, having students meet with their mentors on a weekly basis is unlikely. Therefore, I propose that the mentoring relationship can be improved at all levels through reflective thinking. Peer mentors report to the First-Year Success Director, as well as to the instructor whose students they are mentoring. University seminar faculty are required to meet weekly with the Director of Programs for Academic Support and Enrichment, and faculty in the learning communities are encouraged to meet at least once per month to discuss integrated assignments. Reflective inquiry could be useful at every level of the first-year success program; students, instructors, mentors, and administration could all benefit from reflective practice.

Reflective thinking “requires the continual evaluation of beliefs, assumptions, and hypotheses against existing data and against other plausible interpretations of the data” (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 7). Problems which have no easy or straight-forward answer require reflective thinking. In today’s educational environment, ill-defined problems abound. While K-12 teachers and administrators must deal with state-mandated testing, those in higher education must deal with the effects of those tests. Many students come to college knowing how to write only formulaic, five paragraph essays, or read short paragraphs and answer the questions that follow. They have been

taught to take tests but not how to think. They have spent twelve years learning how to be passive learners, yet college instructors expect active learners with students taking responsibility for their own education. In addition, TAMIU has low admission standards, accepting students from the top 50% of their class. This means that many students who enroll were not on the “college preparatory track” in high school and may not be prepared for the academic rigor of college. Furthermore, a great many of our students are first-generation college students or do not speak English as a first language. Many do not have the support of their parents in their academic endeavors. All of these challenges are ill-structured and cannot be dealt with using technical rationality, which is “grounded in systematic, fundamental knowledge” (Schon, 1983, p. 23). Students must become reflective thinkers in order to deal with their academic and social support issues, instructors and mentors must find a way to help students succeed, and administrators must support the efforts of the instructors and mentors. Solutions that worked in the past will not suffice for today’s students and universities.

Students

Students can benefit from reflection in many ways. Most students leave high school not knowing how they learn, how to think critically, or how to examine their own assumptions. They may have never been asked to reflect on how or what they learn. Typically, first year college students think at a pre-reflective stage, in which individuals do not understand that knowledge is uncertain, or a quasi-reflective stage, in which “individuals...recognize that some problems are ill-structured and that knowledge claims about them contain an element of uncertainty” (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 58).

According to King and Kitchener, students must be challenged and given complex problems to work on if they are to increase their reflective thinking skills. An increase in critical thinking skills may lead to an increase in reflective thinking skills as well. Students need both types of skills in order to solve both well- and ill-structured problems.

Many of our students come to college unprepared for college-level work, an ill-defined problem as they do not know what skills they will need to succeed in higher education. In order to do well, they must reflect on their previous study habits and skills. Students are generally resistant to changing what they did in high school, even when faced with failing grades in college. Their idea of studying consists of memorizing a review sheet, and they rarely read or took notes in high school. In addition, students typically exhibit low level reflective judgment with respect to knowledge. They are unaware that knowledge is socially constructed, and that questions often do not have one right answer. Rather than synthesizing information from a variety of sources, students look to professors to provide them with the “correct” answer. The instructors in freshmen seminar explain the importance of reflecting on their skills, but students usually do not think about these skills until after the first exam in their content courses. Usually, at this point, they are ready to engage in reflection about their skills. Seminar instructors use weekly journals and class discussion to encourage this type of thinking. Students are asked to think about how they studied for the first exam, how they took notes leading up to the exam, and how or even if they read the text. They are asked to examine their previous assumptions about what constitutes preparing for an exam.

Additionally, students meet with mentors to discuss their test performance and what they can do to improve future performances. Having peer mentors aid students in test preparation is a form of peer tutoring, which can be useful strategy to enhance test performance (Pugh, 2005). In fact, Pugh (2005) found that “if a learner feels confident, he or she no longer fears the subject or the test and so will perform better” (p. 9). Because all of the peer mentors have successfully completed their lower division courses, the Freshman Seminar students have confidence in their tutoring.

Mentors

Peer mentors should also be encouraged to think reflectively. Their job is to meet with students, encourage them, and help them adjust to college both socially and academically. Many of our students are not only unprepared academically, but socially and emotionally as well. Most are first-generation college students which may mean they have little encouragement at home in support of their educational aspirations. Several students have young children, and many must work at least part-time to help support their families. All of these issues impact the students’ academic performance. To help students, peer mentors must engage in *reflection-in-action* during the mentoring session. When problems come up, the mentor cannot be “dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but [must] construct a new theory of the unique case” (Schon, 1983, p. 68). Although the mentor has been trained on how to respond to certain problems, each student’s situation is unique, and the mentor must be able to respond to those problems. In order to develop their reflective thinking skills, mentors are also expected to keep weekly journals. In these journals, they are asked to examine their own

assumptions about what it means to be a “good student” and how these assumptions affect how they interact with the students they mentor. They are also asked to reflect on their own freshman year, learning styles and study skills. For example, one journal entry asks mentors to describe an assumption they have made in the past that proved to be inaccurate, what happened to change their perspective, identify other assumptions that have become habits, and determine whether their thinking habits are valid (Sanft, Jensen, & McMurray, 2007). In addition, mentors meet with their director at least once per week to discuss any particularly difficult issues with which they may be grappling. Rather than giving the mentor a pat answer, the director encourages him or her to think through the problem and come up with several plausible solutions.

