

Fall 2019

“Our Stories”: First-year Learning Communities Students Reflections on the Transition to College

Karen Goodlad
CUNY New York City College of Technology

Sandra Cheng
CUNY New York City College of Technology

Jennifer Sears
CUNY New York City College of Technology

Mery Diaz
CUNY New York City College of Technology

Ashwin Satyanarayana
CUNY New York City College of Technology

See next page for additional authors

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ny_pubs



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Goodlad, K. , Cheng, S. , Sears, J. , Diaz, M. , Satyanarayana, A. , Kreniske, P. (2019). “Our Stories”: First-year Learning Communities Students Reflections on the Transition to College. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 7(2), Article 5. Available at: <https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrpjournal/vol7/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the New York City College of Technology at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.

Authors

Karen Goodlad, Sandra Cheng, Jennifer Sears, Mery Diaz, Ashwin Satyanarayana, and Phil Freniske

2019

“Our Stories”: First-year Learning Communities Students Reflections on the Transition to College

Karen Goodlad

CUNY, New York City College of Technology, kgoodlad@citytech.cuny.edu

Sandra Cheng

CUNY, New York City College of Technology, scheng@citytech.cuny.edu

Jennifer Sears

CUNY, New York City College of Technology, jssears@citytech.cuny.edu

Mery Diaz

CUNY, New York City College of Technology, mdiaz@citytech.cuny.edu

Ashwin Satyanarayana

CUNY New York City College of Technology, asatyanarayana@citytech.cuny.edu

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal>

Recommended Citation

Goodlad, K. , Cheng, S. , Sears, J. , Diaz, M. , Satyanarayana, A. , Kreniske, P. (2019). “Our Stories”: First-year Learning Communities Students Reflections on the Transition to College. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 7(2), Article 5.

Available at: <https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol7/iss2/5>

Authors retain copyright of their material under a [Creative Commons Non-Commercial Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).

“Our Stories”: First-year Learning Communities Students Reflections on the Transition to College

Abstract

Analysis of diverse first-year and first-generation learning communities students’ reflective narratives shows this population of students at an urban commuter college of technology face significant challenges in the transition into college. Designed to assist in this transition, the “Our Stories” digital writing project incorporates reflective writing in the long established, yet recently revitalized, learning communities program. Through analysis of the “Our Stories” project, we examine how the structure of our learning communities program, together with writing on an open digital platform, builds community and has the potential to positively influence students as they identify, and begin to make sense, of the social, emotional, and bureaucratic challenges in their transition into college. The role of peer mentors, faculty and administrators in this project is discussed.

Keywords

Learning Communities, student narratives, reflective writing, digital writing, first-year transition, digital pedagogy, faculty development, narrative theory

Cover Page Footnote

It is with sincere appreciation that we acknowledge the support provided for this project by Julia Jordan, Director, Faculty Commons; Lauri Aguirre, Director, First-Year Programs; Iman Abdulfattah, College Assistant, First-Year Programs; New York City College of Technology First Year Learning Communities Faculty; and Peer Mentors, specifically Mariah Rajah and Hashir Qureshi, for their unending support to ensure the “Our Stories” project became a reality. A special thank you is reserved for our First Year Learning Communities students who reflected openly about their experiences at New York City College of Technology, their stories will serve to improve the experience of those who will follow them.

Authors

Karen Goodlad, Sandra Cheng, Jennifer Sears, Mery Diaz, Ashwin Satyanarayana, and Philip Kreniske

A shared belief in the potential for writing to transform student experience was the impetus behind the “Our Stories” digital writing project launched by faculty of New York City College of Technology’s First Year Learning Communities (FYLC) program. Instead of austerity-inspired academic instruction that comes from top-down directives, which have been heavily rejected by faculty and higher education advocates alike, we made a push for more faculty-led innovative instructional technologies and projects that emphasize improving student writing and critical skills, collaboration and openness, and faculty/peer mentor/student relationships—characteristics deemed reflective of good scholarship as well as just and effective pedagogy (Fabricant & Brier, 2016). It is in this spirit that we anticipated that the writing and sharing of learning communities’ students’ stories would positively influence their transition experience by helping them learn about and seek out college resources. Drawing on narrative theory (Berthoff & Stephens, 1988; Dauite & Nelson, 1997; Fulwiler, 1983), we envisioned that writing about the college transition would help learning communities’ students better acclimate themselves to the college while expressing the social, emotional, and academic challenges they face. Ultimately, this narrative process would provide support beyond the classroom setting, ease their transition to college, and help them achieve their academic goals.

