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HIGH IMPACT PRACTICES: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION

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Community college students face special challenges that can impede their academic progress, resulting in lower grades and persistence than students in selective four-year colleges. Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, successfully addresses these challenges with learning communities: small cohorts of students in a blocked program of study, which includes developmental or basic English, a one-credit student skills course, and a social or behavioral science course. This research analyzes the short-term effects of the model by comparing a sample of 267 students enrolled in four learning community and four regular sections of sociology and psychology classes. The results demonstrate a high positive impact for learning communities on student success as measured by grades and course completion rates, with higher levels of engagement and lower rates of absences in learning community sections as the key causal mechanisms. That is, statistically significant correlations between mode of delivery and grades are reduced when controlling for absences, elaborating on and perhaps explaining the well-established relationship between learning communities and short-term student success.

Introduction

In 2010, an estimated 13.7 million students enrolled in degree granting post-secondary institutions; The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projects an increase to 20.6 million in 2021. NCES reports that public community college students represent 34% of all U.S. undergraduates; however, over half of these students will drop out. While financial burdens pose one major obstacle to student success, the effects of poverty are amplified by related challenges. The community college student population consists largely of first generation college students, about 45% at the City University of New York, students who

are often minorities or recent immigrants. Many of these students are inadequately prepared for college-level work; they need developmental learning courses and, most often, extensive academic and emotional support.

Meeting these challenges and ensuring that community college students persist and progress are facilitated when students form relationships with peers and faculty, an experience often missing among commuter student populations. Their personal, academic, and financial problems often require focused counseling and advisement interventions, alongside student-friendly pedagogical strategies (Cf. Waks 2011). At Kingsborough

Community College, the problems, challenges, and special needs of the “at-risk” student population have been successfully addressed by learning communities, with embedded counseling services (MDRC 2005). The research reported here elaborates on the findings of MDRC to offer a partial explanation of how and why the intervention works.

Learning Communities At Kingsborough

In 1996, Kingsborough Community College embarked on the implementation of learning communities, later identified by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) as a “promising practice” through research findings that established their capacity to foster high levels of student engagement (Cf. Smith et al. 2004). Building on initially promising outcomes, Kingsborough expanded the model to create two learning community programs: Intensive ESL and Opening Doors (ODLC). First semester, full-time freshman students enrolled in one of these programs are placed in level-specific sections based on their scores on an English pre-admission test, creating homogenous classes in terms of English proficiency.

The initial learning community programs consisted of small cohorts of students in one- or two-semester blocked programs through which they completed developmental English requirements, one discipline-specific course, such as Introduction to Psychology or Sociology, and a one-hour Student Development seminar aimed at providing students with time-management and other academic study skills, while providing embedded academic advisement and personal support. For the ESL Intensive Program, one section of Speech was added to create a full course load. All learning community students were also required to enroll in an additional two- to four-hour weekly tutoring lab session, where concepts from the entire cluster of courses are reinforced, and tutors provide additional academic assistance.

Also, in the ESL Intensive Program, students received free books plus a Metro card for subway fares [see the two models in Table 1]. Based on the initial success of these in developmental learning sections, learning communities have been constructed around regular freshman English sections throughout the college, and the wider CUNY academic administration has developed an ASAP program modeled on the initial ESL Intensive Program success.

TABLE 1 Learning Community Models at Kingsborough

ESL Intensive Model*	Opening Doors Learning Community Model
Small cohorts - 25 students Blocked program of 5 linked courses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 levels of ESL • Speech • Discipline • Freshman seminar • English Language seminar Counselors, Library, Tutors, Textbooks, Metro card * Also the ASAP model	Small cohorts Blocked program of 3 linked courses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English I or one of three levels of developmental English • Discipline • Freshman seminar Counselors, Library, Tutors

A key and overarching goal of the Kingsborough Learning Community program has been the development of cooperative relationships among students, instructors, tutors, and advisors, focused on student learning outcomes. Faculty development and enrichment thus play a key role in the learning community experience. Instructors teaching in learning communities receive an additional hour of compensation, which they use to meet regularly with linked team members and tutors and to attend workshops for all learning community faculty throughout the semester. Each learning community instructor is required to complete certification in Writing-Across-the-Curriculum, achieved through participation in a seminar and submission of

a teaching portfolio. The seminar substance focuses on active or constructivist pedagogical strategies, student writing and feedback, designing staged and scaffolded assignments, and integrative learning.