Instructors

Instructors can also benefit from reflective thinking. While reflection is becoming more common in undergraduate teacher preparation courses, practicing teachers may not be asked to engage in reflection, especially at the university level. It is imperative that teachers do so as “reflective teachers construct meaning from their work by monitoring, analyzing, and modifying their behaviors according to underlying values and consequences of their actions” (Robinson & Kelley, 2007, p. 32). Teachers must be able to reflect-in-action and on-action. If an instructor is teaching a skill, and students do not understand, the teacher must immediately reflect on what he or she is doing and re-teach the information in a different way. After class, the teacher must reflect on what did and did not work in the classroom and why. I think this is particularly important at a school like TAMU that has a large Hispanic population. Although many instructors are

Hispanic, there are also Anglos, Asians, and African Americans. Often the teaching and learning styles of the two cultures do not mesh well. For example, in the Hispanic culture, the concepts of time and family are different than for many Anglos. Sometimes students do not understand why deadlines for work cannot be extended, while the professor does not understand why the student is even asking. Furthermore, most Hispanic parents expect students to put family first. Students may be gone for days at a time to attend a funeral in Mexico, or they may miss an exam to take a family member to an appointment. While the student believes these are valid reasons for missing class, the instructor may not. In these situations reflection becomes an invaluable tool. Again, these problems are ill-defined, and teachers must work to find solutions to overcome the cultural gap that may exist between them and their students. Teachers must examine their own assumptions about culture and determine how these assumptions may affect their teaching and their attitude toward their students, for “critical reflection is a crucial aspect of reflective practice because teaching is a complex activity, and solutions to teaching problems are often not found because practitioners fail to examine their own perceptions, or premises” (Ostorga, 2006, p. 10).

Instructors can practice reflective thinking in many ways; for example, through journals, narratives, or conferences. One important way to conduct reflection is through the use of autobiographies, which can help instructors create self-knowledge (Li, 2007). Through autobiographies, instructors can determine and reflect upon their own assumptions about teaching and learning as well as different cultures. This is an important part of the teaching process as it will allow instructors to more effectively

teach today's students. Administrators can help teachers engage in reflective thinking by observing the teacher's classroom habits and instruction at least once per semester. After the observation, administrators and teachers can conference to discuss the teacher's action in the classroom, with the administrator taking care to engage the instructor with an indirect and open communication style, paraphrasing and asking probing questions. In this way, teachers and administrators can examine which teaching practices are effective and which are ineffective or need improvement. Using an open communication style and paraphrasing will assure the teacher that the administrator understands the teacher's point of view. This will create a non-threatening environment in which the teacher can express his or her views on his or her performance in the classroom. This type of interaction "sets the stage for a relationship of equality" (Long, 2002, p. 96).

Administrators and teachers may wish to use video during observation which will "provide [teachers] data of their actual performance, the substance of reflective practice" (Robinson & Kelley, 2007, p. 32). By using video, instructors can see and reflect on their actual performance without it being filtered through the administrator. Finally, teachers may wish to reflect in a weekly journal because in writing about their own practice, they think about what brought them to the classroom as well as clarify their intentions as educators (McKinney, 2007).

Administrators

Lastly, administrators can engage in reflective practice about the effectiveness of the first-year success program. According to Pedro (2006), there are several ways an administrator can help a teacher, including encouraging reflection about lessons, acting

as a guide for new instructors, sharing sources of support, providing written and verbal feedback, building good relationships through reflective conversations, offering different perspectives, and “probing into a variety of areas to help...teachers go beyond the technical level of reflection to contextual and critical levels” (p. 132). Administrators should engage in reflective activity with instructors at least once a month to ensure programmatic success, and they should reflect on the program itself at the end of each semester to determine what has been effective in terms of student success and what has not. If students in the program have high withdrawal or failure rates, the program must be reevaluated.

The climate of today’s higher education epitomizes an ill-defined problem for which there is not one correct solution. With more students entering college than ever before, teachers and administrators must learn how to reach students from many different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, because of tracking and state-mandated tests in kindergarten through high school, students may be entering college lacking necessary study and/or thinking skills. Biafore and Ansalone (2008) found that tracking, or “the separation of students into hierarchical learning groups based on perceived or measured ability” (p. 588), is pervasive in American schools. Additionally, they believe that tracking has many negative consequences including separating students along class, racial or socioeconomic lines, with the poor and racial or ethnic minorities being placed in lower tracks more often. Solutions to these problems must be constructed as existing solutions are no longer adequate. Because this issue is growing, colleges cannot afford to ignore it at the expense of their students. In order for

these students to be successful, reflective thinking must occur at all levels: student, mentor, teacher, and administrator.

INTEGRATION

Another aspect of the First-Year Success Program that could be improved is that of integrating the curriculum of the courses within each learning community. From my study, I have concluded that this is either not being done or is being done on a limited basis. Thus far at TAMIU, faculty involvement with learning communities has been limited. Some faculty apparently do not believe that the results of integrative assignments are worth the effort it takes to create them. Others would like to participate but are not sure how to proceed. Several steps have been taken to remedy this situation. For one, the University brought in a speaker to discuss how to create integrative assignments as well as how they benefit students. Secondly, several faculty members and administrators attended a Learning Communities Summer Institute at the Washington Center in the summer of 2008. There, participants learned how to create integrative assignments, assess their current program and encourage faculty participation. Third, the University is in the process of creating a Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning. This center may be used to help faculty understand learning communities in general and how to create meaningful integrative assignments in particular.

