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RECONSIDERING LEARNING COMMUNITIES:

EXPANDING THE DISCOURSE BY CHALLENGING THE DISCOURSE

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At postsecondary institutions across the U. S., concern has risen over the quality of undergraduate instruction, particularly for first-year students. Critics of undergraduate education cite the use of large lecture classes, incoherent curriculum, inconsistent quality of advising, and instruction by graduate teaching assistants and part-time instructors. Since the mid-1990s, numerous institutions have responded to these concerns by examining their first-year students' academic and social experiences and implementing programs designed to enhance their learning and integration into campus life. These programs are intended to raise retention rates, promote college student development, and cultivate academic success. One of the most significant efforts to improve freshman learning has been the development of residential and non-residential Freshman Learning Communities (FLCs) on campuses. FLCs typically link two or more of a group of students' classes during their first year or semester, emphasizing small class sizes, curricular cohesion, collaborative teaching, interdisciplinary learning, instruction by tenured and tenure-track faculty, the formation of peer networks, and out-of-class support.

The higher education literature on learning communities is replete with research and anecdotal accounts that support learning communities. Among the themes that undergird the positive view of FLCs are students' academic success, community-building, student retention, and successful transitions from high school to college (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 1998). Recent literature also asserts that changes in traditional student populations, including increasing

diversity of age, race, and ethnicity, justify changing traditional teaching approaches via learning communities.[1] The literature relies heavily on traditional measures of college student and college program success in evaluating learning communities: student retention, GPAs, the development of cognitive skills, satisfaction, positive peer social networks, student-faculty interaction, and increased learning outcomes (see Braunstein & McGrath, 1997; Gabelnik, et al., 1990). However, the specifics within the literature establish a discourse on learning communities that seems to reify the learning community itself. That is, the literature seems to assume without question that learning communities are, by their nature, worthy enterprises. There appears to be little space in the overall discourse for questions about learning communities themselves.[2]

In this paper, we question some fundamental tenets underlying the idea and practice of learning communities: that they develop and demonstrate community; that learning is improved via less- or non-traditional formats; and that learning communities are "better" than typical or traditional freshman experiences. We approach these doctrinal assumptions through three lenses. First, we examine claims about the historical background (or legacies) and philosophical justifications for learning communities, dating back to the progressive era. Second, we inquire into the normative assumptions about what it means to be a first-year college student underlying FLCs and their implications for actual practice. Third, we bring these questions to bear on our

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[1]These changes include faculty collaboration as well as rejection of what is said to be individual, isolated study in hierarchically structured classrooms in favor of approaches that promote active learning with teachers as facilitators and an emphasis on "interdisciplinary and democratic collaboration, reflective practice, and relations between theory and practical applications" (DeMulder & Eby, 1999, p. 893; see also Barr & Tagg, 1995). Unquestioned here is whether traditional students could learn more from less traditional approaches, too.

[2]Even where critique surfaces, the discourse is fashioned uncritically. Where "strengths" are listed for learning communities, there are no "weaknesses," only "challenges." Where there are claims to "collaboration," there is no "dissent," but "negativism." See, for example, DeMulder and Eby (1999) and Radencich, Thompson, Anderson, Oropallo, Fleege, Harrison, Hanley, & Gomez (1998).

own experiences as co-advisors of an FLC as well as interviews we conducted with six students

in the group. Our paper, then, incorporates elements of philosophical, historical, and interpretive

analyses of existing literature and our actual practice. Our goal is not to argue against learning

communities per se but to bring to the discourse and practice of FLCs some critical questions

regarding their value and practice. These questions often reveal inconsistencies that the

literature and general narratives on FLCs appear to overlook or ignore. We seek to understand

the meaning of those inconsistencies and the motives behind offering FLCs. Do the stated

motives correspond to FLCs in practice? If, for example, FLCs are claimed to be "progressive"

and less bureaucratic but in practice are neither, what meaning might we glean? If FLCs are

claimed to be supportive environments for interaction but risk sequestering students from the

larger college or university sphere, what might FLC advocates do differently?

<u>Historical and Philosophical Foundations</u>

Integral to reconsidering learning communities is an elucidation of the historical and

philosophical background frequently cited in the higher education literature. Specifically, the

language often used in calling for FLCs appears to be "progressive" rather than traditional, and

advocates trace learning communities to Alexander Meiklejohn and John Dewey. Advocates of

FLCs, for example, use the terms "collaborative" and "active" as a contrast to their interpretation

of isolation and passive learning that characterize contemporary college life (e.g., Gabelnik et al.,

1990).[3] In defining learning communities, Gabelnick, et al. (1990), note the following:

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[3] Temple University provides a bibliography regarding what the institution takes to be historical
and philosophical foundations for the learning communities it offers. Included in its list of nine
historical sources are John Dewey's (1916) *Democracy and Education* and Alexander
Meiklejohn's (1932) *The Experimental College*. See
http://www.temple.edu/LC/lcbibliography.html [accessed 11 September 2003].

Large, impersonal, bureaucratic, and fragmented, the American college is often an

educational community only in theory. A variety of factors make the notion of

meaningful educational community–the root of the word "college"–elusive in many of

our institutions. The vision of the collegiate learning community refers to an idealized

version of the campus of the past, where students and faculty shared a close and sustained

fellowship, where day-to-day contacts reinforced previous classroom learning, where the

curriculum was organized around common purposes, and the small scale of the institution

promoted active learning, discussion, and individuality. Such a vision remains nostalgic

at best, except in small colleges such as Reed, Bard, and St. John's. (p. 9)

Evenbeck and Williams (1998) explain, "the term *learning community* is refreshing. It suggests

another time and place, far removed from the reality of university life as it is experienced by

most students, faculty, and staff, and it connotes images of intimate conversations with faculty"

(p. 35).

