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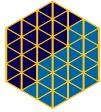
THE LEARNING COMMUNITIES DEMONSTRATION

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Overview

Community college leaders are using many strategies to improve their students' ability to complete their studies, particularly their academically underprepared students. In recent years, these strategies have included adaptations of an approach long used in four-year colleges known as "learning communities," in which groups of students enroll together in two or more courses. Learning communities often feature thematically linked courses and offer an integrated curriculum that helps students to see connections between disciplines. Increasingly, colleges use learning communities to help academically underprepared students progress more quickly toward successful completion of their studies by linking a developmental course with a college-level course. Proponents of learning communities believe that linking courses in this way helps students get to know each other better or more quickly, enables them to see connections between disciplines, encourages them to engage more deeply with learning, and fosters stronger relationships with faculty. These experiences are expected to engage students and to ultimately improve their academic outcomes, including passing courses, persisting to the following semester, and earning a degree or certificate.

The Learning Communities Demonstration is a large-scale, random assignment evaluation of learning community programs at six community colleges. During the first year of the demonstration, all six colleges expanded their learning community programs and, in the process, faced similar challenges in selecting courses to link, recruiting and supporting faculty, filling the learning communities with eligible students, and helping faculty use instructional strategies such as curricular integration to enhance learning. By spring 2009, the colleges operated more than 130 learning communities serving around 3,000 students. This report describes the strategies the colleges used to scale up their programs while working to improve their quality, and the many complex challenges that are likely to be faced by any community college intent on scaling up effective learning communities — including scheduling, faculty engagement with and approach to teaching, and balancing developmental courses with traditional college-level courses. Key findings from the implementation study include:

- **A paid coordinator and committed leaders were essential to managing and scaling up learning communities.**

- **As coordinators clarified expectations and offered support, faculty responded by changing their teaching practices.**

- **Curricular integration remained difficult to implement widely and deeply.**

- **Student cohorts led to strong relationships among students, creating both personal and academic support networks.**

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Foreword

Learning communities are not new. Their origin springs from the Experimental College established at the University of Wisconsin in 1927 by Alexander Meiklejohn. Responding, in part, to what he saw as the division of the curriculum into increasingly smaller units housed in specialized academic structures that separated students from the curriculum and the faculty, Meiklejohn developed an interdisciplinary, team-taught, two-year lower division curriculum that emphasized active learning and the integration of ideas from different fields of study and disciplines. Though short-lived, it established a way of thinking about the structure of the curriculum and students' relationship to it that set in motion the development of learning communities as we know them today.

The learning community initiatives that followed in the 1960s, such as those at Fairhaven College within Western Washington University, the Centennial Program at the University of Nebraska, and the University of California, Berkeley, though no longer active, served to lay the foundation for the learning community movement of the 1980s and beyond. Today, learning communities are found in a wide range of institutions — urban and rural, residential and commuter. Though many have been established in four-year colleges and universities, an increasing number have also been developed in community colleges. DeAnza College, Delta College, Kingsborough Community College, LaGuardia Community College, and Seattle Central Community College, among scores of others, have adapted learning communities to serve the particular needs of their students, many of whom begin college academically underprepared. They have done so, for instance, by including one or more developmental course in the set of courses that are included in the curriculum of the learning community. It is argued that by doing so students are better able to acquire needed basic skills when they have to apply them to the material in the linked courses.

Whether for students who require basic skills or for college-ready students who intend to transfer to a four-year institution, the success of learning communities depends not just on the formation of student cohorts through co-registration, but on the construction of shared learning environments that actively involve students in learning in ways that lead them to integrate the material of the linked courses that make up the learning community. Doing so requires that faculty work together to coordinate their separate courses and employ "pedagogies of engagement" (for example, cooperative or problem-based learning) that actively involve students in learning with others. More than anything else, faculty provide the key to successful learning communities — their collaboration and training the primary challenges that have to be met for learning communities to become fully effective.

This report is the first of several that will be released as part of the national Learning Communities Demonstration. A longitudinal study of learning communities at six community colleges, it is the first large-scale study to employ random assignment of students to gauge the impact of learning communities on student academic achievement in different institutional settings. With the sole exception of MDRC's evaluation of learning communities for students in developmental English at Kingsborough Community College as part of the Opening Doors demonstration, no prior study has employed this rigorous method to test for learning community impact. Though my own multi-method studies of learning communities, most recently with my colleague Catherine Engstrom, provide a detailed picture of their association with a range of outcomes in different college settings, final determination of their impact on academic outcomes, independent of student self-selection, awaits the results from this important study.

The findings reported here focus on the early implementation stage of the development of learning communities in the six colleges studied. It details the many challenges that institutions face in fully implementing learning communities, challenges that take time to meet. As is characteristically the case in the early stages of program implementation, there tends to be significant variation within colleges in the degree to which learning communities are completely established. It simply takes time to put in place the structures, incentives, and staff development programs that enable faculty to construct the sorts of learning environments that are the key to effective learning communities. In providing details of how six community colleges are moving to meet the challenges of implementing learning communities, this report provides a much-needed guide to other colleges as they consider developing or scaling up learning communities on their campuses.

Vincent Tinto
Syracuse University

Preface

With nearly half of all U.S. undergraduates attending community colleges, it is not surprising that the Obama administration's call for increasing the proportion of college graduates by 2020 is centered on these institutions. Community colleges offer educational opportunities to most of the nation's undergraduates who are first-generation, low-income, minority, and nontraditional students, yet retention and completion rates remain distressingly low. More than 40 percent of incoming community college freshmen are underprepared and must enroll in at least one remedial (or developmental) reading, writing, or mathematics course. And less than 30 percent of them will earn a certificate or degree within eight years. This situation must change if the nation is to achieve its goals in a competitive, global economy.