In light of my findings, I believe that the University needs to encourage more faculty support of learning communities. If the faculty does not believe learning communities will be effective, then students will likely not believe it either. Pearson and

Bowman (2000) found that faculty involvement with students is vital to student success; however, in order for this to happen the faculty reward system must change as well. Universities must make working with students a priority. One reason faculty may not be interested in putting in the time required to create integrative assignments is because developing students' skills and a sense of community has consistently rated low on the list of faculty objectives (Pearson & Bowman, 2000). However, this must change as "the quantity and quality of faculty involvement with students is particularly important to the pursuit of excellence" (Pearson & Bowman, 2000, p. 30). Although creating integrative assignments does require a change in the way faculty teach, these types of assignments will be beneficial to students. In order for the assignments to be effective, their worth must be transparent to students. This is the area in which faculty cooperation is imperative. Faculty must be willing to invest the time to meet with the other faculty in their learning communities to create and implement these assignments. TAMIU has taken a step in this direction as a result of the summer institute. Before the Fall of 2008 semester begins, all faculty involved in learning communities will meet and begin to plan assignments. It will be suggested at that time that learning community team members meet regularly during the semester to assess these assignments as well as student learning.

Some integrative assignments have already been formed as a result of last year's speaker and/or this year's summer institute. For example, one team suggested a learning community that would include Biology, Sociology, and Freshman Seminar. Their assignment concerned the Rio Grande, the river that separates Laredo, Texas from

Nuevo Laredo in Mexico. This team suggested that the sociology professor discuss the Rio Grande with respect to how it serves as a social boundary, its fluidity, and the movement of people back and forth across this boundary. Students in the biology course could talk about the life forms in and around the river. They felt this assignment might be particularly appropriate in light of the proposal that a fence be built along the river to separate the United States and Mexico. There has been debate in our community as to the social and biological effects such a fence might have on our region. This assignment is especially good as it connects sociology and biology as well as brings up an issue that related to most of our students' lives. As suggested by Lorents, Morgan, and Tallman (2003), when students can connect their school lives to their lives outside of school, they will be more engaged in learning. As this connection is not currently being made, assignments such as this one would obviously be valuable in many ways. In order for learning communities with an integrated curriculum to be effective, faculty must be encouraged to create assignments such as this that will both integrate the disciplines being taught in the learning community as well as make a connection between the students' school lives and their lives outside of school. The Freshman Seminar course could serve to supplement what is being taught in the other courses by making the connections transparent to students or by having students do readings or other assignments to further enhance their learning. Perhaps the Freshman Seminar course could also incorporate some type of service learning in connection with the work being done in their other classes. For example, there is a nature trail at the Environmental Science Center on the campus of Laredo Community College that follows portions of the

river. The Freshman Seminar course could require a service learning component related to the Rio Grande assignments in which students would volunteer to work at one of the Trail Days the college hosts to maintain the nature trail. In this way, students could learn more about the environmental concerns surrounding the building of the border fence.

FRESHMAN SEMINAR

Finally, the Freshman Seminar component of the First-Year Success Program could be strengthened in several ways. As mentioned above, this course could serve as a cornerstone of the learning communities as far as integrative assignments are concerned. As the results of my study show, this course is already valued by students because it helps them integrate the study skills that they learn in Freshman Seminar and the reading and note-taking they are doing in their other courses. Students also seem to value the student-led reviewing of information in their learning community courses that takes place in Freshman Seminar. However, the role of this course could be strengthened. The Freshman Seminar course could supplement the integrative assignments from the content courses in the learning community. This could be done by class discussions, supplementary readings, guest speakers, field trips or service learning assignments. Furthermore, the library component of the Freshman Seminar course could serve as an integrative assignment in itself. Students could learn needed library skills while finding information for an assignment in one of their learning community courses. If faculty in the learning community collaborate on a regular basis, assignments such as these could easily be brought to fruition.

Moreover, the Freshman Seminar course could help in building a relationship between students and professors. While a professor meeting is required, I do not think this is adequate for students to build a relationship. Until recently, only students who were considered underprepared for college were required to take the Freshman Seminar course. Not only did this limit the course's role in the University, but it also made it seem as though the course was remedial in nature. This sentiment was pervasive among the student body as well as the faculty. Now that all incoming freshman are required to enroll in this course for an entire year, we must work to change this perception, especially among faculty. One of the best ways to do this is to have students meet with faculty. When students are asked to meet with one of their professors, they seem to choose the ones that seem most approachable. Unfortunately, this has the effect of a few teachers being inundated by students while others wait in their office for students who do not come. If given a choice, most students will not visit professors in whose class they are performing poorly. As my study suggests, these meetings can help students perform better. Therefore, perhaps the Freshman Seminar class should require students to visit professors who teach the course in which students have the lowest grade. This may help students raise their grades in these courses as well as form a relationship with a professor they might otherwise view as unapproachable.