Social-belonging interventions (Walton & Cohen, 2011), in particular, reflective writing, appear to have a positive impact on diverse students’ retention and college completion rates. Another evidence-based approach for supporting diverse students in the transition to college is participation in high impact educational practices, such as learning communities (Kuh 2008; Finley & McNair, 2013). Specifically, Finley and McNair’s work draws attention to practices where students interact with each other and “incorporate their lived experiences into their learning, and participate in support networks” (pg. 29). “Our Stories” merges these two pedagogical approaches by adding a digital reflective writing component to the learning communities model. Approaches like the one used in “Our Stories” may be particularly important in public universities that serve a majority of students of color, many of whom come from low-income households and are the first in their family to attend college (Rodriguez, Meyers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2000; Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016).

Background Information

New York City College of Technology Students at a Glance

Commonly referred to as “City Tech,” New York City College of Technology of the City University of New York ranks among the top ten United States colleges that promote upward economic mobility (Aisch, Buchanan, Cox, & Quealy, 2017). With over 17,000 students as of Fall 2018, the college is home

to one of the most diverse student bodies in the country. The majority of students identify as Hispanic 34% and Black (non-Hispanic) 29%. City Tech students also report great need. The majority, 61%, live in households with incomes of less than \$30,000, and 80% of incoming first-year students receive some type of aid (New York City College of Technology, 2018).

Many students also come to City Tech with significant academic need after years of attending underfunded, under resourced, and underperforming K-12 schools that do not adequately prepare them for college. Over 70% of New York City high school graduates attend the City University of New York according to estimates, and anywhere between 53%-80% of these students require remediation in English or mathematics (Gonen, 2013; Fabricant & Briers, 2016). Furthermore, many students experience personal circumstances that can make the college experience challenging. Approximately 62% of students are the first in their families to attend college and many have social networks that provide limited support to help them navigate the college experience.

Revitalizing A Learning Communities Program For Greater Student Engagement

Learning communities are a high-impact educational practice, recognized for making significant positive impacts on the student experience, especially for those from underserved communities (Kuh 2008; Finley & McNair, 2013). Established at City Tech in 2000, the FYLC program follows a traditional model whereby “students take two or more linked courses as a group and work closely with one another and with their professors” (Kuh 2008, p. 10). Since the program's inception, first-year students have had the option to self-select FYLC courses, which are theme based and collaborative by design. For example, a student could enroll in a learning community between a psychology course paired with an English composition course, *Emotions 101: Learning to Navigate the Challenges of College and Life*, in which the relevant course materials in psychology engaged students in thinking about the emotional and physical effects of stress while they read articles and writing about the college transition in their English class. Choosing to join a themed learning community fosters students' initial steps toward “becoming responsible learners” (Wiersema, Licklider, & Ebberts, 2013, pg. 6).

During the process revitalizing the FYLC program, it was particularly important to have faculty develop a mission statement to guide the structure of their work. Research and reflection encouraged faculty members to recognize and express the collaborative nature required for sustaining such a highly intensive teaching method, which feeds interdisciplinary creativity among faculty (Lardner and Malnarich, 2008). Doing so, faculty produced the following:

The mission of First Year Learning Communities at City Tech is to facilitate learning and build interdisciplinary connections among faculty, while encouraging intellectual curiosity of both faculty and our diverse student population. Faculty are guided to engage in student-centered teaching practices that stimulate an open exchange of ideas about teaching and learning while building enhanced peer networks.

Guided by this mission and building on the strength of the themed course structure, a faculty development seminar for all learning communities faculty was established and implemented. The seminar offers multiple sessions grounded in extensive research about the benefits of student engagement in the transition to college and is designed to promote pedagogical practices that foster high levels of engagement and intentional interaction with peers and faculty. Administrative support for this community of teachers and scholars who consider learning communities research and theory and how to apply the theories in their classrooms has been consistent. For instance, the seminars focus on the work of Finley and McNair (2013), who state, "Students most frequently described four types of activities that engaged them to a high degree: group work, application of knowledge, interaction with peers, and real-life connections" (p. 27). Stebleton and Jehangir (2016) also emphasize that learning communities should be structured to foster engaging practices, and Huerta and Bray (2013) found that the positive impact of learning communities, such as higher GPAs, is more significant for Latino(a) populations, especially when the course includes engaging practices. With this in mind, those responsible for the faculty development seminar continually seek to present a means to more deeply involve students and faculty in a student's transition to college and choose to implement opportunities to participate in a collaborative writing project.