It is interesting to note that ongoing nostalgia for close-knit communities itself dates to

the progressive era. Rudolph (1977) describes the University of Wisconsin's invitation to and

expectations of Meiklejohn's experiment: "By 1927, when the college opened, a mythology had

developed around the vanished small college of the nineteenth century, and Meiklejohn was

willing to see himself as enlisted in an effort to bring back their vanished mystique of learning"

(pp. 276-277). In order to recuperate this idea of shared community and purpose, these writers,

like many (e.g., Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Shapiro & Levine, 1999, pp. 17-18), trace the practical

origins of FLCs to Alexander Meiklejohn and a philosophical lineage to John Dewey. In

Meiklejohn's Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin (which lasted from 1927 to

1932), students studied a two-year curriculum based on ancient Greece (freshman year) and

contemporary U.S. society (sophomore year). The students also lived together in a shared dorm.

Professors were "Advisors" and were expected to be able to teach all of the courses that

constituted the program of study. There were no grades until the end of the sophomore year, but

the curriculum was avowedly perennialist. That is, "great books" were used as the foundation

for a kind of intellectual inquiry that, to Meiklejohn, was essential to critically analyzing

American democracy. Careers and specialized knowledge were anathema to his educational

vision.[4] Known for his civil libertarianism, Meiklejohn's vision for what he called "liberal

learning" (classical liberal arts), meant developing students who merged their liberal arts study

with their free speech rights to criticize society. Indeed, Brennan (1998) writes that during his

presidency of Amherst College from 1912 to 1923, Meiklejohn clashed with alumni, trustees,

and some faculty due to his insistence on representing multiple viewpoints in the curriculum and

extracurriculum, such as including anti-war perspectives during a campus "readiness" event as

the U.S. entered World War I and his hiring of faculty with leftist leanings. Ostensibly, the point

was to bring about democracy by challenging democracy. Like Dewey, Meiklejohn

(1932)rejected the idea that teaching and learning were worthy when done mechanically,

procedurally, and without regard to change, interest, and context (see pp. 138-139).[5]

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[4] Meiklejohn (1924) outlined the importance of cultivating intellectual life and insight through the liberal arts in his 1912 inaugural address as President of Amherst College, in which he eschewed the practical demands of society and commerce, arguing that technical and professional education are "dominated by an immediate practical interest which cuts them off from the intellectual point of view of the scholar" (p. 35).

[5] He wrote in detail that "Our first question is, Can Americans, old and young, ordinary and extraordinary, be roused to undertake the task of understanding and evaluating American living? This does not mean that we are to ignore the other work, that of cultivating excellence, of training the best thinkers. It does mean that a democracy such as ours, by confusing the special and the general, has an infinite capacity for defeating its own deeper purposes. It means that the teachers of a democracy must be its critics, that in the training of its youth they must fight an unending battle against the blindly hostile forces of its popular drift. Their task is not so much to teach lessons whose value is recognized as to create the recognition of value for insights which

For his part, Dewey's progressivism meant criticizing society as well, and the criticism

was directed at the daily lives of citizens. Dewey argued for educative experiences that were

necessarily different and contextual. Like Meiklejohn, Dewey recognized that teaching and

learning done by rote or done procedurally would yield the very kind of traditional schooling

that had students bored with school in the first place. The point of learning was not

"preparatory" for Dewey (1916) and he saw democracy as one mode of associated living (p. 87;

see also pp. 81-110). Such a mode of living required experiential learning-by-doing and the

approach used students' background experiences as beginning points. Social interaction was

necessary in Dewey's view of schooling since the projects students engaged in to solve problems

were not done in isolation. There was no "rugged individualism" for Dewey. Still, for all of the

similarities between Meiklejohn and Dewey, those who invoke the two thinkers in their

discussions of learning communities appear to include little more than the idea that education is

a "social process" linked to democracy and community—and ignore some fundamental ironies

and contradictions of aligning these educators with the ideals of FLCs.[6]

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are essential to individual and social well-being. Under present conditions, the primary aim of college teaching is a kind of spiritual remaking, a reshaping of fundamental attitude and interest. If what has just been said is true, it follows not only that teaching is in large measure volitional, but also that it is very difficult. It does not admit of rough-and-ready, casual, or mechanical handling. It will not serve our purpose simply to offer fragmentary courses and then, if a student does not take them satisfactorily, to 'flunk him out' of college. Under present social conditions, the general effect of such methods is to create in the student mind attitudes of unwilling and relatively dishonest conformity, devices for 'getting by' the tests rather than for meeting them. In the face of this situation the 'preliminary hypothesis' of the Advisers is that teaching should be personal, individual. We should bring to bear upon each student, according to his special needs, the influence of the individual teacher. And the statement here made applies to students whom we call 'good' as well as to those who are 'bad.'" [Deron—you don't cite page numbers here; is this also from 138-9?]

[6] Indeed, there may be an irony in aligning these two thinkers at all, particularly given their well-known disagreements in the 1940s over the role of college curriculum as St. John's College moved to a classical, or "Great Books," curriculum. Gerald Grant and David Riesman (1978) point out that as educators nationally debated over progressives' fear that a new curricular