Numerous internal and external studies have examined the impact of Kingsborough Community College learning communities and their short and long term effects on students' academic performance and persistence. The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) in particular has funded and executed multiple studies over a seven-year period. Their most recent publication (Weiss, et al. 2014) reports on a longitudinal study seven years out. The study evaluates randomized samples of over 1500 students in learning community and regular sections of the same courses, including the Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College. Their findings corroborate the short-term effects of learning communities on retention, but provide only "limited evidence" of positive effects on longer-term outcomes, such as graduation rates, a topic addressed more fully in the conclusions.

An earlier MDRC four-year follow up study of six community college learning communities programs provided evidence that learning community programs had a positive impact on student persistence (Weiss et al. 2012). After four years, a significantly higher number of learning community students went on to earn their degrees when compared to students not enrolled in the program. These two later studies (Weiss et al. 2012; Weiss et al. 2014) corroborate the findings from an earlier two-year study conducted by the MDRC, in which learning community students reported higher levels of engagement and demonstrated higher levels of persistence. Likewise, in the classroom, Kingsborough faculty consistently provide anecdotal reports of more positive experiences in terms of student retention and performance: learning community students

achieve better exam scores, have fewer absences, are more likely to pass the course, form relationships with faculty, persist at least three semesters beyond the first semester, and graduate in as little as four years, results not obtained even in stand-alone smaller classes that are also Writing Intensive (Walters 2001; Winter 2004; Song 2006). Therefore, the overall program goal of cultivating high levels of student engagement in an integrative learning environment, fostered by a team of dedicated faculty with aligned course curriculum and assignments, has largely worked.

The goals specific to ESL Learning Communities aim at combining English language skills development and content-based instruction to prepare and improve students' academic literacy (Song 2006; Winter 2004). The curriculum in the content-based course links is not modified in any manner to adjust to the performance levels of the developmental ESL students: "The theory behind content-based instruction is that the ESL student will benefit from the ecological validity of English language usage in the academic course" (Winter 2004). The ESL Intensive Program was in fact designed to provide an inclusive learning environment for immigrant students, where they could engage in an authentic college learning experience and achieve success in a credit-bearing course while mastering English (Walters 2001; Song 2006; Winter 2004).

The Pedagogical Model

The pedagogical theory underpinning the Learning Communities model at Kingsborough is rooted in the work of John Dewey (1910), Lev Vygotsky (1978), and Paul Freire (1996), who thought of learning as reflective, constructivist, shared, and student-centered. Learning community faculty work to provide a structure through which students can appropriate and control their own learning; ideally, students self-navigate through, reflect upon, and integrate experiential and academic

learning as part of the ongoing process of meaningful knowledge construction. Here integrative learning refers to an “understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus” (AAC&U 2010).

An additional pedagogical element comes from the work of Vygotsky (1978) and his *zone of proximal development*. Vygotsky observed that *actual levels of development* reflect cognitive processes already in transition whereas a *zone of proximal development* projects a horizon within which immediate learning and cognitive development might occur. The theory thus circumscribes the distance students at a given level might reasonably be expected to “self-navigate” within—right beyond his or her own cognitive space. More importantly, Vygotsky thought that this learning takes place most effectively in the company and with the guidance of those who are only slightly more advanced in their learning (Vygotsky 1978).

Vincent Tinto’s work (1997) explains how learning communities provide students with the opportunity to build a network of peer support, easing the transition from their familiar, local, and provincial neighborhoods and culture to the more anonymous academic and cosmopolitan setting of the university, replacing the sense of loss and estrangement with a shared sense of belonging. Because they have more control over the learning process, as one student put it, “not only do we learn more, we also learn better” (Tinto 1997: 611). Working together, students become proficient at self-re-evaluation of what they think they know and how they know it; together they learn how to renegotiate old perspectives and make way for new ones, constructing communities of shared knowledge and understandings that bridge their diverse social and academic worlds.

Reflection refers to systematic thinking—a meaning-making process, which involves a conscious goal of personal and intellectual growth (Rodgers 2002). According to John Dewey, meaningful reflections emerge most effectively within a process of learning from and among teachers and peers. During discussion and interaction, all students, including life-long learners, critically evaluate prior understandings of social, scientific, and academic realities to achieve higher levels of awareness regarding “mind, self, and society”.