Learning communities — which are proliferating across college campuses and hold some promise for helping developmental-level students succeed — may be one way to make that happen. Learning communities are small groups of students who take thematically linked classes together in order to enhance their engagement with school, increase their understanding of interdisciplinary connections, and strengthen their cognitive skills. In some cases, developmental-level courses are linked with college-level courses, providing a useful context for the developmental-level work and allowing students to earn college credit immediately. This report describes the Learning Communities Demonstration, an ambitious initiative taking place at six community colleges that are testing different models of learning communities and scaling up their programs. MDRC is evaluating those programs as part of its participation in the National Center for Postsecondary Research, a partnership funded by the federal Institute of Education Sciences that also includes the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, and faculty at Harvard University.

As Vincent Tinto, one of the nation's foremost experts on learning communities, notes in his foreword to this report, the Learning Communities Demonstration is the first large-scale random assignment study of this intervention. It builds on the promising results of MDRC's earlier study at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, which found that students in learning communities moved more quickly through developmental English requirements, took and passed more courses, and earned more credits in their first semester than other students.

But while the Kingsborough study focused on program impacts, this report considers what it takes to build a strong learning communities program. Despite their growing popularity, learning community programs are not easy to implement and sustain and, for that reason, they often remain modest in scope at most community colleges. The six colleges described here learned valuable lessons about the inherent challenges in scaling up a learning communities program so that, instead of reaching a small number of students and involving just a few faculty

members, they can reach hundreds of students and enlist the participation of dozens of faculty members. Their experiences demonstrate that it is possible to meet those challenges, although not without some growing pains. It is our hope that this report will be helpful to other colleges that are looking to launch and start up their own programs. We also look forward to sharing the results on the effects of these learning communities on student achievement over the next two years.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

Acknowledgments

Executive Summary

Community colleges are on a quest for answers to the urgent question of what they can do to help more students achieve their education and career goals. College leaders are trying new strategies in the face of alarmingly low persistence and completion rates, particularly among their academically underprepared students. In recent years, a popular response has been to enroll groups of students together in two or more courses, which are often linked thematically and share assignments. This course structure is called a "learning community."

Proponents of learning communities believe that linking courses in this way helps students get to know each other better and more quickly, which can lead to the development of social and academic support networks. The link, or "integrated curriculum," may also help students understand connections between disciplines and, in so doing, help them to both engage more deeply with learning and enhance their cognitive skills. Linking a developmental-level course and a college-level course, a popular approach, can additionally help students earn college credit immediately and give them a useful context for their developmental-level work. Finally, learning communities can provide a structure in which faculty can get to know students on a deeper level and keep tabs on their progress. These experiences are expected to improve academic outcomes such as course passing rates, persistence to the following semester (that is, reenrolling each semester), and earning a degree or certificate.

Little rigorous research has been done on the effect of learning communities on academic outcomes, particularly for students at the developmental level — that is, students who are not academically prepared to take college-level courses. Two exceptions are Tinto's evaluation of learning communities in 13 community colleges and MDRC's evaluation of learning communities for students in developmental English at Kingsborough Community College, as part of the Opening Doors demonstration (a multisite study that tested interventions at six community colleges designed to help low-income students stay in school and succeed).[1] The encouraging results from these studies paved the way for the Learning Communities Demonstration, a nationwide, large-scale random assignment evaluation of learning communities, funded primarily by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to the National Center for Postsecondary Research, and supplemented with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford

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[1]Cathy McHugh Engstrom and Vincent Tinto, "Learning Better Together: The Impact of Learning Communities on the Persistence of Low-Income Students," *Opportunity Matters* 1 (2008): 5-21; Susan Scrivener, Dan Bloom, Allen LeBlanc, Christina Paxson, Cecilia Elena Rouse, and Colleen Sommo, *A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College* (New York: MDRC, 2008).

Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, and the Robin Hood Foundation.

Six community colleges across the country are participating in the Learning Communities Demonstration:

- The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) (Baltimore, Maryland)

- Hillsborough Community College (Tampa, Florida)

- Houston Community College (Houston, Texas)

- Kingsborough Community College (Brooklyn, New York)

- Merced College (Merced, California)

- Queensborough Community College (Queens, New York)

At each college, around 1,000 students who were interested in enrolling in learning communities volunteered to be in the study. About half were randomly assigned to the program group and half to a control group. Program group members could enroll in a learning community that fit their schedule and course needs; control group members were allowed to enroll in any course for which they were eligible or that was required, but could not enroll in a learning community. (Random assignment creates two groups that are similar both in characteristics that can be measured, like age or academic attainment, and in those that cannot be reliably measured, like motivation. This approach ensures that any difference in observed outcomes between the two groups of students — called *impacts* — can be attributed with confidence to the learning community experience.) Study intake began in fall 2007 and was completed in fall 2009.

As data become available, future reports will share findings on the impact of learning communities on academic outcomes. While these impact findings will be invaluable for informing the debate on how to improve student success rates in community colleges, college leaders and staff also need practical answers to the "how to" questions of learning communities: how to expand the program from a handful of learning communities serving a few dozen students to dozens of learning communities serving hundreds, how to motivate and support faculty, how to decide which courses to link together, how to make learning communities work for academically underprepared students, and how to deliver an integrated curriculum in the community college setting.

The six colleges in this study tackled all of these questions while participating in the Learning Communities Demonstration. Their experiences, which are the subject of this report, offer rich examples and many solutions to the real-world challenges likely to be faced by any

community college intent on designing, operating, and scaling up effective learning communities. The key findings are:

- A paid coordinator and committed college leaders were essential to managing and scaling up learning communities.