Unlike Dewey, Meiklejohn held to idealist (some say elitist) principles and rejected much of what would come to be known as pragmatic or progressive educational theory (see, for example, Meiklejohn, 1942). Unlike Meiklejohn, Dewey rejected "great books" programs and elitism. He was, after all, on the forefront arguing against curricular humanists who wanted schools to prepare students for college via liberal arts programs of study. While Meiklejohn's experiment at Wisconsin is often cited as an example of a learning community, it should be noted that the faculty were the ones to develop the themes and Meikeljohn eschewed electives (something Dewey embraced). Given that Meiklejohn's experiment focused on democracy and participation, it seems ironic that power was concentrated in the hands of Meiklejohn and the faculty. Moreover, as we have demonstrated, the compatibility of the educational ideas of Alexander Meikeljohn and John Dewey are debatable at best. This is particularly true given Meikeljohn's curricular prescriptiveness and Dewey's (1902) stance that educators should combine the "logical" and the "psychological," or content and the situations of learners, in formulating educational experiences and purposes. Although both men had concerns with cultivating habits of citizenship, their educational practices for democracy and community have very different implications for what a learning community might look like. On one hand, Meiklejohn's commitment to a "great books" curriculum means the goals are pre-existent and student interests need to match or adapt themselves to those goals. On the other hand, Dewey's commitment to students' experiences as the building blocks for further inquiry means that the

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authoritarianism was overtaking American colleges and universities, "the high point of the debate was an exchange between John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn" (p. 49). Where the two men did agree was, as Dewey (1944) asserted, "that an overloaded and congested curriculum needs simplification" (p. 155). But their remedies differed, as Dewey argued against "the traditional view of truth as a fixed structure of eternal and unchanging principles already in our possession to which everything else should be made to conform" (p. 188), and the isolation of vocational learning, scientific inquiry, and daily life from intellectual work. See also Alexander

community, itself, develops as the members of the community identify (and continually modify) their interests.

To the degree that Meiklejohn and Dewey *are* aligned (as with their agreement that teaching and learning are not easy and should not be mechanical and as with their agreement that participation in society requires criticality), we wonder about the connection of those similarities to current learning communities. To what degree is the teaching in learning communities actually different from non-learning community classes? Are students developing the kind of criticality that would, for example, allow for criticism of the learning communities themselves? To what degree are learning communities developing "better" students--where "better" means students who are more likely to fit traditional expectations for student success? Is there irony in the possibility that learning communities may not be democratic or reflective of a simplified curriculum, as Meiklejohn and Dewey might have come together to champion? Along a related line of irony, when Gabelnick, et al. (1990) note that the learning community is an effort to confront the large, bureaucratic qualities of many universities and colleges, we wonder whether the bureaucracy is simply not moved to the level of the learning community itself (rather than being confronted and simplified).

<u>Contemporary Assumptions Underlying Learning Communities</u>

The nostalgia for small, close-knit communities that offer social and academic coherence maps onto contemporary theories of who students are and what they need in "the bustling, often impersonal environment of the modern campus" (Evenbeck & Williams, 1998, p. 35). Defined as a curricular and pedagogical response to concerns about student retention that follows Tinto

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Meiklejohn's (1945) response to Dewey.

(1993; 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993) and Astin's (1984; 1993) conceptualizations of "persistence" and "involvement," the FLC is constructed as meeting the needs of students as they make the difficult "transition and adjustment to the social and academic demands of college life, a time when the likelihood of drop-out [sic] and the possibility of transformative learning is greatest" (Tinto & Goodsell, 1993, p. 8). Tinto's theories of student departure and Astin's idea of involvement point to the need for the integration of students' social and academic lives to improve academic success and retention, and suggest the power of FLCs to support student persistence (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999, p. 46). FLCs, then, are designed to respond to needs based on research that constructs the first year of college as a risky developmental passage from which students can be protected in small, safe, interactive communities. Writers who follow these models cite a range of benefits of FLCs for students that combine principles and outcomes of academic and psychosocial development: seeing the same people across classes, experiencing large universities as "small" (often by avoiding large lecture classes), engaging in social networks that support academic integration, cultivating interdisciplinary skills, developing purposeful identities, and gaining voice in the construction of knowledge (Gabelnik et al., 1990, pp. 63-72; Guarasci, 2001; Tinto, 1997).[7] Unquestioned in this discourse is the construction of the first-year student as "at-risk." Moreover, "community" as an idea and an ideal appears to be beyond critique.

Lenning and Ebbers (1999) cull a comprehensive definition of community from writings about FLCs and education generally that "involves inclusiveness, commitment, consensus that allows differences to be acknowledged and processed, vulnerability, and 'graceful fighting,'

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[7] See Lenning and Ebbers (1999) for a list that includes GPA, retention, academic skills, self-esteem, engagement in learning, ability to meet academic and social needs, intellectual empowerment, complex thinking, openness to ideas different from one's own, and increased

where conflict is not avoided, minimized, or disregarded" (p. 5). Included as well are

purposefulness, "shared values, caring for one another, and appreciation for cooperation" (p. 5).

Community, they explain, has become "an end as much as a means to an end, in the same vein as

the 'furniture of the mind' emphasized in the Yale Report of 1812 [sic]" (p. 7). Community,

then, is embedded as a normative ideal, presumed to be process and product, as are the benefits

of FLCs. Raymond Williams (1976) contrasts two twentieth-century uses of the word

community that underscores tensions in its meanings: "Community can be the warmly

persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to

describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all

other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society,* etc.), it seems never to be used

unfavorably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term" (p. 66). Read

as an a priori assumption, community can take on a coercive, prescriptive tone rather than one

that describes emerging identifications.