Another way the Freshman Seminar class in particular and the learning communities in general could be improved is through appropriate grouping. My study suggests two things: students want to meet new people as part of their college experience, and they find it helpful when these people share similar goals and/or majors.

Although some learning communities are formed by major, many are not. It would be helpful to students if they were placed in learning communities by major. For example, in the Fall 2007 semester, TAMIU had a nursing learning community. These students shared common goals and were able to form a strong bond with each other. Because they had a science class together, they were able to form effective study groups, and the Freshman Seminar course instructor could teach study skills that were specific to these students. On the other hand, in this case study, most, but not all students were education majors. The ones who were not education majors tended to feel left out and not as much a part of the group. Homogeneity, as far as majors are concerned, is favorable in the Freshman Seminar course and learning communities.

Students feel that meeting new people is an important part of their first year at the University. Therefore, it may not be in students' best interest to put them into learning communities grouped by high school. This does not happen intentionally, but when registration occurs on-site at local high schools, this is sometimes the result. When this happens, not only are students denied the experience of meeting new people, but the learning community may resemble a high school schedule; indeed, both students and professors often have this complaint about learning communities. Consequently, every effort should be made to form learning community classes with a mixture of students from different local high schools as well as out-of-town students.

CRITICAL THEORY

The results from this study can be linked to critical theory in several ways. One of the most important aspects for students of both the learning community and the Freshman Seminar course was that these components enabled them to make friends more easily. In fact, many students felt that this was one of the most important functions of the learning community. Students felt very strongly about fitting in and connecting with other people at the University. In some cases, this feeling of connectedness led students to feel responsible for and to one another. Both hooks and Freire felt that this was an important step toward critical thinking. When “everyone feels a responsibility to contribute” (hooks, 1994, p. 39) classrooms become more democratic and more discussion occurs. When discussions occur, students may feel as though they are actively contributing to their education rather than being simply acted upon. Freire (1973) believed that when students engaged in this type of activity and became *Subject* rather than *Object*, critical thinking could occur.

Another concept that emerged from this study was the concept of voice. Through the Freshman Seminar course, students learned about themselves, their study skills, and their learning styles. Personality and career assessments helped undeclared students move toward a possible major. For those who had already declared a major, these tests may have confirmed that they were headed in the right direction or had them question if what they were doing was really in their best interest or for the right reasons. Aside from the academic benefits, some students learned they had strengths that they did not realize they possessed or weaknesses which they needed to improve. Similarly, what students

learned from study skills or learning styles assessments could be put to use to improve their understanding of the content being presented to them in class. In this way, students are able to use their strengths to succeed. Rather than being told how to read a college text book or how to take notes, with this knowledge students can do these activities in ways that make sense to them. When students are given a voice in determining how to approach their studies, they will be more likely to succeed. Acknowledging students' strengths rather than simply pointing out their weaknesses and allowing them to use those strengths will give students power over their own successes or failures. McLaren (1998) believes that students must have a voice before they can construct knowledge, and learning communities and Freshman Seminar courses can help students find and use this voice.

Finally, the First-Year Success Program, which includes learning communities with an integrated curriculum and the Freshman Seminar course, seems to encourage students to believe that Texas A&M International University truly cares about their success. Most students believe that these initiatives began because the University wanted its students to have a smooth transition from high school to college and to pave the way for college success. If Hispanic students, as the literature suggests, prefer a more collective, rather than individual culture, which enables them to make friends easier, the learning communities and the Freshman Seminar course will be of great value to students. Apple (1982) believes, and Oakes & Lipton (2003) agree, that students prefer their own lived culture, and as such, culture cannot be separated from learning. Enabling students to make friends and form relationships with professors, peer mentors, and tutors

may make them feel as if the University is more welcoming and caring. If this is the case, as Tinto (1997) suggests, students will be more likely to be retained.

LIMITATIONS

With more and more culturally different students entering our colleges and universities, retaining these students has become a vitally important issue. The traditional college classroom does not seem to lend itself to the success of minority students as evidenced by retention and graduation rates. Many universities are turning to innovative programs such as learning communities and freshmen seminar courses to increase retention. In my research, I examined if learning communities make a positive impact on Hispanic students' perceptions of college, which may, in turn, lead to higher retention rates. While some aspects of the First-Year Success Program are perceived to be very beneficial to students, other areas could be improved. Students report that learning communities do offer social and academic support, but the academic support is certainly the stronger of the two. Social support may be improved by enhancing the mentoring program and grouping students in learning communities by major or interests. Similarly, students perceive the Freshman Seminar course to be beneficial, especially in the sense that they believe that the course was instituted to help them achieve success in college; however, some aspects of the course could be improved to further aid students in gaining ownership over their college education. Finally, the integration of disciplines within the learning community must be improved. Students are not able to see the connection between disciplines nor are they able to see the connection between their

school lives and their lives outside of school. In order for deep learning to occur, students must be able to incorporate their lived experiences into their academic lives.

Because this is a case study, results are not generalizable to other learning communities either within or outside of Texas A&M International University. Also, since the research focuses on Hispanic students, it is not known how learning communities affect students from different ethnic or racial backgrounds.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research into this area might be more quantitative in nature. For example, GPAs and retention rates could be calculated to examine if perceived advantages of the First-Year Success Program translate into higher GPAs, higher retention rates, and lower academic probation rates. TAMIU will have this information in the near future, but it is outside the scope of this study.