- As coordinators clarified expectations and offered support, faculty responded by changing their teaching practices.

- Curricular integration remained difficult to implement widely and deeply.

- Student cohorts led to strong relationships among students, creating both personal and academic support networks.

Implementation of the Learning Community Programs

The colleges in the study varied in the amount of experience they had with learning communities, ranging from a college that had run only a handful of learning communities taught by a few passionate instructors, to a college where learning communities had been fully institutionalized and served a substantial percentage of all incoming freshmen. To make it possible to rigorously evaluate these programs, leaders at each college had to be willing to scale up their program to offer six or more learning communities each semester, where each learning community in the program shared at least one common course, or "anchor" course.

A primary question for the demonstration is whether learning communities improve academic outcomes for students who enter community college with low basic skills. Therefore, the learning communities at CCBC, Hillsborough, and Merced each included a developmental English or reading course, and at Houston and Queensborough, each learning community included a developmental math course. Each of these "anchor" courses was linked with one of the following: another developmental course, a college-level course (usually the introductory course for an academic subject), or a "student success course" (designed to teach study skills and other strategies for succeeding in college). Kingsborough's program was an exception, in that it was designed only for continuing students in specific majors, and the anchor course was an "integrative seminar" that taught college success strategies appropriate for students who had passed through their developmental requirements and chosen a major. Beyond this, colleges adapted or strengthened their learning communities programs by, for example, adding enhanced student services or actively promoting integrative teaching practices (that is, curricular integration, or instructive strategies that connect the content of the linked courses).

Each learning communities program evolved over the course of the demonstration as colleges responded to the challenges of scaling up while maintaining or improving the quality of

their programs. Program coordinators worked hard to schedule the links, recruit and train new faculty to teach in the learning communities, coordinate between student services and academic affairs to schedule the learning community classes and promote the courses to students, and support faculty such that they collaborated with their teaching partner to integrate the linked courses. About a year into the demonstration, a series of focus groups and interviews was conducted at each college in order to document the implementation of the program up to that point. In addition, course syllabi from learning communities were collected and analyzed, and faculty who taught in the learning communities were surveyed. These data taken together tell the story of the extent to which the programs were implemented as designed, as well as how they grew and evolved throughout the first year of their participation in the demonstration.

Key Findings on Implementing the Three Core Elements of a Learning Communities Program

The findings in this report highlight the strategies that the six participating colleges used and the lessons they learned in the first year of the demonstration, with a focus on three core elements: how to design and manage a large learning communities program, how to train and support faculty to take full advantage of the structure of learning communities to improve teaching and learning, and how to incorporate extra support for students into the learning communities.

Designing and Managing Learning Communities

Although all of the colleges had operated learning community programs before the study began, new administrative structures were required for the demonstration because, in every case, the colleges expanded their programs. Running six or more learning communities per semester, taught by as many as a dozen or more instructors, while enrolling several hundred students, requires significant management and administrative support. The six colleges faced similar challenges attracting both faculty and students to the learning communities, but with time were able to achieve their goals and overcome many early obstacles.

- **A paid coordinator and committed college leaders were essential to managing and scaling up learning communities.**

Each site received a grant to support a coordinator position to oversee all project activities. The coordinator played an indispensable role and initiated a variety of activities, including recruiting faculty, organizing faculty development events, working with registration staff to enroll students in the learning communities, and assuming a host of other responsibilities. In addition to the important role of coordinators, clear and visible commitment from top leaders at the colleges can "make or break" an effort to scale up learning communities. For example, at

CCBC, learning communities became a primary strategy in the college's five-year plan to improve student achievement and retention, demonstrating the administration's support, which bolstered buy-in across faculty and student services staff. Strong examples of visionary leaders of learning communities were not always present at the outset of the demonstration. But over time, all six colleges experienced the support of champions at a high level in the college — support without which they would not likely have succeeded in implementing and scaling up their programs.

- **Recruiting and supporting enough motivated faculty were ongoing challenges at most colleges.**

Most of the colleges in the demonstration had operated only a few learning communities of the kind needed for the study prior to the demonstration. As a result, they had to scale up rather quickly as the demonstration got under way, doubling or sometimes tripling the number of learning communities they offered. To do so meant that they had to recruit faculty who might not otherwise have volunteered to teach in a learning community. Coordinators learned to use many strategies to motivate and support faculty, including offering incentives such as stipends or access to training, clearly communicating expectations about what it meant to teach in a learning community, and providing ongoing support to help instructors collaborate and integrate their courses. As a result of the program's long history, Kingsborough had a particularly well-developed strategy for recruiting, training, and supporting faculty. Administrators across departments approached faculty who they felt would do well in learning communities, who were then presented with detailed documentation of the expectations and supports for teaching in a learning community. Faculty who chose to get involved then went through a six-week training module with their teaching partner to plan their learning community. Faculty received compensation for participating in the training module and for each semester of teaching.

- **Choosing which courses to link together was initially difficult, but leaders soon learned how to strategically select courses that both met student needs and attracted enough students to fill the learning communities.**

Colleges that are expanding and strengthening learning communities need to make sure not only that there are trained and enthusiastic faculty to teach the new linked courses, but also that there are enough students to fill them. The colleges in the demonstration became much more adept at this as time went on. Program coordinators learned to choose links strategically to maximize enrollment, by analyzing past trends in enrollment patterns and considering factors such as the time of day when classes are taught and student course preferences. For example, at Queensborough, the learning communities originally linked two developmental-level courses. Students enrolled at a lower rate than expected, so program administrators reworked the offerings to link the developmental math course with a college-level course. The opportunity to im-

mediately earn college credit while simultaneously eliminating a developmental course requirement was much more popular among students, and there was little trouble filling the learning communities from that point on. Across the colleges, program coordinators also learned that marketing learning communities to appeal to students helped them meet their enrollment goals.