What happens to the student who doesn't make connections with others in the FLC, or

who is alienated both by the microcommunity and the larger university community?[8] And what

about the potential for the protections of FLCs to foster dependence on others rather than the

independence and healthy "interdependence" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 47) they seek to

cultivate? Questions of whom FLCs benefit, why, and how have largely been ignored in a

discourse that zealously embraces integrating social and academic community without

consideration of the potential for insularity, isolation, and dependence. For an example that is

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quality and quantity of learning (p. 52).
[8] For an example that is considered as evidence of a student's desire for community but not as a
problem inherent in the structures of FLCs, see Tinto and Goodsell (1993), who say of a student
who describes himself as "alienated," "Even negative comments about the FIGs (Freshman
Interest Groups] support the idea that students wanted to meet people; in fact, students expressed

considered as evidence of a student's desire for community but not as a problem inherent in the structures of FLCs, see Tinto and Goodsell (1993), who say of a student who describes himself as "alienated," "Even negative comments about the FIGs (Freshman Interest Groups] support the idea that students wanted to meet people; in fact, students expressed disappointment if that did not happen for them" (p. 17). Although few critiques of or problems in learning communities are noted in the literature, Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Scott (2001) point to the potential for the development of exclusionary cliques and conflicts that begin outside the classroom and are brought into it. Strommer (1999) mentions faculty concerns that FLCs can segregate students from upper-class students from whom they could learn socially and academically and that segregation may reinforce a "'secondary school' mentality" of adversarial roles toward instructors, the formation of cliques, and even "negative" community behaviors such as cheating, rudeness, or skipping class (p. 43).

The predominantly positive depictions of communities leads us to wonder whether learning communities are surreptitiously used by universities as marketing tools under the guise of "community building." While the research literature speaks repetitively of "students' needs," equally repetitive is an emphasis on retention due to economic exigencies, including "decreasing enrollments, greater competition among colleges for students, and the demand for accountability in institutions of higher education" (Johnson, 2000-2001, p. 219)[9]—not to mention university and college rankings and classifications (indeed, they are not mentioned). This marketing issue is linked to a question of the degree to which learning communities are socializing agents that support—and play on—particular narratives about what it means to be a student, particularly one

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disappointment if that did not happen for them" (p. 17).

[9] See also Soldner, Lee, and Duby (1999) on FLCs as many institutions' response to "the tremendous internal and external pressures to improve undergraduate education, student

who may be "at-risk" during the first, "critical" year of college.

<p style="text-align:center">A Specific Case of an FLC</p>

Our point is to consider questions about learning communities in general, but our analysis also extends the critique to our own experiences as co-directors of an FLC, "School and Society." We are not claiming that the general literature does not represent our circumstance. We wish to argue, on the contrary, that our experiences may be more common than the general literature indicates, particularly given the foundational assumptions behind learning communities and the way they are generally being used in institutions of higher education.

Our institution is a large, urban research university that has traditionally served part-time students but is moving toward attracting full-time students by, for example, constructing residential facilities and improving its general education offerings. As part of this move, the university introduced FLCs in 1999, when 295 students enrolled in 11 FLCs, and by 2001 had doubled this number to enroll 600 students in 25 FLCS across the university's colleges. In 2002, the university had space for 800 students in 32 FLCs. Our institution seemed to be approaching the learning community in an inverted manner. That is, while most learning communities appear to develop out of a sense of changing demographics (where those demographics indicate a pattern of movement from a traditional to a not-so-traditional student body), our university began with a non-traditional population and seems to see learning communities as a way to attract more traditional students.

An informational pamphlet on FLCs handed out to incoming first-year students at a pre-orientation began with several letters to students. In the first, the Associate Provost for

satisfaction, but most importantly, student persistence" (p. 115).

Undergraduate Studies addressed students:

>Freshman Learning Communities allow you to join a small group of students, faculty and student leaders. Joining the FLC will give you an opportunity to get to know the faculty, to become involved in a group and to participate in projects designed around the theme of your FLC. Most important, when you register for a Freshman Learning Community, you enroll in a strong academic program consisting of core curriculum courses. . . . Our research shows that students who enroll in an FLC earn a higher grade point average than their counterparts who do not participate in the program.

On the next page, the Director of Freshmen Studies addressed another letter to students:

>FLC courses are taught by committed faculty with interdisciplinary backgrounds. The faculty members have been hard at work planning the curriculum, and you can be assured of taking the right courses for your first semester. The FLCs contain the best courses, offered at the best times, and taught by some of the best faculty. . . . Simply pick an FLC that sounds interesting and your first semester schedule is complete.

If these administrative "welcome letters" were not enough, a two-page "fact sheet" on FLCs reinforced these messages of getting the best, doing the best, and streamlining an intimidating process of registering and becoming a college student. In a section entitled "What are Freshmen Learning Communities," the fact sheet reiterated, "You will only have to register for the learning community of your choice to be assigned to each of the sections in the course cluster." After explaining that this course cluster would include "students who share your interests," the fact sheet promised that "this group creates a small, friendly community within a large research university." A following section, "Benefits of joining an FLC," explained,

>First-year college students deserve a formative, integrative academic experience on

which to build lifelong strengths and perspectives. This experience should include not

just the courses they take, but the combination, sequence, and fit of those courses. . .

Each FLC course builds on the other by exploring unique yet related fields of knowledge.

. . . Although located in the heart of a fast-paced city, Georgia State University is an ideal

place to develop lifelong skills and build relationships. . . . Joining an FLC allows a

student to:

> Register more easily for Fall semester
>
> Study and make friends with other freshmen
>
> Connect with faculty in a learning community
>
> Benefit from an enriched academic experience
>
> Learn what Georgia State University has to offer in the classroom and beyond.
>
> (Georgia State University, 2002).

Despite assurances of a seamless bureaucratic, social, and academic transition for students, as

faculty, we faced practical difficulties that render idealized notions of learning communities

highly problematic. Indeed, once we set the FLC in motion, our institution seemed to reinforce

the opposite of the anti-bureaucratic, anti-centralized ethos associated with idealized notions of

FLCs as benefiting not only students but also faculty. Faculty collaboration is meant not only to

create integrated and meaningful FLC courses but also to enhance faculty development and

teaching satisfaction (Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999, p. 169. Lenning and Ebbers (1999) offer a

list of faculty benefits that includes sharing knowledge, collegial trust, the promotion of active

teaching, broadened knowledge of pedagogy, and seeing one's own discipline in a larger context

(p 57; see also Gabelnik et al., 1990, pp. 79-82).