Other studies might include students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds or larger universities. Perceptions of learning communities may be different among students in larger schools with more heterogeneous populations. In schools that do not have a large commuter student body, the need to make not only academic but social connections may be more prominent. If students are farther away from friends and family, social support may be perceived as being more important than academic support.

REFERENCES

- Alleman, J., & Brophy, J. (1993). Is curriculum integration a boon or a threat to social studies? *Social Education*, 57 (6), 287-291.
- Apple, M.W. (1982). *Education and power*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Arbona, C. & Nora, A. (2007). The influence of academic and environmental factors on Hispanic college degree attainment. *Review of Higher Education*, 30 (3), 247.
- Arredondo, D.E., & Rucinski, T.T. (1998). Using structured interactions in conferences and journals to promote cognitive development among mentors and mentees. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 13(4), 300-328.
- Beach, R., Lundell, D. B., & Jung, H.(2002). Developmental college students' negotiation of social practices between peer, family, workplace, and university worlds. *Exploring Urban Literacy & Developmental Education*, 3, 79-108.
- Berg, B.L. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. Boston: Pearson.
- Berlin, D.F., & Lee, H. (2005). Integrating science and mathematics education: Historical analysis. *School Science and Mathematics*, 105(1), 15-25.
- Bohon, S.A., Johnson, M.K., & Gorman, B.K. (2006). College aspirations and expectations among Latino adolescents in the United States. *Social Problems*, 53(2), 207.
- Boswell, C. (2004). Mentoring: More efficiency needed. *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, 84(4), 46-48.

- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- Brittenham, R., Cook, R., Hall, J.B., Moore-Whitesell, P., Ruhl-Smith, C., et al. (2003). Connections: An integrated community of learners. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 27(1), 18-25.
- Caine, R.N., & Caine, G. (1995). Reinventing schools through brain-based learning. *Educational Leadership*, 52(7), 43-47.
- Campbell, S.M., & Nutt, C.L. (2008). Academic advising and the new global century: Supporting student engagement and learning outcomes achievement. *Peer Review*, 10(1), 4-7.
- Cannon, D. M., Klein, H., Koste, L.L., & Magal, S.R. (2004). Curriculum integration using enterprise resource planning: An integrative case approach. *Journal of Education for Business*, 80(2), 93-101.
- Chesler, N.C., & Chesler, M.A. (2002). Gender-informed strategies for women engineering scholars: On establishing a caring community. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 91(1), 49-55.
- Cortese, A. J. (1992). Family, culture and society: Educational policy implications for mexican americans. *Phylon*, 49(1), 71-83.
- Corti, L. & Thompson, P. (2004). Secondary analysis of archived data. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. Gubrium, & D. Silverman (Eds.) *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 327-343). London: Sage Publications.

- Covington, M. V. (2000). Goal theory, motivation, and school achievement: An integrative review. *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 51, 178.
- Derby, D.C., & Watson, L.W. (2006-2007). African-american retention within a community college: Differences in orientation course enrollment. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 8(3), 377-390.
- Engberg, M.E., & Mayhew, M.J. (2007). The influence of first-year “success” courses on student learning and democratic outcomes. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(3), 241-258.
- Feng, A.X., Van Tassel-Baska, J., Quek, C., Bai, W., & O’Neill, B. (2005). A longitudinal assessment of gifted students’ learning using the integrated curriculum model (ICM): Impacts and perceptions of the William and Mary Language Arts and Science Curriculum. *Roeper Review*, 27(2), 78-83.
- Fidler, P.P., & Hunter, M.S. (1989). How seminars enhance student success. In M.L. Upcraft, & J.N. Gardner (Eds.), *The freshman year experience* (pp. 216-237). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2004). Five misunderstandings about case study research. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium, & D. Silverman (Eds.). *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 420-434). London: Sage Publications.
- Fontana, A. & Frey, J.H. (2005). The interview: From neutral stance to political involvement. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.) *The sage handbook of qualitative research*, 3rd ed. (695-727). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Continuum.

- Friedman, D.B., & Alexander, J.S. (2006). Investigating a first-year seminar as an anchor course in learning communities. *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 19(1), 63-74.
- Frierson, H.T. (Ed.). (1997). *Mentoring and diversity in higher education*. Greenwich: JAI Press.
- Grayson, J.P. (2003). The consequences of early adjustment to university. *Higher Education*, 46, 411-426.
- Hall, P.M. (1997). Race, ethnicity, and schooling in America: An introduction. In P. Hall (Ed.), *Race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism: Policy and practice* (pp. 3-40). New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.
- Heck, R., Price, C., & Thomas, S. (2004). Tracks as emergent structures: A network analysis of student differentiation in high school. *American Journal of Education*, 110 (4), 321.
- Henry, L. A., Castek, J., Roberts, L., Coiro, J., & Leu, D. J. (2004). Case technologies to enhance literacy learning: A new model for early literacy teacher preparation. *Knowledge Quest*, 33(2), 26-29.
- Henscheid, J.M. (2004). First-year seminars in learning communities: Two reforms intersect. In J.M. Henscheid (Ed.). *Integrating the First-Year Experience: The Role of Learning Communities in First-Year Seminar*, (Serial No. 39), 1-8. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