Teaching and Learning in Learning Communities

Proponents of the learning community model consider three components to be key agents of change in the classroom setting: faculty collaboration, integrative teaching practices, and pedagogy that promotes active, collaborative learning. The faculty members who teach in learning communities work in teams as "teaching partners" to create curricular connections between their courses. Such faculty collaboration is necessary for teaching partners to coordinate their courses and teaching practices, and to communicate with one another about their shared students. Courses are coordinated through integrative teaching practices — or curricular integration — when the course material is tied together by a learning community theme, aligned readings, joint assignments, and other strategies, in order to encourage students to see connections between the courses. Finally, teaching practices that emphasize active, collaborative learning — that is, teaching that pushes students to engage more actively with the material and with each other in intellectual discourse — are also thought to be a critical component of effective learning communities.

The extent to which teaching and learning changed at the six colleges depended in large part on the degree to which these three components were emphasized, the college's efforts at training and supporting faculty, and the faculty's response to training opportunities, while at the same time coping with the challenges of scaling up the program.

- **As coordinators became clearer and more specific about their expectations for collaboration, and as they put into place the support and training needed, many faculty responded positively to the challenges of changing their teaching practices.**

Faculty members with less experience teaching in learning communities were particularly responsive to the coaching and training that were offered. As coordinators began to feel more comfortable with clarifying and communicating expectations, faculty pairs met with each other more often to plan their learning communities, and there was a corresponding increase in practices such as developing themes for learning communities to emphasize interdisciplinary connections and assigning work that asked students to draw on those connections. This pattern was evident throughout the colleges but was particularly strong at Hillsborough. By the third semester of the demonstration, the coordinator was strongly encouraging faculty to adopt themes for their learning communities and develop assignments and projects that fit with these themes, such as censorship and immigration.

- **While many learning communities featured instructional strategies to engage and motivate students, curricular integration proved to be very difficult to implement widely and deeply.**

By the end of the first year of the demonstration, all six colleges had made an effort to bring more integrative practices into the classrooms of their learning communities — including those that did not initially emphasize this component in their programs. However, the use of these practices still varied widely, both within and across the colleges. Curricular integration proved to be very demanding and challenging to implement, especially when faculty were not adequately informed of or trained in these techniques. While at least one or two faculty pairs at each college managed to offer an integrated curriculum, on the whole most learning communities featured only superficial or sporadic attempts to help students see interdisciplinary connections. Students often didn't notice these efforts, and when they did their reactions were mixed.

Supporting Students in Learning Communities

By co-enrolling a cohort of 20 to 25 students in the same classes together, learning communities can create connections that will support students as they pursue their academic goals: connections with their fellow students, connections with faculty, and connections to the support services that are available on campus. These connections can lead to a heightened sense of engagement with and belonging on campus, which may in turn lead to stronger academic and personal support, and better academic outcomes.

Students can develop strong relationships when they take linked classes together as a group, as they see each other and work together regularly in multiple classes. Strong relationships between students and faculty occur when faculty work to be more accessible to their students and to be aware of any issues that students may be facing, through extra outreach, sitting in on their teaching partner's class, and communicating regularly with their teaching partner about the students in the cohort. Finally, students are connected to resources that are available on campus when support services are integrated into the learning community. This can happen when, for example, a student success course is included in the link, or by tying services into the classroom through a dedicated tutor or counselor, or through presentations made by service specialists on campus.

For the six colleges in the study, the success of the learning communities in creating connections for students stood out as a consistent and powerful theme.

- **Student cohorts in learning communities led to strong relationships among students, creating both personal and academic support networks.**

The experiences of the colleges in the demonstration show that student cohorts supported the development of strong personal and academic support networks among students, which increased their sense of community and willingness to ask for help. Across the colleges, students typically described seeing and working with the same people in multiple classes as their favorite aspect of the learning community. Students in learning communities reported that they felt more comfortable and more supported than they did in their stand-alone classes. This was particularly the case at Houston, where students spoke about the friends they had made in their cohort and the fact that they felt more comfortable asking each other for help because they knew each other well. Faculty members at Houston and across the colleges also observed that their learning community students supported each other, that they formed networks more quickly, and, in many cases, that the cohort increased accountability and seemed to improve attendance and even academic performance among their students.

- **The strongest connection to student support services seemed to occur when the support was integrated closely with the learning community, through a student success course or tied-in services.**

Linking with a student success course was a popular approach for connecting students to support services. Systematically implemented, tied-in services, such as outreach from program coordinators or tutoring, also supported the students in the learning communities. For example, Merced offered a learning community that linked developmental English with a student success course, and several others had supplemental instructors to assist students both inside and outside the classroom. These learning communities gave students additional tools to help them with their studies and navigating college life. Such programs require coordination and communication between the instructional and student services divisions in the colleges during the planning and implementation of learning communities.

Summary

Though the learning communities in each college's program were consistent with respect to the "anchor" course and student cohorts, significant variation across learning communities within the same college was observed, particularly in the level of curricular integration. In fact, the variation in instructional strategies seemed at least as great within colleges as across colleges. This variation was primarily a result of the faculty's varied levels of experience teaching in learning communities, and inconsistency on the part of program leaders to initially specify clear expectations about the program and hold faculty accountable for meeting those expectations.

However, as coordinators became clearer and more specific about their expectations for collaboration and integration, more faculty development took place, leading to more collaboration among pairs. As new faculty gained more experience, many faculty members began to ex-

periment with intentional integration such as assigning joint projects to their students. This is consistent with the view that learning community programs tend to go through certain "developmental" phases themselves, with the use of innovative instruction that takes full advantage of the learning community structure often taking time to reach its full potential.