We thus question whether non-specialized, interdisciplinary teaching and learning is

possible in institutions that require core curricula. What happens, even (or especially) in

"successful" learning communities, when the nexus of student action, student voice, and student

learning is faced with mandated course requirements (such as a required "Freshman Orientation"

course), learning community classes within larger sections of the same class, and requirements

beyond the scope of learning community faculty or student interests? The literature speaks of

addressing "challenges," such as administrative and institutional support, but ignores very real

issues of departmental budgetary and staffing demands, which, in our experience, resulted in

last-minute enrollment increases in two of the five classes that hindered our ability to create

collaborative assignments and integrated courses with the other faculty. Thus, ideas that FLCs

"have a dynamic quality that arises naturally as a result of putting several teachers together to

build a new curriculum" (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 54) or that interdisciplinary connections

would become explicit and systematic in the course of teaching and learning became impossible

to sustain. But faculty and students have divergent experiences and views of processes of

teaching and learning. What, in relation to their own desires and the promises of FLCS, did

students articulate of their experiences?

To learn of students' reasons for and perspectives about participating in the FLC, we

conducted interviews with six students who were part of our FLC. We selected students who we

hoped would represent a diversity of perceptions in a class of 25 students comprised of 18 white

females, one Asian American male, three African American females, and three white males. We

selected one white male, two African American females, and three white females, one of whom

was the only student who had not come directly from high school. The semi-structured

interviews (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Seidman, 1998), which lasted less than an hour each,

were designed to elicit the students' thoughts about what it was like for them to be first-year

students, their perceptions of college life, their choice to participate in the FLC, and their experiences of the FLC. Because of the potentially sensitive nature of an instructor interviewing students about their learning experiences while they were in class with her, the interviews were carefully structured to include only general questions. As we did not conduct intensive interviews, our analysis consisted of inductive analysis of each interview transcript as an independent narrative, in which we distilled salient themes from each and then compared these themes across participants to uncover consistencies and inconsistencies. Finally, we also sought to examine these themes in relation to the literature on FLCs.

While students echoed many of the recurring, positive themes of the literature on FLCs, they also offered some insights that are obscured in the literature. These include: (1) feelings of alienation and isolation from, and even boredom with, their peers, which led to eagerness to move into classes in the larger university community; (2) an inchoate sense that the next semester would be the "test" of whether they could "make it" at college after the FLC had offered them something of a protective bubble from selecting their own "uncoordinated" classes, making their own social contacts, and navigating the university's bureaucratic structures; and (3) a lack of urgency to explore campus life, join clubs, or look for social interactions elsewhere, despite articulated statements of a need to cultivate independence. The FLC was seen, in effect, as being a comfortable haven where much of the "work" of students' social and academic life was "done" for them.

Developing Needs

Illuminating in the students' narratives was their choice to participate in the "School and Society" FLC. While five of the six had declared majors in education and wanted to become teachers, their choices to enter an FLC were also influenced by such factors as ease of

registration, parents' desires, and their own concerns about adapting socially and academically to college life. Keisha,[10] for example, offered dual motivations: "I thought it would be easier to register for classes and I thought it would give me a better perspective on education." Angela, who was interested in exploring education as a career option, narrated an initial ambivalence about social aspects of the FLC: "I didn't know what it would be like to have classmates the same in every class, 'cause I was kind of thinking it would be cool to meet more people by having different classmates but at the same time it would be cool to know the people better." And Linda's mother chose the FLC for her: "'Cause she thought it would be good to have the same people in the same class and have you interact in a community at college, don't just jump into it. Just have the same people. People that, you know, help you study, understand college life."

After Carrie's mother pressed her daughter to join the FLC (contrary to Carrie's desires and intentions), Carrie came to hope that it would "ease me into the college process. You know, it's a lot different from high school, so maybe just being with the same group of freshmen and the same professors, you know, that it would just make the transition a lot easier." When asked to describe the transition, she cast it in academic terms, saying, "mainly the academic, just because I wasn't sure how professors do stuff differently as far as exams and, you know, homework. . . . I wasn't sure, you know, a little scared about what to expect." It is interesting to note, however, that Carrie was a straight-A, 4.0 GPA student in high school. When I asked her whether, even with her high school record, college was still intimidating, she responded, "Not academically, I mean, it was a little bit, because I'd hear these horror stories in high school about the professors. . . . Professors don't care about you at all, they don't want to know your name,

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[10] All names are pseudonyms.

you're just a thing, you're another person in their class, they're not sympathetic at all." While

Carrie explained that this fear was quickly allayed in the FLC, she also suggested that a benefit

of FLCs was the possibility of studying with others, yet one she would not pursue: "I'm more of

an independent studier."

Partially resonant with research that calls for small communities, it appears that a folklore

about large, impersonal classes created anxieties for a number of these students. Marcy

explained, "I like the idea [of FLCs] because you get closer to your professors. . . . You get to

know your professors better, which is good for a freshman, instead of them being scary and I

can't go ask them any questions sort of thing." She continued, "I know a lot of my friends who

are at UGA [The University of Georgia], they're in like lecture classes with like a hundred or

plus people and I was not looking forward to that at all and everyone made it sound like, 'Oh,

you're definitely going to have these huge lecture classes, and you just take notes and your

professors won't know your name.' I like the small classes a lot." Keisha also sought small

classes, based on what she had been told: "I was scared of going into classes with 200 kids.

You know, this lady was telling me, 'you're going to go to college and the professors all they're

going to want to know about you is your social security number.'"