- Hesse-Biber, S.N., & Leavy, P. (2006). *The practice of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hickey, D. T. (2003). Engaged in participation versus marginal nonparticipation: A stridently sociocultural approach to achievement motivation. *The Elementary School Journal*, 103(4), 401-412.
- Hinde, E. R. (2005). Revisiting curriculum integration: A fresh look at an old idea. *The Social Studies*, 96(3), 105-111.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Howard, H.E. (2000). Effectiveness of a freshman seminar in an urban university: Measurement of selected indicators. *College Student Journal*, 34(4), 509-515.
- Hurley, M. M. (2001). Reviewing integrated science and mathematics: The search for evidence and definitions from new perspectives. *School Science and Mathematics*, 101(5), 259-268.
- Ignatz, M. (2005). Curriculum integration: Preparing prospective teachers. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 34(5), 38-41.
- James, P. A., Bruch, P. L., & Jehangir, R. R. (2006). Ideas in practice: Building bridges in a multicultural learning community. *Journal of Developmental Studies*, 29(3), 10-18.
- Jewler, J.A. (1989). Elements of an effective seminar: The university 101 program. In M.L. Upcraft, & J.N. Gardner (Eds.), *The freshman year experience* (pp. 198-215). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Johnson, M., Crosnos, R., & Elder, G. (2001). Students' attachment and academic engagement: The role of race and ethnicity. *Sociology of Education, 74*, 318-340.
- Justiz, M.J., & Rendon, L.I. (1989). Hispanic students. In M.L. Upcraft, & J.N. Gardner (Eds.), *The freshman year experience* (pp. 261-276). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kao, G., & Thompson, J.S. (2003). Racial and ethnic stratification in educational achievement and attainment. *Annual Review of Sociology, 29*, 417-442.
- Keup, J.R., & Barefoot, B.O. (2005). Learning how to be a successful student: Exploring the impact of first-year seminars on student outcomes. *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, 17*(1), 11-39.
- Kincheloe, J.L., & McLaren, P. (2005). Rethinking critical theory and qualitative research. In N.K. Denizen & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 303-342). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- King, P.M., & Kitchener, K.S. (1994). *Developing reflective judgment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Klein, J.T.. (2005). Integrative learning and interdisciplinary studies. *Peer Review, 7*(4), 8-10.
- Lake, K. (n.d.). Integrated Curriculum. Retrieved February 2, 2006, from <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/8/c016.html>.

- Lang, D.J. (2007). The impact of a first-year experience course on the academic performance, persistence, and graduation rates of first-semester college students at a public research university. *Journal of The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*, 19(1) 9-25.
- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Lee, J.J., Sax, L.J., Kim, K.A., & Hagedorn, L.S. (2004). Understanding students' parental education beyond first-generation status. *Community College Review*, 32(1), 1.
- Lee, S., Theoharis, R., Fitzpatrick, M., Kim, K., Liss, J.M., et al. (2006). Create effective mentoring relationships: Strategies for mentor and mentee success. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 41(4), 233-240.
- Li, X. (2007). Multiculturalize teacher identity: A critical descriptive narrative. *Multicultural Education*, 14(4), 37-44.
- Long, S. (2002). Mentoring: A personal reflection. *New Library World*, 103(3), 94-98.
- Lorents, A, Morgan, J., & Tallman, G. (2003). The impact of course integration on student grades. *Journal of Education for Business*, 78(3), 135-138.
- Losey, K. M.. (1997). *Listen to the silences: Mexican American interaction in the composition classroom and the community*. New York: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Lowe, A. & Toney, M. (2000). Academic advising: Views of the givers and takers. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 2(2), 93-108.

- MacGregor, J., & Smith, B. L. (2005). Where are learning communities now?
About Campus, May-June, 2-8.
- Marin, G., & Marin, B.V. (1991). *Research with hispanic populations*. Newbury Park,
CA: Sage Publications.
- Marshall, J. (2005). Connecting art, learning, and creativity: A case for curriculum
integration. *Studies in Art Education*, 46(3), 227-241.
- McKinney, K. (2007). On reflecting the reflectiveness of the teacher-scholar. *Teaching
English in the Two Year College*, 35(1), 20-29.
- McLaren, P. (1998). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the
foundations of education* (5th ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- McMillan, J.H. (2000). *Educational research: Fundamentals for the consumer* (3rd ed.).
New York: Longman.
- Mertens, D.M. (1998). *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating
diversity with quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
Publications.
- Miller, A. (2002). *Mentoring students & young people: A handbook of effective practice*.
London: Kogan Page.
- Miller, J.W., Janz, J.C., & Chen, C. (2007). The retention impact of first-year seminar on
students with varying pre-college academic performance. *Journal of the First-
Year Experience*, 19 (1), 47-62.
- Miller, L.S. (2005). Exploring high academic performance: The case of Latinos in higher
education. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 4(3), 252-271.