Looking Ahead to the Impact Findings

Over the next year, a series of reports will be released that will include findings from the impact evaluation and updates from the implementation research. The implementation research reported here suggests that despite some improvement over time, one component of learning communities — curricular integration — was not consistently or fully implemented in all of the learning communities. Given the relatively low level of integration, and the variation across and within sites, it seems unlikely that any impacts would be the result of this particular instructional approach. Instead, it is more likely that impacts would derive from the stronger social relationships of students in learning communities, and the way that those relationships may have led to deeper engagement with and commitment to education among the students.

While the Learning Communities Demonstration was not designed to sort out which of the key components of learning communities are the mechanisms underlying any impacts, or which ones matter the most, it is expected to shed light on whether and how much learning communities as a whole can affect student outcomes. Combined with the results of the implementation research reported here, the impact findings stand to significantly advance what is known about what works to improve the success of community college students.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Overview

Community colleges are on a quest for answers to the urgent question of what they can do as institutions to help more students achieve their education and career goals. College leaders are trying new strategies in the face of alarmingly low persistence and completion rates, particularly among academically underprepared students. In recent years, a popular response has been to enroll groups of students together in two or more courses, which are often linked thematically and share assignments. This course structure is called a "learning community."

Learning communities in community colleges typically enroll groups of about 25 students together in two or more courses, often in the first semester of the first year of enrollment, and the faculty members who teach in these learning communities work in teams as "teaching partners" to create curricular connections between the courses. Proponents of learning communities believe that linking courses in this way helps students get to know each other, which can lead to the development of social and academic networks. The link also helps students understand connections between disciplines, and in so doing helps them both engage more deeply with learning and develop higher-order cognitive skills. These experiences are expected to improve academic outcomes such as course passing rates, persistence to the following semester (that is, reenrolling each semester), and earning a degree or certificate.[1]

With their roots in small, elite colleges and the ideals of early twentieth century philosophers who hoped to better prepare young people as future leaders of the nation, learning communities in today's community colleges have evolved to meet quite different needs.[2]

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Despite the increased popularity of learning communities in community colleges in recent decades, little rigorous research has been done on the effect of learning communities on academic outcomes, particularly for students at the developmental (remedial) level.[3] Vincent Tinto conducted important early work on learning communities at LaGuardia Community College in New York and Seattle Central Community College in Washington, and subsequent work at 13 community colleges across the country, that suggests that students in learning

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[1]Minkler (2002).

[2]For a discussion of the history of learning communities, see Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004).

[3]For a comprehensive review of research on learning communities, see Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes, and Schneider (2008).

communities benefit both academically and socially.[4] But rigorous research based on random assignment to treatment and control groups to measure the impact of learning communities on academic outcomes was not available until MDRC launched an evaluation at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, as part of the Opening Doors demonstration.[5] The findings suggest that participating in a learning community resulted in a higher probability of passing developmental classes and earning credits that count toward a degree.[6]

It was the Kingsborough study that laid the groundwork for the Learning Communities Demonstration, a nationwide, large-scale random assignment evaluation of learning communities, funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to the National Center for Postsecondary Research (NCPR).[7] Six community colleges across the country are participating:

- The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC)
  (Baltimore, Maryland)

- Hillsborough Community College (Tampa, Florida)

- Houston Community College (Houston, Texas)

- Kingsborough Community College (Brooklyn, New York)

- Merced College (Merced, California)

- Queensborough Community College (Queens, New York)

At each college, around 1,000 students who were interested in enrolling in learning communities volunteered to be in the study. About half were randomly assigned to the program group, and half were assigned to a control group. The program group members could enroll in a learning community that fit their schedule and course needs; the control group members were allowed to enroll in any course for which they were eligible or that was required, but could not enroll in a learning community. Random assignment creates two groups that are similar both in characteristics that can be measured, like age or academic attainment, and in those that cannot be reliably measured, like motivation, ensuring that any difference in observed outcomes between the two groups of students can be attributed with a high degree of confidence to the

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[4]Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo (1994); Engstrom and Tinto (2008).

[5]Opening Doors was a multisite study that tested interventions at six community colleges designed to help low-income students stay in school and succeed.

[6]For more information on the previous MDRC study of learning communities, see Scrivener et al. (2008).

[7]NCPR is a coalition of research organizations that includes the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University; MDRC; the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia; and faculty at Harvard University. See www.postsecondaryresearch.org for more information about NCPR's work.

learning community experience. Study intake began in fall 2007 and was completed in fall 2009; researchers will continue to track the students for several more semesters to measure the impact of learning communities on various academic outcomes.[8]

Why Operate Learning Communities in Community Colleges?

The prevalence of low completion rates in community colleges is well known, well documented, and much discussed.[9] According to government statistics, fewer than one in six students had earned a degree or a certificate three years after beginning their postsecondary education at a two-year institution in 2003.[10] But completion rates are much worse for the large and increasing number of students who do not reach the "cut score" on math and language arts placement tests and must enroll in developmental-level courses, now required at most community colleges before students are allowed to enroll in college-level classes, earn a certificate or degree, or transfer to a four-year institution.[11]

Estimates of the percentage of students entering community colleges who enroll in one or more developmental course vary, depending on the characteristics of the students in the sample. An often-cited estimate states that around 60 percent of recent high school graduates who enter community college enroll in at least one developmental reading, writing, or math course.[12] This figure most likely understates the number of students who are in need of developmental education, partly because a large percentage of students who receive low scores on placement exams and are referred to these courses simply never enroll.[13]

The high percentage of students who are referred to developmental education is only part of the picture; the percentage of those referred who start but never complete the sequence of courses leading to college-level courses is quite another. One recent study uses data provided by 57 community colleges that are part of the Achieving the Dream initiative to estimate the rate at which developmental-level students complete the sequence of courses that is required before they are deemed ready to take on college-level work.[14] The study finds that only 33

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[8]For a description of the methodology of the Learning Communities Demonstration, see Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes, and Schneider (2008).