As an urban public commuter college of technology, the college lacks physical space to bring students together; however, City Tech's proprietary digital platform, called the OpenLab, offers an opportunity to develop virtual communities. The OpenLab is a campus-wide, open digital WordPress and BuddyPress platform for teaching and learning developed by faculty at the college (Rosen & Smale, 2015). The FYLC faculty leaders utilize this digital platform and launched "Our Stories" drawing from the prior work of Kreniske (2017a; 2017b), which demonstrated the potential of digital reflective writing for first-year students. Consistent with Kreniske's previous work, the writing prompts in this project aimed to encourage first-year students to reflect on their college transition experience and to interact with the digital college audience. The use of these two approaches, in the context of incredible diversity, distinguishes our current collaboration from previous work (Kreniske 2017a; 2017b). The choice to work with learning communities faculty was made in part because of the

opportunities provided by the structure the faculty development seminar and the ability to engage first-year students as they transition to college.

Implementing “Our Stories: Becoming a College Student”

In the fall semesters of 2016, 2017 and 2018, “Our Stories” utilized the college’s OpenLab, a unique proprietary virtual community in order to foster a greater sense of student belonging. We believe that this sense of belonging is a key component for improving student performance and retention. FYLC was specifically chosen because of the faculty development seminar that was already established and continuing to evolve; it provided the structure desired to engage faculty who were already invested in including high impact and engaging practices into their teaching. The writing project was meant to complement the community-building efforts within learning communities and to help extend that network beyond the physical and temporal limits of class meetings. Through “Our Stories,” FYLC faculty directed students to tap into this college-wide digital support network during their first weeks of school and to find other students facing similar challenges. We discovered that City Tech’s OpenLab provided a space for students to voice and work through pressing personal, social, political, and academic issues, while cultivating personal writing as a means of agency for student self-empowerment.

Implementation of the “Our Stories” writing assignments was, and remains, dependent on the instructor. After a less than robust roll out in 2016, program leaders reviewed recruitment and communication efforts and were successful in gaining greater participation in 2017 and 2018. We outlined what we learned and explained our approach for boosting participation in a previous publication (Kreniske, Goodlad, Sears, & Cheng, 2018). Some faculty members choose to offer extra credit, others fold the assignment into other assessments, while others make it optional. Over the course of the 2016 and 2017 semesters, FYLC faculty assigned students the same prompt three times, at the beginning of the semester, roughly in the middle of the term, and in the last weeks. In 2018 the assignment was presented twice, at the start and at the end of the semester. The prompt reads:

We invite you to tell a story about your first few weeks at City Tech. Research has shown that first-semester students often worry about their transition in to college and how eventually students become comfortable and find a community of people with whom they are close and feel they belong. Please describe in a short story how you have experienced your first few weeks at City Tech. Aim to write 300-500 words and be sure to illustrate your post with examples from your own experiences in classes, seminars, lectures, study groups, and labs. What happened? How did you and others involved think and feel? How did it turn out? We hope this process will help

you think about your transition experience. Once you have finished writing please take time to read and comment on at least two of your peer's stories.

Faculty and student participation reflected work from across the college: membership on the site rose from 37 members in May 2017 to 123 members by December 2017. During this time, students across nine different FYLC courses wrote nearly 100 posts and made 169 comments over the semester. In 2018, 152 new members joined the site representing 11 different FYLC and wrote over 150 posts and made 200 comments. Some students contributed posts each time it was assigned while others submitted only one or no posts. Student peer mentors, upper level students enrolled across the curriculum, were trained to monitor and comment on the posts. Student posts were visible only to members of the college community who joined the website. One important aspect of the project was that people from outside the college did not have access to this reflective writing. Limiting the project's site to college users created a relatively safe space for students to develop their writing and reduced the potential for unwelcome interactions with potentially disrespectful comments and spam.

As participants in the "Our Stories" project, students shared their stories as blog posts. Their stories reveal a population of learning communities students with a large immigrant population, evoking questions of vulnerability, cultural adjustment, and unspoken uncertainties about legal status as documented or undocumented persons. Students' stories provide insight into the unique challenges faced by first generation students and an immigrant population, providing insight for administrators and faculty to develop learning communities and other first-year initiatives to aid in a more positive transition to college.