- Miller, W.L., & Crabtree, B.F. (2004). Depth interviewing. In S.N. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.) *Approaches to qualitative research* (pp. 185-202). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Monaghan, M., & McConnell, T. (2005). English, history, and song in year 9: Mixing enquiries for a cross-curricular approach to teaching the most able. *Teaching History, 121*, 22-28.
- Munoz, J.S. (2004-2005). The social construction of alternative education: Re-examining the margins of public education for at-risk chicano/a students. *The High School Journal, 88* (2), 3-23.
- Nicpon, M.F., Huser, L., Blanks, E.H., Sollenberger, S., Befort, C., & Kurpius, S.E.R. (2006-2007). The relationship of loneliness and social support with college freshmen's academic performance and persistence. *Journal of College Student Retention, 8*(3), 345-358..
- Novick, B., Kress, J.S., & Elias, M. J. (2002). Building learning communities with character: How to integrate academic, social, and emotional learning. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Oakes, J., & Lipton, M. (2003). *Teaching to change the world, 2nd ed.* Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Ostorga, A.N. (2006). Developing teachers who are reflective practitioners: A complex process. *Issues in Teacher Education, 15*(2), 5-20.
- Pearson, F. & Bowman, R.L. (2000). The faculty role: implications for collaboration with student affairs. *College Student Affairs Journal, 19*(2), 29-40.

- Pedro, J. (2006). Taking reflection into the real world of teaching. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 42(3), 129-132.
- Porter, S.R., & Swing, R.L. (2006). Understanding how first-year seminars affect persistence. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(1), 89-109.
- Power, C.P., Higgins, A., & Kohlberg, L. (1989). *Lawrence Kohlberg's approach to moral education*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Programs for Academic Support and Enrichment Fall Report. (2005). Laredo, TX: Texas A&M International University.
- Pugh, K.H. (2005). Peer tutoring do's and don'ts. *Phi Delta Kappa Fastbacks*, 528, 7-31.
- Rapley, T. (2004). Interviews. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. Gubrium, & D. Silverman (Eds.) *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 15-33). London: Sage Publications.
- Rhodes, L. (1999). Community college students' opinions regarding the value of their freshman seminar experience. *Community College Journal of Research & Practice*, 23(5), 511-523.
- Richardson, L. (2004). Writing: A method of inquiry. In S.N. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.) *Approaches to qualitative research: A reader on theory and practice* (pp. 473-495). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Robinson, L., & Kelley, B. (2007). Developing reflective thought in preservice educators: Utilizing role-plays and digital video. *Journal of Special Education Technology*, 22(2), 31-43.

- Ryan, M.P., & Glenn, P.A. (2002). Increasing one-year retention rates by focusing on academic competence: An empirical odyssey. *Journal of College Student Retention, 4*(3), 297-324.
- Salinitri, G. (2005). The effects of formal mentoring on the retention rates for first-year, low achieving students. *Canadian Journal of Education, 28*(4), 853-875.
- Samson, S. & Granath, K. (2004). Reading, writing, and research: Added value to university first-year experience programs. *Reference Services Review, 32*(2), 149-155.
- Sanft, M., Jensen, M., & McMurray, E. (2007). *Peer mentor companion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Schnell, C.A., & Doetkott, C.D. (2002-2003). First year seminars produce long-term impact. *Journal of College Student Retention, 4*(4), 377-391.
- Schon, D.A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Seidman, A. (2005). Minority student retention: Resources for practitioners. In G.H. Gaither (Ed.) *Minority Retention: What Works?* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Sidle, M.W., & McReynolds, J. (1999). The freshman year experience: Student retention and student success. *NASPA Journal, 36*(4), 288-300.
- Slattery, P., & Rapp, D. (2003). *Ethics and the foundations of education: Teaching convictions in a postmodern world*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Smith, B. (2004). Leave no college student behind. *Multicultural Education, 11*(3), 48-50.

- Sorel, K. (2005). The integrated curriculum. *Science and Children*, 42(6), 21-25.
- Stake, R.E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N.K. Denizen & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 443-466). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (2003). Student retention report. Retrieved September 18, 2005 from <http://www.thecb.state.tx.us>.
- Thompson, D.E., Orr, B., Thompson, C., & Grover, K. (2007). Examining students' perceptions of their first-semester experience at a major land-grant institution. *College Student Journal*, 41(3), 640-648.
- Tinto, V. (n.d.). Learning better together: The impact of learning communities on student success. Retrieved September 20, 2005 from <http://soeweb.syr.edu/Faculty/Vtinto>.
- Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68(6), 599-623.
- Tinto, V. (1998). Learning communities and the reconstruction of remedial education in higher education. Prepared for presentation at the "Conference on Replacing Remediation in Higher Education" at Stanford University, January 26-27, 1998.
- Tinto, V., & Goodsell, A. (1993). Freshman interest groups and the first year experience: Constructing student communities in a large university. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Reading and Learning Association, Kansas City, Mo.

- Trevino, A., & Mayes, C. (2006). Creating a bridge from high school to college for Hispanic students. *Multicultural Education, 14*(2), 74-77.
- Tsui, L. & Gao, E. (2006). The efficacy of seminar courses. *Journal of College Student Retention, 8* (2), 149-170.
- Valdes, G. (1996). *Con respeto: Bridging the distance between culturally diverse families and schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Vars, G. F. (1991). Integrated curriculum in historical perspective. *Educational Leadership, 49*(2), 14-15.
- Vesta, D., Stuhr, P. L., & Ballengee-Morris, C. (2006). Suggestions for integrating the arts into curriculum. *Art Education, 59*(1), 6-11.
- Walker, D.A., & Schultz, A.M. (2000-2001). Reaching for diversity: Recruiting and retaining Mexican-American students. *Journal of College Student Retention, 2*(4), 313-325.
- Warren, E.S. (2005). Future colleague or convenient friend: The ethics of mentorship. *Counseling and Values, 49*(2), 141-147.
- Watkins, C. (2005). *Classrooms as learning communities: What's in it for schools?* London: Routledge.
- Wilkie, G. (n.d.). Assessing learning community effectiveness: An institutional view. Retrieved September 20, 2005 from <http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/resources>.