A developmental narrative in which the FLC would support the future was evident in the

students' articulations. Marcy, for example, explained the FLC's benefits in this way: "Getting

to know those people will make it easier to talk to people next semester when you're in classes

with different people every day. You won't be afraid to approach them so much." Brad

explained,

> I was nervous about the transition from high school to college. . . . And I know I don't do
>
> transitions well. Like moving from one period in my life to another, and I have this

anxiety about it. Like I had some serious anxiety about coming to college, like I was

leaving Alpharetta, I was leaving my small little community . . . and coming to

downtown where there would be so many different kinds of people.

Indeed, when asked if the FLC had provided the continuity he was looking for, Brad responded,

"We'll find out next semester, I guess. Because after I cross the bridge we'll see if it helped me.

After I get over this transitional period then I'll know. . . . But I don't know about next semester

when I'm thrown into random classes. Like I had a little anxiety about signing up for classes,

because with the FLC it was done for me." Brad, more than the other students, reiterated his

anxieties throughout the interview. When asked whether he was less anxious now, he said, "Not

quite. I'm a little anxious about next semester, what it's going to be like to move from the

comfort—again, comfort—of the FLC into this. I feel like I'm going from a smaller community

in the college to like the big college community." In fact, Brad painted the bridge of the FLC as

one that was only temporary:

And I think above and beyond the FLC to try in that first semester to reach out into the

bigger realm of Georgia State. That might make the transition easier. That might be

what I should have done. And I kind of regret not doing that now, getting involved,

auditioning for a play or something. Because the theater people are kind of like a family

when they do the plays and stuff like that, so that when the FLC experience was over,

you still would have a group that you belong to instead of having to go out and look for

something, starting all over.

Brad was acutely aware of his position in a developmental narrative, one he was not taking

control of: "I haven't gone out and done anything to get myself involved, which I think might

hinder my ability to make that step. But I feel like in the FLC I feel like part of the group. . . I

kind of feel like I belong at Georgia State, but I don't know if that'll change next semester." The homogeneity of this FLC in particular may have provided Brad with a buffer from the "real GSU." Brad spoke of his discomfort in an urban environment: "I feel an anxiety of being the minority. Because I've never in my life had to think about race . . . and sometimes I feel out of place." Yet Linda, too, wanted to reach out to broader communities in the university: "I haven't done any clubs yet, but next semester I'm going to get into a club just to get to know other people."

Angela described herself as concerned with what the next semester would bring, as she left her friends in the FLC and began taking required courses that she did not feel confident in: "I'm worried about next semester because I'm worried that my teachers aren't going to be as cool as the ones I've got now. That's going to suck because I like every single teacher that I have. . . . I'm not looking forward to next semester as much as I was this one."

The protection of the FLC may have actually kept students from exploring other facets of the university, developing networks, and cultivating a sense of autonomy. In her analysis of developmental theories, Lesko (2001) takes up Erickson's enduring influence on conceptions of adolescence and youth, suggesting that his work sets up an idea of adolescence as a "developmental moratorium," in which young people are positioned in an expectant mode, protected as they passively await a future of responsibility and power. This "expectant time" is constructed by adults, institutions, and "theories that tell us that youth need dependency because they are confused about their identities" (p. 130). We would extrapolate her discussion of Erikson to theorists such as Chickering as well, given his use of aspects of Erikson's developmental tasks or stages (see Chickering & Reisser, 1993, pp. 2, 23), She argues that "dominant concepts regarding youth's position in the western societies, 'development' and

'socialization,'" position young people as "not fully developed or socialized" (p. 123) and thus

as needing guidance and protection. The college student whose needs and outcomes research

would make knowable and known is positioned as passive despite developmental theories'

normative calls for young people to work for active mastery of the environment and a unified

sense of self. Authoritative social scientific discourses, then, institutionalize structures in which

college students exercise a pseudo-autonomy directed to a desired future as they "are expected to

measure up to finely attuned assessments of productivity, learning, morality, and achievement

while remaining in a social position that is dependent and watched over not only by adults but

also by their age-peers" (p. 129). FLCs may be supporting a discourse of development and

empowerment in which students are not active but passive, are told what they need, and as a

result internalize their roles accordingly.

<u>Failed Community</u>

Students' naming social interaction as a benefit of FLCs was belied by their own lack of

access to social interaction and by the lack of diversity in the FLC group. Marcy, for example,

spoke of the study groups as beneficial, enabling exchange of information and mutual support.

Yet, when asked about this exchange, she said, "I don't go because they're always in the village

[student dorms] and I don't live in the village but everyone, like . . . they get together before

exams. But I can't get down there in the evening." It appears she has learned to internalize a

discourse of the benefits of FLCs as community without experiencing those benefits. And

Angela, even as she embraced the close network, described herself as outside of it: "Not

superclose friends, you know, but we talk, we're cool. I think a lot of them get together and

hang out on the weekends and after school, but I don't really do that stuff. I'm living at home, so

I drive here every day, it takes about 45 minutes."[11]

Equally, if not more significant, was the sense of confinement in the FLC that several students described. Linda commented, "It's the same people. I'm ready to get out. Just seeing the same faces, just seeing the same people, going to the same classes with the same people." When asked about friendships she had made, Linda said, "Just one in particular, Heather. . . but like there's only like three African American people in the class." She framed the racial homogeneity of the class in terms of questions of comfort: "I don't like to go to a restaurant and be like the only black person. Not that I'm a racist or nothing, I just feel uncomfortable. I don't know. I just would feel more comfortable, equal. . . . If there were more black people, you'd have more friends that you could talk to." Another African American student, Keisha, commented, "It's kind of annoying seeing everyone every single day. That's why I'm looking forward to second semester. I feel kind of like I'm in a little cage. . . . When I walk around and I see these different people on campus and I'd like to be in class with them, just to get the whole diversity of the campus."