Amplifying Voices of Learning Communities Students Through "Our Stories"¹

Stories can be powerful. They can help bring awareness of people's experiences and the meaning they ascribe to them. Narratives can also highlight, the otherwise silenced or obscured experiences of those who are not part of the dominant sociocultural context or are not in positions of power. Diaz and Shepard (2019) note that the narrative approaches are one way to give voice to the compelling and yet often unheard and marginalized voices and, in particular, youth voices. The counter-narrative, especially, can be of incredible significance as point of knowledge. By reading, analyzing and sharing their stories, we seek to amplify the voices of our students enrolled in learning communities and make faculty and administrators more aware of the transition undertaken by students who are primarily of color, from low-income households, and often of immigrant

¹ All quotations from students reflect what was written. No corrections were made to grammar, spelling, or typos.

backgrounds. Recognizing that underserved and Latino(a) students benefit greatly from learning communities (Kuh 2008; Finley & McNair, 2013; Huerta & Bray 2013), we hope that their words can be used to inform and improve learning communities' programs to support diverse first-year learners at institutions across the country.

The narrative turn taking place in the late 1970's and 80's forged a shift from dominant positivist interpretations of human phenomena toward hermeneutic interpretations of people's experiences and about who we are and where we have been (Cohler 1982, 1991; Schiff, 2014). In research and practice, narrative approaches are employed across different disciplines to construct, to develop analysis, to critique, and to derive meaning from people's experience (Sandelowski, 1991). The writing and reading, or telling and receiving, of stories is a key aspect of the narrative approach. For example, DeSalvo (2000) argues that reflective writing can serve as a tool for personal growth, as part of the healing process, and as a means of enabling new perspectives. Similarly, Furman (2005) finds significance in the use of writing and reflecting as a pedagogical approach for reinforcing self-awareness and uncovering hidden stories that may not otherwise be expressed. These stories sensitize us to our own experiences, and the experiences of others, and can make us aware of dilemmas in practice or education settings.

More relevant to our project, storytelling through digital platforms—which include the use of text, among other media—has emerged as a means for reflective and interactive practice, as a useful tool in pedagogical strategies, and as a vehicle for community building, mobilization, advocacy, and influencing policy (Lambert 2013; Daiute, 2014; Daiute & Kreniske, 2016; Lenette, Cox, & Brough, 2015; Kreniske, 2017; Khran, 2019). In digital narratives, formerly obscure stories are shared in public domains, in which wider audiences can engage in the concerns of the individual and/or engage in social issues. Thus, public digital platforms on college campuses have the potential to produce or impact pedagogical practices.

FYLC students' narratives reveal key experiences in their transition to college. In their writing, students frequently noted that learning communities played an important role in their successful transition to becoming undergraduate college students. Students' narratives about the benefits of belonging to a learning community reveal key experiences in their transition to college. We established that our students expressed three major themes: first, it was noted that students were shocked by how different college was from high school; second, students who were immigrants struggled with questions about fitting in to the college environment while facing additional family demands; and third, many students wrote about the challenges of balancing working and attending college. Their narratives offered useful insights and have propelled us to explore and develop

more equitable educational practices and community-building strategies throughout the learning communities faculty development seminars and the peer mentor program.

Students Emphasized the Benefits of First Year Learning Communities

Student narratives illustrated how being in a learning community helped create a positive transition to college. Many students believed that seeing the same cohort in more than one class was a benefit of participating in FYLC courses and that the sense of community helped ease the transition to college. One student credited the context of the learning community as a positive transition and noted that her first semester felt like high school, writing:

My first months at City Tech didn't feel much different from high school. The reason as to why it didn't feel different from high school is because am in a learning community. This learning community helped me adapt to college at a fast pace because I saw familiar faces everyday, so I got comfortable quickly.

In this post, the student made a positive correlation between a high school-like environment and the transition to being a college student. This perception can lead to students feeling more positive about their classroom behavior and social interactions in college (Goodlad, Westengard, & Hillstrom, 2018).

Other students found comfort in knowing they are part of a community, even creating a dialogue about getting familiar with their peers, which was enabled by the combination the learning community structure and the writing project, specifically designed to complement the community-building efforts within learning communities:

Learning Community helped me stay connected to other students. I feel more comfortable knowing I am not alone. I made many friends in my classes and have strong relationships with.

Comment 1: i took a ten year break, so we can somewhat relate. Personally, it feels fresh, but more assured, because I am definitely pursuing what I want. I wish you much success in your journey

Comment 2: Thank you . . . ! It does feel fresh and I hope I do well this first semester!

This exchange demonstrates how enrollment in learning communities help students to develop a network. Although they are registered in different learning communities, "Our Stories" provided a platform for these and other students to build a network outside the confines of their own class structure. This network may then lead to a student's increased engagement and satisfaction in college.

As midterms approached, another student observed that the FYLC model fostered a supportive environment and contributed to his ability to complete assignments, writing:

Halfway through the semester and we were near to take our first college midterms. I am glad that everyone in my class started to get along really well. At the beginning of the semester everyone was on their own, but slowly with group work and assignments that our professors assigned us, we were able to get to know each other more. . . . It is helpful to gather up with friends to get some work done, it helps everyone focus on getting all your assignments done.