Educational leaders such as Dewey, Vygotsky, and Tinto have each advocated for the profound impact a collaborative, cooperative, and integrative learning environment can have on “at risk” and other students. The latter can thrive within small communities that foster a shared sense of purpose: one that values the intellect, calculated risk-taking, the roles of “others”, and evidence-based experiential learning. Diverse students work together toward shared goals, each contributing his or her own perspective—integrating what is relevant from personal histories, connecting these to current tasks, creating new frameworks, and then referring to collective products to shape and interpret new experiences. Thereby they enter a new world of academia together, by peeking into and sharing through narratives the experiential lives of their classmates.

In tandem, faculty and tutors work together to provide supportive pedagogical structures that support student exploration and evidence-based learning. They create staged and scaffolded assignments, often based on a common theme, facilitating the integrative learning that takes place across the curriculum and the semester. Students more readily identify connections and meanings because focused problem solving is embedded in their courses; assignments in each class are not mutually exclusive but rather are part of a planned instructional design across the curriculum and their instructors. Especially journal

writing and small group work facilitates the sense of “emergent” knowledge.

Engagement is also facilitated by the counseling resources and support available to students; the latter know that an entire team of people outside of their classroom is involved and shares a commitment to their academic and personal success; these support services help students in areas that, while segregated from their class experiences, have a deep impact on their performance if not resolved; these include, but are not limited to, time-management skills, negotiating personal trauma, and study skills.

Research Goals

The goal of this research is to investigate and analyze learning community student outcomes, and how these work. The key axioms are based on both theoretical knowledge and shared experiential wisdom, acquired through the long-term commitments and involvement of both authors to working especially with students enrolled in the Kingsborough ESL Intensive Program. The pedagogical theories lead to five key and interrelated hypotheses, some of which must be left for others to research:

1. Instructor presence results in higher levels of student-faculty engagement.
2. Effective curriculum design results in higher levels of intellectual engagement.
3. The learning community structure results in higher levels of peer engagement.
4. Higher levels of engagement result in higher attendance.
5. Attendance and engagement result in greater success as measured by grades, graduation or transfer, and integrative learning.

Research Methods

Sample

After obtaining departmental and administrative approval to approach faculty and students teaching or registered in Behavioral Science Department classes in Psychology or Sociology, four instructors teaching four learning community sections and four instructors teaching four regular sections of introductory sociology and psychology classes were recruited for the study. The eight sections provided access to a sample of 267 students, 95 learning community students, and 172 students in standard delivery sections. After the elimination of cases for missing data, a total of 247 students were included in the final correlational analysis.

Research Procedures

Following a Human Research Protections Program (HRPP) approved protocol, faculty were recruited at a department meeting through a general announcement with a brief description of the study, a flyer, and a letter to faculty explaining the research protocol. Students in each participating course section were approached at the end of the class period. Each student was given a flyer with our contact information and links to a web-based survey. (The survey measures student engagement and appears in the Appendix; results from the survey are not included in this report due to extremely low response rates; however, the items provide an important point of reference for future research.) At the end of the semester, each participating instructor was assigned a section code number and asked to provide a copy of his or her class roster with all identifying information removed, i.e., section name and number, student names, and student IDs were removed. The rosters were returned to the researchers in pre-addressed sealed envelopes identified on the exterior only through the section code. Data for each student were entered

initially into Excel spread sheets using coded ID numbers, with mode of delivery entered as one variable. The data were then transferred to SPSS for analysis.

Results

While the measurements in many ways fell short of our ambitions, and our response rates on some items resulted in their omission from this report, the student outcomes on major success indicators in the research corroborate our hypotheses, complementing our face-to-face and other experiences with student engagement, student learning, and student success, and provide support for the theories behind the pedagogical model. Without this extensive and shared wisdom based on years of experience in the classroom with learning communities, we might express more skepticism regarding the results and the causal nexus, especially in the absence of the hard data on the three forms of student engagement that might have been provided by higher levels of participation in the survey. This topic and the “softer” evidence will be taken up in the concluding section.

Learning community students are more engaged with teachers, peers, and the intellectual content of their course. Their engagement contributes better attendance with fewer absences. And, better attendance contributes higher grades. These are the basics of education; any experienced and dedicated teacher will corroborate these as foundational premises in student learning.

Absences

Data from the class rosters confirm the well-established findings on the impact of learning communities on short-term retention. Learning community students are far more likely than students enrolled in regular sections to complete the course with a passing grade, as shown in Table 2. Eight percent of students enrolled in learning community sections failed to complete the course compared to 28% of

students enrolled in a regular section of the same course. Course completion is much more obvious in the face-to-face classroom than average grades, which are shown in Table 3; the former corroborate what learning community faculty anecdotally report on a regular basis.