SUPPLEMENTAL SOURCES CONSULTED

- Beane, J. (1991). The middle school: The natural home of integrated curriculum. *Educational Leadership*, 49 (2), 9-13.
- Biafora, F. & Ansalone, G. (2008). Perceptions and attitudes of school principals towards school tracking: Structural considerations of personal beliefs. *Education*, 128(4), 588-602.
- Blanc, R. A., DeBuhr, L. E., & Martin, D. C. (1983). Breaking the attrition cycle: The effects of supplemental instruction on undergraduate performance and attrition. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 54(1), 80-90.
- Facts on the Hispanic or Latino Population*. (n.d.). Retrieved March 15, 2007 from <http://www.census.gov>.
- Lonning, R. A., DeFranco, T.C., & Weinland, T.P. (1998). Development of theme-based, interdisciplinary, integrated curriculum: A theoretical model. *School Science and Mathematics*, 98 (6), 312-318.
- McGlynn, A.P. (2004). Nurturing hispanics to four-year degrees. *The Education Digest*, 69(5), 51-54.
- Nora, A. (1990). Campus-based aid programs as determinants of retention among hispanic community college students. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 61(3), 312-331.
- Slattery, P. (n.d.). The center for a post modern world: Statement of beliefs, purposes, and programs. Retrieved February 21, 2006 from www.coe.tamu.edu/~pslattery_

Tinto, V. (1998). Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously. *The Review of Higher Education*, 21(2), 167-177.

Zurita, M. (2004). Stopping out and persisting: Experiences of latino undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 6(3), 301-324.

APPENDIX A

LEARNING COMMUNITY

1. How do you feel about the requirement that all freshmen enroll in a learning community?
2. How has being in a learning community enabled you to make friends at the University?
3. Do you feel at ease with the people in your learning community? Why?
4. When you miss class, how do other students in your learning community help you catch up on any missed work?
5. If you prefer to go to the Writing Center or CASA with someone else, would you choose another student from your learning community? Why?
6. Do you study outside of class with other students from your learning community? Why?
7. Do you go out with other students in your learning community for non-academic reasons?

APPENDIX B

INTEGRATED CURRICULUM

1. How does your freshmen seminar instructor integrate materials from your other classes into this class?

2. Do you find this practice helpful? Why or why not?

3. Do your instructors in your other learning community classes also integrate material from other courses? How?

4. If yes, do you find this helpful? Why or why not?

5. Do you feel that integrating material in your learning community classes helps you understand the material better? If so, in what way?

6. Do you feel that integration of material helps you see connections between the different disciplines? How?

7. Does an integrated curriculum help you see connections between your school life and your life outside of school? If yes, how?
8. If you answered yes to the previous questions, can you give an example of how participating in a learning community with an integrated curriculum as helped you connect what you are learning in school to your life outside of school?

8. Has the freshmen seminar course made you feel a part of the university? Why or why not?

APPENDIX D

STUDENT MENTOR EVALUATION

1. I feel that my Student Mentor provided me with choices and options.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

2. I feel my Student Mentor understood me.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

3. I felt encouraged to be open with my Student Mentor during our meetings.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

4. My Student Mentor conveyed confidence in my ability to do well in this course.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

5. I feel that my Student Mentor accepts me as a person.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

6. My Student Mentor made sure that I understood the goals of this course and what I needed to do.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

7. My Student Mentor encouraged me to ask questions.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
 Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

8. I feel a lot of trust in my Student Mentor.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
 Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

9. My Student Mentor answers my questions fully and carefully.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
 Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

10. My Student Mentor listens to how I would like to do things.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
 Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

11. My Student Mentor handles people's emotions well.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
 Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

12. I feel that my Student Mentor cares about me as a person.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
 Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

13. I don't feel very good about the way my Student Mentor talks to me.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
 Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

14. My Student Mentor tries to understand how I see things.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Strongly Agree

Neutral

Strongly Disagree

15. I feel able to share my feelings with my Student Mentor.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Strongly Agree

Neutral

Strongly Disagree

Please feel free to add any comments below, or on the back, that you wish about UNIV 1101-1102-the course, the instructor, student mentors, etc. We are particularly interested in knowing what we could do to make it more useful to incoming freshmen students, and whether or not it made a difference in the success of those who have taken the class. We appreciate all comments.

VITA

Name: Hayley DeAnn Kazen

Address: Hayley Kazen
Texas A&M University
TLAC Mail Stop 4232
College of Education
College Station, TX 77843-4232

Email Address: hkazen@tamiu.edu

Education: B.A., Spanish, The University of Texas at Austin, 1991
M.A., Sociology, The University of Texas at El Paso, 1997
M.A., English, Texas A&M International University, 2005