Fostering community building through group work in the learning communities appeared to contribute directly to student engagement. Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) state that “student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is positively related to academic outcomes as represented by first-year student grades and by persistence between the first and second year of college” (pg. 555). It is through “Our Stories” that we can directly point the construct of learning communities as a beneficial component to a student’s transition to college.

Even when students struggled, they valued participating in a learning community. Students emphasized how being part of the learning community afforded them a supportive network that was a critical part of their success in their first year of college. As one student wrote:

I enjoyed being a part of the First Year Learning Community because it gave me an opportunity to meet amazing people that want to study the same thing as me! We help each other out all semester long. I hope to see them in future classes. If you are an incoming freshman for the Spring 2019 then I suggest you become apart of the FYLC. You will not regret the decision!

Students Experience the Differences between College and High School

As noted above, the structure of the learning community offered one point of familiarity in the often challenging transition to college. While the following student communicates his anxieties about meeting new people, he found comfort in the familiar format of the learning community.

Another thing about college is that many will be nervous on meeting new people. In fact that didn’t matter to me but once I found out about my learning community classes, I was amazed on how it works too. For a whole semester I will have the same students in those LC classes. It is very nice because many of us are coming out of small high schools where we saw a lot of our friends for multiple classes. I also love having people around me with the same interest as me.

Beyond the learning community, students expressed that the first weeks in college felt starkly different from high school. Their posts evoked these differences as they found themselves in an educational space, seemingly on their

own, without the supervision and management of adults or the comfort of established peer supports. One student reflects:

While i was walking down the hall to get to my first class, I was nervous. I did not know what to expect on my first day. I walked in nervous and excited, I noticed that everything was different. No posters on the wall, no bell to indicate when the class starts and most differently no friends. High school was a place where i had teachers look after me and making sure i was in school every day. My first week at college made me notice that all of that was over and that if i wanted help I'll have to seek for help myself.

For this student, the notion "that everything was different" was a way to communicate the emotional struggle he faced in the adjustment to college.

The sheer size of the campus, ten buildings scattered across several city blocks, was intimidating for students and posed challenges to how they negotiated both time and a new physical space. Many students lamented the lines for elevators. One student writes:

Also, the amount of students in this school is tremendous so the elevators are always packed. This puts me at a disadvantage because i try and come in on time but i cant even do that since the elevators are always full except for when you don't need them.

The new space, and more complicated scheduling, also meant a need for self-management. One of the students quickly realized that there are potential repercussions for not being able to negotiate this change: "There is new responsibility to get to class on time everyday and the fact that the start time for class is different depending on which day it is can be disruptive." Others liked the flexibility of designing their own class schedule and thought it was an empowering benefit of college life, as one participant described, "I feel like I'm in control of my life and my schedule."

So much of students' K- 12 educational experiences involve adult control of their physical being and how they use space and time in school settings (McNamee, 2016). Decisions such as when to arrive at school, where to sit, when and how to move within and outside of the classroom, and even when to eat or use the bathroom have, until now, been regulated and structured by adults in authority. Rigid discipline strategies and behavior monitoring of students are particularly salient in low-income, high need schools (Diaz, 2019). It is not surprising that the autonomy of the college experience can be disconcerting for some of our students and yet liberating for others.

Students Learn to Fit-in and Struggle with Family Demands

The transition to college presents a new set of social and academic pressures for students. These pressures involve a push toward independence, development of coping skills, social skills, and overall life skills, and a competitive

environment. This is particularly salient for students who are young, from low-income households, immigrants, and whose parents did not attend college or attended but did not graduate, and whose parents are unable to provide the social capital needed to navigate higher education settings (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Baum & Flores, 2011; Rodriguez, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2000; Ishitani, 2003; Mitchell, 1997; Billson & Terry, 1982).

Our students revealed similar experiences negotiating the new pressures of college in their “Our Stories” posts. Some students were concerned about “fitting in” socially as well as academically to an American university system. New students were worried about being socially compatible with their peers when they first started college. Feeling foreign in an already unfamiliar educational setting can exacerbate the sense of alienation. One student wrote:

Coming from a different country, I didn’t know what to expect. As I walked into the building on my first day, the halls were flooded with new students, I was one of them. I thought to myself, am I dressed accordingly? Do I look worried?