Table 2 Course Completion Rates

Final Grade	LC	Rates	RS	Rates
A	36	38%	29	16%
B	22	23%	45	25%
C	18	19%	40	22%
D	11	12%	14	8%
F	1		7	
W	1		6	
WU	2		16	
INC	4		21	
Σ of F, WU, W, INC grades	8	8%	50	28%
		100%		100
Total Students	95		178	

TABLE 3 Grades

Class Modality	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Grade Learning Community	88	2.9205	1.10611	.11791
Regular Section	139	2.4820	1.16316	.09866

Especially important in *explaining* how learning communities work to produce the short-term results are data on rates of absence. Table 4 displays the means and rates of absences for students in learning community sections as compared to students in standard delivery sections of the same class. Learning community students are absent at a rate of 1.25 times per semester compared to students in standard delivery sections, who are absent at a rate of 3.8 times per semester. The means are about 1.0

for learning community students compared to 3.9 for students in standard delivery sections.

Finally, in order to point to the causal nexus, that is, to show that the reduction in absences is a key contributor to the improved performance, we executed a correlational analysis and then partial correlations. Class modality was converted to a dummy variable with Learning Community sections coded as 1; Standard Delivery sections were coded as 0.

The negative correlation between delivery modality and absences is statistically significant at the .01 level. The negative correlation

between absences and grades is statistically significant at the .01 level. And, finally, the positive correlation between grades and class delivery modality is statistically significant at the .01 level. The causal role of absences in predicting the short-term effects is demonstrated by the partial correlations shown in Table 6. The statistically significant relationship between grades and mode of delivery “washes out” when controlling for absences, that is, the statistically significant relationship between mode of delivery and student success as measured by grades, including course completion

TABLE 4

Learning Community Sections							
	LC 01	LC 02	LC 03	LC04	Total	Rate = Absences/ Number of Students	
Absences	0	43	62	14	119	1.25	
Lateness	0	4	2	0	6	.06	
Standard Delivery Sections							
	RS 01	RS 02	RS 03	RS 04	Total	Rate = Absences/ Number of Students	
Absences	221	59	125	272	677	3.8	
Lateness	59	0	11	6	76	0.43	
Absences							
	Class Modality			N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Absences	Learning Community			88	.9659	1.52714	.16279
	Regular Section			155	3.8903	4.68428	.37625

TABLE 5 Correlation Matrix

		Absences	CDM	Grades
Absences	Pearson Correlation	1	-.334**	-.507**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	263	236	263
Class Delivery Modality	Pearson Correlation	-.334**	1	.242**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	236	236	236
Grades	Pearson Correlation	-.507**	.242**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	263	236	263

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

or failure to complete grades, which, like the “F” grade were coded as “0”, is elaborated upon and perhaps *explained* by the reduction in absences. Perhaps it is not such a stretch to presume that the reduced absences result from higher levels of engagement, a topic taken up in the Conclusions and Discussion.

Table 6 Partial Correlations Controlling For Absences

Control Variables			Grades	Mode of Delivery
Absences	Grades	Correlation	1.000	.038
		Significance (2-tailed)	.	.573
		Df	0	224
Mode of Delivery	Mode of Delivery	Correlation	.038	1.000
		Significance (2-tailed)	.573	.
		Df	224	0

Conclusions And Discussion

Reaching and communicating with immigrant and other “at risk” students through “transactional listening” (Waks 2011), learning communities, faculty-student engagement, and curriculum design shapes an even more urgent and pressing national and international agenda than was the case when the authors of this paper began their separate work in the ESL Intensive Learning Communities at Kingsborough. In any face-to-face college classroom, but especially in the community college setting, watching absences drop to one per student per semester, observing students actively engaged in learning from each other, and seeing student products that compete with the best work of students in highly selective colleges and universities taken together provides an astonishing teaching experience. The significance of a gratifying experience

with high impact teaching and learning strategies is now amplified as we recognize their potential in addressing key global and international communication issues. Whereas one of the learning community founders, Rebecca Mlyarczyk, was oft to say, “You can’t teach the students you wish you had, but only ones in your classroom,” we are now more prone, as sociologists, to say, “Pity the sociologist who avoids reaching out for the experiential learning afforded by working with refugee and immigrant student populations.”