[9]Brock (forthcoming).

[10]Berkner and Choy (2008).

[11]Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006).

[12]Adelman (2004).

[13]Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2009).

[14]Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a national initiative funded by Lumina Foundation for Education to promote data-driven reform in community colleges, and has a special focus on low-income students and students of color. By 2009, over 102 community colleges had joined the initiative. As part of their participation, colleges provide student records data to a central database. See www.achievingthedream.org for more information about this initiative.

percent of students who are referred to developmental math and 46 percent of students who are referred to developmental reading complete the relevant sequence within three years. Moreover, persistence up to this point does not mean that the students are home free: around half of students who complete the sequence do not go on to pass the first college-level class in the subject, often called the "gatekeeper" course. The upshot is that, in these 57 colleges, only 20 percent of students who require developmental coursework in math actually enroll in and pass the first college-level math course.[15]

Learning communities are a popular strategy to which community college leaders are turning to help slow and reverse these discouraging trends. Learning communities are a particularly appealing option for instructing developmental-level students for several reasons. First, these students may be more marginalized from the college community, and the social and academic support networks that are encouraged by learning communities can serve as an important connection to the campus. Second, the connection between the developmental-level course and the course (or courses) with which it is linked — whether another developmental-level course, a college-level course, or a "student success" course that is designed to teach students the skills they need to succeed in college — can serve to support learning in each linked course in a way that may be particularly valuable for an academically underprepared student. With a connection to another developmental course, the student's academic skill needs are being addressed from several angles; with a connection to a college-level course, the skills that are taught can be tailored to give students a context for the rationale behind developmental-level work as well as giving them the opportunity to earn college credit even as they go through their developmental sequence. Finally, pedagogical approaches in learning communities can engage and motivate these students, who are far more likely than other students to drop out when they become frustrated with the time they need to spend taking — and passing — pre–college-level courses.[16]

Although there is no reliable estimate of the number of colleges that run learning communities, let alone how many or what kind of learning communities, evidence suggests that the prevalence of learning communities is increasing, particularly for developmental students. One source is the Second National Survey of First-Year Academic Practices, which shows that 60 percent of the nearly 350 responding community colleges offered a learning community program in 2002.[17] Information collected from community colleges that are part of the Achiev-

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[15]Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2009). While these rates come directly from Achieving the Dream data, the study also demonstrates that they are comparable to those found in the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, which followed a nationally representative sample of eighth-graders for 12 years.
[16]Malnarich (2003); Minkler (2002); Tinto (1998); Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes, and Schneider (2008).
[17]Barefoot (2002).

ing the Dream initiative gives a similar picture of the growing popularity of this model. Twenty of the 34 colleges that joined the initiative by 2005 reported that they were running learning communities as part of their involvement with the initiative.[18] However, while many community colleges appear to have learning communities, anecdotal evidence suggests that programs tend to be quite small, limited by the number of faculty for whom teaching in learning communities is a personal passion.

Moving Learning Community Programs to Scale

Moving from a program consisting of a few learning communities taught by several passionate instructors to a larger, sustainable, and high-quality program serving hundreds of students and taught by dozens of faculty can be a huge leap. And yet, this is the goal increasingly undertaken by many community colleges, including the six colleges that joined the Learning Communities Demonstration. Most of the colleges in the demonstration had previously operated no more than a handful of learning communities of the kind to be evaluated for the demonstration. Those learning communities tended to be a hetereogeneous mix of links, driven more by faculty preference than by intentional goals of the institution. In order to be involved in the demonstration, college leaders needed to be interested in scaling up their program to serve at least 500 students over the course of three or four semesters. Further, some were asked to reconfigure the links, so that all of the learning communities in the study at the college shared at least one common "anchor" course, which, with one exception, needed to be in developmental education.[19]

Within a short time the colleges needed to double or sometimes triple the number of learning communities that they offered each semester, recruit several hundred rather than a few dozen students, recruit instructors who had previously been untapped to teach in the new learning communities, and in some cases include campuses that had not previously run learning communities,. At the same time, colleges needed to support faculty and implement any enhancements in their model such as tutoring and field trips. Needless to say, all this was a tall order for all six colleges.

To support them in this work, each college received a grant from NCPR to compensate a part-time "learning community coordinator" and to pay for other expenses such as stipends to support faculty in the learning communities, field trips, student assistants to help with recruitment, and release time for faculty to attend training events and meetings. In addition, demon-

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[18]Zachry (2008).

[19]In addition to these considerations, college leaders and staff needed to understand and be willing to participate in a random assignment study. Their willingness to submit their programs to a rigorous evaluation as well as to adapt their enrollment and registration procedures to accommodate random assignment was invaluable to the study.

stration funds covered the costs of several trainings and consultants (described in more detail in Chapter 3). Even with this support, the experience of implementing a larger number of learning communities was complex and challenging to a degree that was largely unanticipated by most of the colleges. Their experiences offer valuable insights and lessons from which other community colleges can benefit as they attempt to bring their own programs to scale or improve the quality of the learning experience for students. While several useful guides and articles exist to help colleges get started with learning communities, little information exists about how to expand and sustain large, high-quality programs that have the capacity to serve a large number of students.[20] This report helps fill that gap by giving an account of how several colleges tackled those challenges.