Questions about one’s belonging was repeatedly referenced in student writing and their peers often wrote replies that showed empathy with such worries, communicated support, and shared solidarity as immigrants. These concerns align with research related to successful transitions to college. Successful transitions involve meaningful involvement and greater connection to their respective college communities (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Another concern about fitting in was associated with the diversity of the student population in college level courses. Some found themselves to be one of a few first-year students in their courses. At City Tech, first-year students and seniors can find themselves in the same course. Incoming students expressed feeling uncomfortable with the diverse age range of the student body, especially classes with older students. A student wrote about not liking a specific class due to the older students in the course:

I didn’t like my Friday class bcus their were some old people such as moms, it made me feel nervous because I wasn’t familiar with that type of surrounding in a class. I wasn’t use to it. I was also the youngest in the class (18) everyone else was older than me.

For younger students accustomed to different relationships with “older adults,” sharing an education space as equals in the hierarchy may have come as a surprise and prove to be discomfoting.

Student writing further revealed demands unique to immigrants and children of immigrants. These include frequent international travel, challenges in learning English, and the negotiation of legal processes. One student shared her story of

falling behind because she had to travel home for an important family event. She wrote:

My first few weeks at City Tech have been stressful. I have social anxiety, so in all my classes I mostly remained silent. Everyone else was quiet too, which made me feel better and relieved. After the first week at school, I had to go to Honduras for my sister's quincenara during labor day. I caught an infection on my trip and had to miss a whole week of school (and work).

Students with transnational family relationships, and socio-cultural expectations may experience tensions between their educational duties and the duties to their family. Negotiating travel and or economic contributions to the family pose additional challenges in their college experience. Research on *Familism*—where the needs of the family take priority over that of the individual—suggests that this can be both a strength and a barrier (Marin 1993). According to Fuligni and Hardway (2004), minority and immigrant students seem to be driven toward academic achievement by the desire to make their families proud and in the hopes of contributing economically at a future point. However, when immediate financial or other family needs are present, students may feel an obligation to work in order to contribute, which can often impact their academic performance and progress.

Challenges of School-Work Balance

Having enough money to attend college was a constant worry and many students held jobs, even during their first year at the college. Most worked part-time, and others had full-time positions to help finance college. Working to provide support for family members is one among many additional pressures that impacts students' participation in the college experience (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Students also discussed the cost of college beyond tuition and lamented over expenditures for transportation, housing, and books. A student wrote:

I work full time and go to school full time as well it hasn't been easy to manage both into getting all my assignments done on time . . . I work to pay for my transportation and books which aren't cheap.

Coping with academic- and work-related demands, students described personal sacrifices that highlighted the challenges of the first-year experience for many at City Tech. Their mid-semester posts revealed how students emotionally and physically negotiated these demands. A student noted that schoolwork was secondary to social life:

I am only getting worse and worse at keeping with the rest of the world. So, I am going to be honest right now I just don't feel like doing [school work] until last minute because I think it's best for me to enjoy my life while I still have it and I can manage squeezing in assignments into forty-five minute breaks so my work wont be considered late.

The student went on to express that she knew this was destructive behavior and expressed the desire to continue to work towards her dreams:

Although sometimes I think about completely giving up and destroying the hopes and dreams I had for myself and that my loved ones have for me, I will continue to push through in whatever way that helps best and gives me the most progress.

Economic struggles and difficulty balancing work, school, and their social life was a major challenge articulated by our learning communities' students. As the semester progressed this balance became progressively more difficult to manage for many.

The Importance of Narrative Reflection in Learning Communities

The analysis of "Our Stories" narratives sheds light on how two high impact pedagogical practices, learning communities and narrative reflective writing, can be combined using a digital platform. The narratives and analysis presented in this paper may help administrators and faculty design more effective learning communities programs. As colleges and universities, especially those serving urban and diverse student populations, seek to improve the first-year student transition to college, we should recognize the value of both learning communities and narrative reflection. Learning communities are structured to support students as they work through the cognitive, social, and emotional challenges that are involved in transitioning to college. Simultaneously, student narratives provide valuable and specific insight into their needs and create opportunities for students to shape their own transitions. Narrative writing on a digital platform facilitates pedagogical aims and broadens the reach of learning communities beyond the physical limits of the classroom.

Students used the reflective writing space to express how the structure of their FYLC courses enabled them to better acclimate themselves to the new college environment. Students described how in part due to this supportive learning community model, they were able to overcome challenges, including those that involved family demands, the pressure of balancing working and attending college, and negotiating a complex immigration and educational system. These stressors were at times exacerbated by increasingly demanding academic requirements and the administrative complexities that are a routine part of attending college. With the structure of their learning communities course and through a digital platform, students developed networks and found social, emotional, and academic support among their peers.