Learning communities are not a panacea for the world’s ills, nor are they the only pedagogical style that works, and they are not one that works for all students or life-long learners. In some instances, the student community-building backfires into serious classroom management problems. In other instances, peer pressure and “group think” result in a watered down curriculum or knowledge sharing that by any standard would be defined as plagiarism or cheating. All three pieces and all players must function together in a delicate balance to achieve the desired results: peer communication and teamwork, faculty-student interaction, and curriculum design. However, the basic model has been a generally accepted practice in the natural sciences and musical arts for centuries. Imagine teaching biology without four-hour active learning, scientific, and evidence-based laboratory experiments, where students meet and work together in teams or pairs. And, as we know, teaching physics outside an integrative learning model can only and has resulted in high-energy creation models and applications far removed from the intentions of the inventing scientists.

There are other, perhaps superior, pedagogical models that report similar student success stories and hard evidence of student learning. Bret Eynon and Randy Bass (2014) for example, have raised the bar with ePortfolio resources, pedagogical design, and ePortfolio research. Their strategies may *explain*

anecdotal reports of success with hybrid classes, for which one class hour meets in a computer lab (“Blackboard assisted”, in the CUNY nomenclature), providing students and teachers with regular opportunities to engage individually and informally, while students engage in completing challenging data collection and writing assignments. Especially Eynon’s work at LaGuardia might also be applied to explain anecdotal reports of failure, such as our fully online learning community, which linked sections of Introduction to Research Methods and Digital Communication. Retention rates were identical to the regular sections of the same courses, suggesting that the online learning community concept simply could not provide the kind of interaction and community formation as found in the on the ground classrooms. Our efforts to create a hybrid learning community along the lines of the ESL Intensive Model, with one hour removed from the content course and one hour added through an ePortfolio course, which promises to combine the best of all pedagogical worlds, has nonetheless simply failed to materialize, despite repeated efforts. The model is expensive in that it requires one hour per week of class time in a computer lab. The work of one-hour course in ePortfolios, nonetheless, has energized the Early Childhood Program at Kingsborough (Cf. Schneider and Morales-Flores as part of Walters, et al. 2013).

Finally, our deepest failure as Scholarship of Teaching and Learning researchers perhaps lies in our inability to couple engagement survey results with classroom observational data and individual student outcomes at the individual level, organized by section, in this modest pilot study, funded with a small PSC-CUNY Research Award. Especially because the CCSSE data are collected every other year for all CUNY community college students, it is our hope that the task of matching data across sections with different modes of delivery at the individual student level will be taken up by

teams of institutional researchers with larger grants. Yet these larger and more ambitious efforts should never detract from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research that provides faculty with opportunities to communicate evidence-based strategies in communities of peers who share their deep commitment to college teaching. Strategies that work for at-risk students generally work for all students at all levels, creating communities of knowledge and calculated risk-taking across cultural borders at every level. And, while institutional researchers such as MDRC have questioned the long-term results for learning community alumnae, there can be no question, given the evidence, of their efficacy at the starting gate for community college students—in the classroom, where education begins.

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APPENDIX I

OUR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SURVEY (Cf. CCCSE 2012; Garreson 2007)

STUDENT-FACULTY ENGAGEMENT

1. During the semester, how many times did you speak to your instructor in class about course assignments?

- Never
- Once a month
- Twice a month
- Once a week
- Every class

2. During the semester, how many times did you ask the instructor for extra help with a difficult topic or concept after class finished or before class began?

- Never
- Once a month
- Twice a month
- Once a week
- Every class

3. During the semester, how comfortable were you talking to your instructor academic or personal issues not related to the course?

1. Not at all 2. Very little 3. Somewhat 4. Very much 5. Extremely

ENGAGEMENT WITH PEERS

4. During the semester, how many times did the instructor require you to participate in group or teamwork projects during class?

- Never
- Once a month
- Twice a month
- Once a week
- Every class

2. During the semester, how many times did you choose to work with a classmate on an assignment?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very Often

3. During the semester, how often did you get together with classmates outside of class to study or work on class assignments?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very Often

4. During the semester, how many times did you share your viewpoints in class discussions?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very Often
- Very Often

OUR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

INTELLECTUAL ENGAGEMENT

1. During the semester, how many drafts of a one paper did you write for class?

- None
- One draft
- Two drafts
- Three or more

2. During the semester, how comfortable were you about challenging certain theories you learned about in class?

- Uncomfortable
- Somewhat comfortable
- Comfortable
- Completely at ease

3. During the semester, how often did you identify connections between concepts you learned in one class to the concepts in another class?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very Often

4. During the semester, how many times did you combine ideas from different courses in one assignment?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very Often