Carrie, a self-proclaimed Christian, spoke of exclusions in the FLC: "It's really hard me being a big Christian coming here and just people aren't really as accepting as I thought they would be, this being such a diverse school. But I know my classmates, I mean they just make it clear that they don't want anything to have to do with my religion. . . . It's more the ethnic and racial diversity that's accepted, and that's great, but you're in the Bible Belt and so there needs to be a lot of religious tolerance." She perceived the group as exclusionary: "I see them walking around in little clumps, people from our FLC and that's just fine that they're making new

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[11] FLCs have been suggested as a support for commuter students, who have been labeled a "high-risk retention group" (Gordon, 1989, p. 196). On the need for institutions to foster community interaction, including social and academic involvement, for commuter students, see

friendships but if you have someone like me who's different from the rest of them it's not okay."

She offered an example from our class in which she was in a group preparing to lead a debate about teaching evolution in public schools:

> When I was doing the presentation for your class and we were going to do the debate thing, everybody wanted to be on the other side. And they're like, "Oh, you want to do that, that's great, because we don't really want to." Or, about ten minutes before we were going to do the presentation, you know, they drew the fish and they put the Darwin in there and they just kept going on about how that was the best and so I'm like, "What about the other fish," and they're like, "Who cares." So, I know it's just the little things, but they know how I feel and so I think it's a little disrespectful. And so I just feel out of place. Really I haven't met anybody in my FLC that I know of with my views and I don't feel like I fit in much. And they all like to party and get drunk and that's okay but I don't, so the social life is kind of hard.

The "buffer" Carrie found was outside the FLC: "I have another class outside the FLC and people are really nice in there. It's actually music appreciation class but we talk, I've talked to some people about religion and about the church I go to and they're like you go there, that's great, you know, they just seem a lot more accepting." Carrie had investigated student organizations, but found that she could not participate in them due to their evening meetings. She was considering transferring to another university in an outlying county near her home, but wanted to try one more semester without the FLC: "I'm hoping maybe things'll change next semester once I'm out of the FLC. . . . I just think maybe if I get with a bunch of different people because right now I have five classes with the same people and I don't get to meet a lot of

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Chickering & Reisser (1993, p. 399) and Pascarella & Terenzini (1991, pp. 639-40).

different people I think. If I have a variety, then maybe."

Carrie's concerns about feelings of isolation and limited options regarding other people's ideas represent part of a discourse that challenges dominant views on learning communities. As has been indicated, some students felt that having the same classes with the same people meant that they already sensed what people were going to say in response to particular questions. When Carrie raised her hand to speak, students often rolled their eyes, presumably because they felt they already knew what kinds of ideas she was going to express. Could such familiarity as having the same people in all of one's classes breed a kind of contempt FLC advocates never imagined? And could the reality of specially selected, small classes be more problematic than the literature indicates? When students are told that FLCs develop friendships and a close-knit community, they appear to accept idealized notions of both of the concepts friendship and community. But when students indicate, like Angela did, that they rarely if ever actually engaged with her peers outside of class, we wonder whether there is a form of hegemony in evidence: students willingly engaging in a narrative about their FLC experience that supports FLCs even if the FLCs fail to provide individual students with some or much of what they promoted. If FLC promotional literature, university FLC administrators, and FLC faculty establish and reinforce a discourse about what is beneficial about FLCs without engaging in questions about what might be problematic about FLCs, it appears to be a natural extension to have students say positive things about FLCs, even if their experiences contradict some or much of the larger discourse.

A significant concern that emerges from juxtaposing student, research, and institutional narratives is that while we are able to consider a student such as Carrie's views as part of a deliberation about FLCs, it becomes clear that individual student interests, problems, and

possibilities are actually not the driving force behind current efforts to adopt, promote, and

expand FLC programs. In place of the interests of students and the historical, progressive

narrative about developing community and democratic engagement, we wonder whether

institutional motivations like retention rates and enrollments are actually the primary motivations

behind learning communities.

Challenging the Discourse

In attempting to challenge the larger discourse on FLCs, we wish to remind ourselves of

the three major lenses we used to explore FLCs in this paper: (1) the legacies frequently used to

provide historical justification for FLCs; (2) the normative assumptions of FLCs; and (3) our and

our students' experiences as co-directors of an FLC. By revisiting these lenses, we wish to craft

a challenge to the dominant discourse in order that we (and others) might expand our

understandings of FLC initiatives and practices. In so doing, we find ourselves increasingly

worried that the dominant discourse on FLCs camouflages underlying, and arguably ominous,

reasons for the recent proliferation of FLCs in the United States.

We worry, for example, that the progressive history attributed to Meiklejohn and Dewey

is used to romanticize ideas like community and democracy in order to "sell" the idea of FLCs

both to faculty on campuses and students interested in coming to those campuses. The legacy of

Meiklejohn and Dewey is, ironically, one exemplification of a problem we see with the

movement toward FLCs: unreflective misunderstanding. That is, by not knowing or

acknowledging the sometimes bitter feuds between Meiklejohn and Dewey, FLC advocates seem

to advance an ahistorical rationale as part of the justification for FLCs. This is symbolically

important given the assumption that "community," "citizenship," and "individual development"

are primarily based in "consensus" and "shared values," such that arguments within and among community are not highlighted as important, valuable, or even existing. It is as though citizens can only be citizens if they do not disagree with one another. But Meiklejohn and Dewey not only disagreed with one another, they maintained that free speech rights for criticizing society were sacrosanct. If the oft-cited historical justification for FLCs contradicts the assumptions of the very "community," "citizenship," and "individual development" FLC advocates highlight, does such inconsistency indicate that the historical background cited is done so uncritically? If so, what might such a lack of criticality and any corresponding lack of reflection represent? What hope is there that FLCs can themselves promote critical thought? If criticality is not a primary emphasis, what becomes the central purpose for FLCs and the colleges that adopt and promote them?