Our students' narratives revealed the need for continued advocacy and funding to foster engagement in learning communities and develop innovative programs to support diverse students emotionally, socially, and academically. "Our Stories" revealed that administrators should take into consideration the need

for students in learning communities to collaborate outside of class time through secure and user-friendly digital platforms. The use of digital platforms should extend beyond a means to reflect, providing extensive access to academic, emotional, and other student support systems available on campus. Administrators also need to consider the role of peer mentors in learning communities and activities that include narrative reflective writing. Consideration of how peer mentors will be trained to both use and interact on a digital platform, as well as when to seek outside support for new students, will contribute to the success of a narrative reflective project. Administrators need to also consider when paired courses are scheduled, recognizing the needs of their student population as well as the opportunity for students to easily network outside of class time and to access campus resources.

As faculty read, analyze, and learn from first-year students through narrative reflection like "Our Stories," they should consider developing better networking opportunities among new students. Courses can be designed to foster networks through well planned group activities both inside and outside of the classroom and in a virtual space. To support narrative reflection on a digital platform, faculty need to dedicate class time to establish expectations of participation.

With future iterations of "Our Stories," FYLC faculty and program leaders continue to evaluate how learning communities students and peer mentors engage and reflect in a virtual space. Ongoing analysis informs our recommendations to administrators and the FYLC faculty development seminar, creating deliberate and targeted opportunities to improve FYLC student experiences as they transition to college.

References

- Aisch, G., Buchanan, L., Cox, A., & Quealy, K. (2017, January 18). Some colleges have more students from the top 1 percent than the bottom 60. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html>
- Acevedo-Gil, N., & Zerquera, D. D. (2016). Community college first-year experience programs: Examining student access, experience, and success from the student perspective. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 175, 71-82.
- Arbona, C., & Jimenez, C. (2014). Minority stress, ethnic identity, and depression among latino/a college students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 61(1), 162–168.
- Baum, S., & Flores, S. M. (2011). Higher education and children in immigrant families. *The Future of Children*, 21(1). 171-193.

- Berthoff, A. E., & Stephens, J. (1988). *Forming, thinking, writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.
- Billson, J. M., & Terry, M. B. (1982). In search of the silken purse: Factors in attrition among first generation students. *College and University*, 58, 57–75.
- Cataldi, E. F., Bennett, C. T., & Chen, X. (2018). *First-generation students: college access, persistence, and postbachelor's outcomes* (No. NCES 2018-421). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018421>
- Cohler, B. J. (1982). Personal narrative and the life course. In P. Baltes & O.G. Brim (Eds.), *Life Span Development and Behavior* (Vol 4, pp. 205–441). New York: Academic Press.
- Cohler, B. J. (1991). The life story and the study of resilience and response to adversity. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1(2–3), 169–200.
- Daiute, C. (2014). *Narrative inquiry: A dynamic approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Daiute, C. & Kreniske, P. (2016). Hopes, misunderstandings and possibilities of narrating for inclusive education. In A. Surian (Ed.), *Proceedings of openspaces for interaction and learning diversities*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- DeSalvo, L. (2000). *Writing as a way of healing: How telling stories transforms our lives*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Diaz, M. (2019). Finding justice: Transforming schools with the children we serve. In M. Diaz & B. Shepard (Eds.), *Narrating practice with children and adolescents* (pp. 149-170). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Diaz, M., & Shepard, B. (2019). *Narrating practice with children and adolescents*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students*. Washington, DC: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.
- Fabricant, M., & Brier, S. (2016). *Austerity blues: Fighting for the soul of public education*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- Finley, A., & McNair, T. (2013). *Assessing underserved students' engagement in high-impact practices*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Fulgini, A. J., & Hardway, C. (2004). Preparing diverse adolescents for the transition to adulthood. *Future of Children*, 14(2), 99-119.
- Fulwiler, T. (1983). Why we teach writing in the first place. *fforum*, 4(2), 122-133. Retrieved from [http://comppile.org/archives/fforum/fforum4\(2\).htm](http://comppile.org/archives/fforum/fforum4(2).htm)
- Furman, R. (2005). Using poetry and written exercises to teach empathy. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 18(2), 103-110.