Methodology and Data Sources

The implementation study was guided by the following questions:

1. How were the learning community programs initiated, designed, and operated at the participating colleges?

2. What were the key factors that promoted or impeded the smooth implementation of the programs at each site? How did implementation change over time?

3. How did implementation vary across learning communities within the same college and across the six colleges?

The implementation research findings reported here rely on several data sources. The primary data source was made up of write-ups and transcripts from the site visits that were conducted at each site during the second semester that the college was running learning communities as part of the demonstration. These data included interviews and focus groups with college administrators, faculty, and students; direct observations of a small number of classrooms; and written documents such as course catalogues. A second key data source consisted of running logs kept by the project team on developments at each of the six colleges, including information about study intake, staffing, and how the program was modified over time. The third data source was a survey of faculty who taught in the learning communities. The survey included questions that were designed to capture practices and beliefs of learning community and non–learning community faculty (although only data for learning community faculty are reported here). The final data source comprised sets of syllabi from the learning communities

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[20]For resources, see Shapiro and Levine (1999), Levine-Laufgraben and Shapiro (2004), and a variety of monographs published by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education (http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/publications.asp), among others.

that were collected from three of the six colleges. (Future reports will include this analysis for the other three colleges.) For more details on the methods and data sources, see Appendix B.

The Demonstration Timeline: Key Dates and Milestones

The demonstration was conducted during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years. As Figure 1.1 shows, three colleges began study intake — enrolling students into the study and randomly assigning them to learning communities or the control group — in fall 2007, and three more were added in spring 2008.

At each college, the demonstration period lasted three to five semesters — the time it took for the college to reach its study intake goal (with at least 500 students enrolled in learning communities and the remainder in the control group). As of fall 2009, all six colleges had completed random assignment. Researchers will continue to track students in the study for several more semesters to measure the impact of learning communities on student outcomes such as completing developmental education courses, accumulating credits, and persisting from semester to semester.

Starting in the summer of 2007 and continuing throughout the demonstration period at each college, faculty and staff participated in a variety of faculty and professional development activities to strengthen and sustain their strategies and practices. Professional development was conducted both by NCPR consultants and by in-house faculty leaders; more details about these events can be found in Chapter 3.

Data for this implementation study were collected during the second or third semester that the college was running learning communities as part of the demonstration, at which point the research team conducted interviews with college administrators, instructors, and students (described in more detail above).[21] A survey of faculty was administered during the fall of 2008 and the spring and fall semesters of 2009. Syllabi were collected during the same time period.

Overview of This and Future Reports

Each college entered the demonstration with plans for implementing its own version of learning communities, which, while conforming to the study's requirements, varied in significant ways, particularly in what courses were linked, how much emphasis was put on curricular

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[21]A second round of implementation research was conducted at five of the six colleges in the final semester of the demonstration at those colleges. The focus of this report is on the first year of implementation of the learning communities — that is, the first two semesters after study intake began. Later reports will incorporate information collected in the second year.

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Figure 1.1

Timeline of Key Events in the Learning Communities Demonstration

STUDY ACTIVITIES

Study intake ends:
Hillsborough

Implementation research (first round):
CCBC
Hillsborough
Houston
Merced
Queensborough

Faculty survey fielded:
CCBC
Hillsborough
Houston
Merced
Queensborough
Kingsborough

Study intake begins:
CCBC
Houston
Merced

Implementation research (first round):
Kingsborough

Study intake begins:
Hillsborough
Queensborough
Kingsborough

Study intake ends:
Queensborough

Implementation research (second round):
Kingsborough
Queensborough

Study intake ends:
CCBC
Houston
Merced
Kingsborough

Implementation research (second round):
CCBC
Houston
Merced

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

Summer 2007	Fall 2007	Spring 2008	Summer 2008	Fall 2008	Spring 2009	Fall 2009
Evergreen Summer Institute: Hillsborough Houston Merced Queensborough Kingsborough	**Faculty development event:** Houston Hillsborough Queensborough Kingsborough	**Faculty development event:** CCBC Hillsborough Houston Merced Queensborough Kingsborough	**Evergreen Summer Institute:** CCBC **Kingsborough Summer Institute:** Hillsborough Queensborough Kingsborough	**Faculty development event:** CCBC Hillsborough Queensborough Kingsborough	**Faculty development event:** CCBC Houston Queensborough Kingsborough	**Faculty development event:** CCBC Merced Kingsborough

integration, and how extra support services were tied into the learning communities. The next chapter of this report first describes how the six colleges in the demonstration were identified and recruited, and then describes each college, its learning communities program, and — in brief — how the program evolved in the first year.

The extent to which the programs were implemented as designed, as well as how they grew and evolved during the first year of their participation in the demonstration, is addressed in the chapters that follow. The chapters focus on three key implementation challenges: how to design and manage a large learning communities program (Chapter 3), how to ensure that teaching and learning in the classrooms are high in quality and adhere to the learning community model (Chapter 4), and how to incorporate support for students into the learning communities (Chapter 5). The final chapter concludes with a description of cross-cutting themes that emerged from the analysis of these implementation challenges.

Additional findings from the Learning Communities Demonstration will be released in a series of reports through 2011. Early impact findings will be released as data become available on the full sample in each college, as follows:

- Impacts from Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Reading: Hillsborough Community College

- Impacts from Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Math: Queensborough Community College and Houston Community College

- Impacts from Learning Communities for Students in Developmental English: The Community College of Baltimore County and Merced College

- Impacts from Learning Communities for Students in Occupational Majors: Kingsborough Community College

A final report, including a synthesis of impact findings across the colleges, cross-college implementation lessons, and findings from a cost study of learning communities in selected colleges, is also planned for 2011.