Gabelnik, et al. (1990) contend that a "sense of responsible citizenship is often present and purposefully cultivated in learning communities. . . . Group processes can be powerful in a learning community, and group norms for tolerance, inclusion, and support are important factors for success" (p. 59). We wonder what Gabelnik, et al., mean by "responsible citizenship." Are they generally referring to Meiklejohn's or Dewey's differing notions of citizenship? If Gabelnik, et al., do not mean either thinker's notion of citizenship, then whose notion of citizenship is being "purposefully cultivated?" What does citizenship entail? Perhaps more troubling is the claim that certain norms are "important factors for success." What does "success" mean and what are the contexts for "success?" Who establishes the criteria to determine "success?" If FLCs are supposed to establish group norms like "tolerance, inclusion, and support," are these norms constitutive of citizenship? If so, and since citizenship is "purposefully cultivated," whose purpose is served by such cultivation? In a broader sense,

might FLC advocates be incorrect in claiming that FLCs are uniquely different from traditional college experiences?

Further, regarding the establishment of norms, Chickering and Reisser (1993) argue that when students form friendships and "participate in communities that become meaningful subcultures, and when diversity of backgrounds and attitudes as well as significant interchanges and shared interests exist" (p. 275) development is fostered. Yet they warn that student culture "can affect the development of identity and purpose by encouraging wide-ranging exploration or curtailing it. . . .[W]hen the community validates a limited set of roles, development of identity suffers" (p. 276). While a community is optimally diverse, "It serves as a reference group, where there are boundaries in terms of who is 'in' and who is 'out.' It has norms that inform those with different roles, behaviors, and status that they are 'good' members or that what they are doing is unacceptable" (p. 277). Do the norms to which Chickering and Reisser (1993) refer emerge from student interaction or are norms pre-existent, prescribed as are the a priori assumptions of community? If the norms are pre-existent, are they intentionally used to determine discourse of a particular type—one, say, that limits criticality, the raising of questions about taken-for-granted assumptions about curricular content and structure, or the format of classes?

We believe it is conceivable, if not likely, that FLCs *are* being used for purposes other than developing students' criticality. We believe it is likely that students and parents are provided with an idealized, normative version of FLCs that mask some very real problems that exist within and result from FLCs. Aside from the irony of their history, the lack of reflection we are claiming exists in the dominant discourse on (and in) FLCs becomes highly problematic when the goals and purposes of FLCs are asserted to be focused on students and their needs and

interests.   Indeed, the goals and purposes of FLCs may be directly related to the economic situation of institutions of higher education. In order to "survive," colleges and universities increase their focus on initiatives like FLCs in order to retain students and stay in business. [get ben's sources for here]

Our critique of FLCs and the dominant discourse surrounding them should not suggest that such criticism has not existed in the past. Indeed, in responding to criticism that freshman seminars are often characterized as "holding students' hands," Gardner (1989) writes that "The argument that freshman seminars coddle or hand hold students is true. Acknowledge it, then ask, 'So what?' A certain amount of hand holding and coddling can be combined with legitimate academic work. If all this leads to a demonstrable increase in freshman learning and persistence rates, how is that disadvantageous to the institution?" (p. 244).[12] Gardner dismisses the critique about "hand holding" first-year students, but the way he does so is what we find most interesting. In his rationale for downplaying the critique, Gardner appears, in effect, to ignore the effects of hand holding on students that we have pointed to, and suggests that as long as learning and persistence rates "increase," the *institution* should be content. Beyond questioning what is actually meant by "learning" and who decides what qualifies as a legitimate "increase," we think the ultimate focus of FLC discourse is not the student, but the institution. By asking the question "How is that disadvantageous to the institution?" Gardner reinforces a criterion that reifies the university and puts students in positions to support the institution, but to what degree does the university support the student? What does it mean when universities "sell" FLCs by offering students enticements like easy registration and pre-planned courses?

When the dominant discourse does focus on students, as with Gardner's quote concerning

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[12]

hand-holding, we wonder about the degree to which students are infantilized. When, for example, registration is "taken care of" for students, when courses are selected for students, and when, as was the case in our experience, a required course (GSU 1010: New Student Orientation) was offered that stipulated that students play "name learning" games, "team building," go through perfunctory campus tours, and fill out work sheets having to do with financial aid, "time management," and the essential parts of a syllabus, we wonder about the degree to which the FLC establishes expectations for students that, while well-intentioned, often yield resentment about being treated less like a college student and more like a "baby."   For example, in evaluating the FLC overall, Brad commented, "I know a lot of their policies and a lot of the stuff that goes along with the FLC is a little cheesy and some of the stuff that we have to go through with the GSU 1010, like the diversity training and whatever that guy is, team-building. I think the idea, the concept of an FLC is a good idea. I think that in theory it does kind of work because it makes people feel comfortable." When asked what he would change, he said, "The team building and the diversity training. I think the GSU 1010 class is a good class in theory but it's not really necessary. I think that it could be a week-long course. I don't think we should have to learn about time management for two-and-a-half hours a week, you know, that's really a waste of time."

In sum, then, our analysis of three elements of FLCs—historical antecedents, contemporary norms and discourses, and a case from our own practice—suggests that although the idea of an FLC has merit, a number of cautions are in order, including: (1) consideration of who would benefit from an FLC and why rather than the use of discourses of risk and community as a marketing tool to benefit institutions; (2) questioning the viability of administrative centralization of the FLC machinery, including courses and their content

requirements ; (3) consideration of what historical traces are at work (and how) in FLCs as educators seek to cultivate student voice and autonomy through small communities. If FLCs are to continue to proliferate nationally, educators must attend to the nuances of the assumptions underlying them and their potential effects on faculty and students.

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