- Ginder, S., Kelly-Reid, J., & Mann, F. B. (2018). *Graduation rates for selected cohorts, 2009-14; Outcome measures for cohort year 2009-10; Student financial aid, academic year 2016-17; and admissions in postsecondary institutions, fall 2017 (Provisional Data)* (No. NCES 2018-151). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018151>
- Goodlad, K., Westengard L., & Hillstrom J. (2018) Comparing faculty and student perception of academic performance, classroom behavior, and social interactions in learning communities. *College Teaching*, 66(3), 130-139. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2018.1453472>
- Gonen, Y. (2013, March 7). Nearly 80% of city public high school grads at CUNY community colleges require remediation for English or math. *New York Post*. Retrieved from <https://nypost.com/2013/03/07/nearly-80-of-city-public-high-school-grads-at-cuny-community-colleges-require-remediation-for-english-or-math/>
- Hanzapolous, M. (2016). *Restoring dignity in public schools: Human rights education in action*. New York and London: Teachers College Press.
- Huerta, J. C., & Bray, J. J. 2013. How do learning communities affect first-year Latino students? *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 1(1): 1-18.
- Ishitani, T. T. (2003). A longitudinal approach to assessing attrition behavior among first-generation college students: Time-varying effects of pre-college characteristics. *Research in Higher Education*, 44, 433-449.
- Khran, E. (2019). Storytelling, poetry, writing, and the art of metaphor. In T. Heinonen, D. Halonen, & E. Krahn (Eds.), *Expressive Arts for Social Work and Social Change* (pp. 76-104). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Kreniske, P. (2017a). How first-year students expressed their transition to college experiences differently in two writing contexts. *Computers and Composition*, 45, 1-20.
- Kreniske, P. (2017b). Developing a culture of commenting in a first-year seminar. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 72, 724-732.
- Kreniske, P., Goodlad, K., Sears, J., & Cheng, S. (2018, October 9). Our stories of becoming a college student: An interdisciplinary reflective writing project for first year students. *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy, Assignments*. Retrieved from <https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/our-stories-of-becoming-a-college-student-a-digital-writing-project-for-first-year-students/>
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. National Center for Education Statistics.

- Kuh, D. G., Cruce, T. M., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R. M. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(5), 540-563.
- Lambert, J. (2013). *Digital storytelling: Capturing lives, creating community* (4th ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Lardner, E. & G. Malnarich. (2008). Sustaining Learning Communities: Moving from Curricular to Educational Reform. *Perspectives*, MASCD, 20-23.
- Lenette, C, Cox, L. & Brough, M. (2015). Digital storytelling as a social work tool: Learning from ethnographic research with women from refugee backgrounds. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 45(3), 988-1005.
- McNamee, S. (2016). *The social study of childhood*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marin G. (1993). Influence of acculturation on familialism and self-identification among Hispanics. In M. E. Bernal & G. P. Knight, G. P. *Ethnic identity: Formation and transmission among Hispanics and other minorities* (pp. 181–196). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Mitchell, K. (1997). *Making the grade: Help and hope for the first-generation college student* (No. ED 413886), Educational Resources Information Center. 5, 13-15.
- New York City College of Technology. (2018). *Fact sheet (2018-2019)*. Retrieved from <http://www.citytech.cuny.edu/about-us/docs/facts.pdf>
- Pascarella E. T., & Terenzini P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (2nd ed.), San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 75(3), 249-284.
- Rodriguez, N., Myers, H. F., Morris, J. K., & Cardoza, D. (2000). Latino college student adjustment: Does an increased presence offset minority-status and acculturative stresses? *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 30(7), 1523–1550. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2000.tb02534.x>
- Rosen, J. R., & Smale, M. A. (2015). Open digital pedagogy = critical digital pedagogy. *Hybrid Pedagogy*. Retrieved from <http://hybridpedagogy.org/open-digital-pedagogy-critical-pedagogy/>
- Sandelowski, M. (1991). Telling stories: Narrative approaches in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 23(3), 161-166.
- Schiff, B. (2014). Rereading personal narrative and the life course. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 145.
- Schwartz, S. J., Waterman, A. S., Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Lee, R. M., Kim, S. Y., Vazsonyi, A. T., & Zamboanga, B. L. (2013). Acculturation and well-being among college students from immigrant families. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69(4), 298-318.

- Stebbleton, M. J., & Jehangir, R. (2016). Creating communities of engaged learners: An analysis of a first-year inquiry seminar. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 4(2), 5. Retrieved from <https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1125&context=lcrpjournal>
- Walton, G. & Cohen, G. (2011). A brief social-belonging intervention improves academic and health outcomes of minority students. *Science*, 331(6023), 1447-1451.
- Wiersema, J. A., Licklider, B. L., & Ebbers, L. (2013). Becoming responsible learners: Community matters. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 1(1): 1-22. Retrieved from <http://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=lcrpjournal>
- Wine, J., Jansen, N., & Wheelless, S. (2011). *Beginning postsecondary students longitudinal study* (No. NCES 2012-246). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED566501>