Chapter 2

The Learning Communities Demonstration: Theory and Implementation

The programs in the Learning Communities Demonstration were chosen to capture the experiences that are currently available to students who are enrolled in community colleges across the country. This chapter begins with a description of comprehensive learning communities in order to provide a context for the learning community programs that were designed and operated by the colleges in the demonstration; it then goes on to describe the site selection process and the learning community programs at each college.

Picturing Comprehensive Learning Communities

As discussed in Chapter 1, proponents of learning communities believe that learning community students will develop closer ties with peers and faculty members and gain greater mastery over subject matter than they would in a more conventional college program, resulting in higher academic achievement and persistence.[1] This theory of change assumes the successful implementation of five key elements of learning communities: curricular integration, pedagogical strategies that encourage active and collaborative learning, faculty collaboration, student engagement arising from strong relationships among students and between students and faculty, and the integration of student support services.[2] Table 2.1 shows these elements and associated practices in detail.

The extent to which the learning communities in the demonstration appeared to incorporate each of these elements, and the challenges that coordinators and faculty faced in implementing them, are described in the chapters that follow. To provide a context for this discussion, the following section, drawing on both theoretical and empirical work, offers brief definitions of each concept and examples of its application in learning communities.

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[1]Minkler (2002); Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004).

[2]Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes, and Schneider (2008). Neither researchers nor practitioners can be certain that each component is equally important — or important at all — in generating positive impacts on academic outcomes for students. However, it would be near-impossible to design an experiment that isolated the effects of each, and so administrators and practitioners must rely on the theory behind the inclusion of each of these components when choosing what to emphasize in their learning community model, rather than waiting for rigorous evidence to arise.

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Table 2.1

Key Elements of Comprehensive Learning Communities in Community Colleges

Element	Description	Examples of Practices
Curricular integration	Courses are linked thematically, with shared content and assignments, in order to construct shared, relevant teaching and learning experiences.	Aligned syllabi; overarching theme; joint assignments; joint grading; cross-course, project-based learning
Active, collaborative learning	Pedagogy promotes critical thinking through experiential, collaborative, and reflective learning. Purposeful classroom and co-curricular activities relate course content to real world issues and events.	Problem- or project-based assignments; discussion and dialogue in classroom; small-group work; field study or service projects
Faculty collaboration	Instructors work together on linking activities and assignments across subjects; share and develop effective pedagogy; and consult on their shared students.	Organized communication before and throughout the semester; professional develop-ment to support cross-course planning; team teaching
Student engagement	Within cohorts, students create meaningful peer networks that promote academic support and social bonding. Relationships between students and faculty are strengthened by faculty outreach and communi-cation.	Cohorts; study groups or group projects; informal social events; outreach by faculty; faculty communication about shared students; field trips
Integration of student support services	Knowledge and use of campus resources that provide extra academic support. These services are integrated with classroom activities.	Student success courses; tutoring or supplementation instruction; dedicated counselor; classroom discussion of available campus resources; library training; access to technology

Curricular Integration

Proponents of learning communities often stress that linking two or more classes helps students see the connections between what they are learning in each course in the learning community, and between academic learning and their own sociopolitical experiences. Curricular integration refers to course material that is tied together in such a way as to reveal those connections and stimulate students to think creatively and critically about the material. Accord-

ing to Gabelnick, curricular integration allows students to "reconceptualize social, economic, political and multicultural issues" and draw more meaning from academic learning.[3]

Examples of curricular integration in learning communities are:

- Overarching themes or names for the learning community

- Synchronized course calendars

- Aligned readings

- Joint assignments

- Shared grading for joint assignments

- Long-term projects integrating material from each class

- Team teaching

Active, Collaborative Learning

Proponents of learning communities typically encourage teaching that pushes students to engage more actively with the material and with each other in intellectual discourse. According to Bonwell and Eison, active learning is "any class activity that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing."[4] Hurd suggests a connection between this kind of learning and academic achievement.[5] Teachers using this approach, for example, might ask students to reflect critically on readings and write about their own response to those readings.[6]

Examples of strategies to encourage active learning in learning communities are:

- Class discussion

- Presentations (individual or group)

- Reflective writing

- Long-term projects integrating material from each class

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[3]Gabelnick (1997), quoted in Minkler (2002).
[4]Bonwell and Eison (1991).
[5]Hurd (2000).
[6]Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000).

- Service learning projects[7]

- Field trips and other extracurricular activities

Cooperative or collaborative learning is a subset of active learning and is emphasized often by Tinto in his discussions of student engagement.[8] According to Johnson and Johnson, cooperative learning has four essential components: (1) positive interdependence, in which all group members participate to achieve the group goal; (2) individual accountability, in which each member of the group is held responsible for his or her own learning, which in turn contributes to the group goal; (3) cooperation, in which students discuss, problem-solve, and collaborate together; and (4) evaluation, in which members of the group review and evaluate their ability to work together effectively and to make changes as needed.[9]

Examples of strategies to encourage collaborative learning are:

- Group or team projects

- Peer evaluations

- Grades assigned to work performed by teams rather than by individuals

- Faculty collaboration

According to learning community proponents, for curricular integration to take place in learning communities, faculty who teach the linked courses (typically two faculty members, one per course) need to work together to include practices that incorporate integrative, active, and collaborative learning techniques such as those described above.[10] The frequency with which faculty meet to plan and conduct their learning communities can vary, as can the mode of communication (for example, face-to-face meetings versus e-mail exchanges), but significant collaboration before and during the semester is considered to be necessary for integrative teaching — that is, instructional strategies that encourage students to see connections between disciplines and between academic learning and personal experiences.[11] Some faculty also choose to underscore and strengthen the curricular connection between their courses by sitting in on each other's classes or team-teaching both courses.

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[7]Service learning is a strategy that integrates instructional and community service to encourage civic participation while benefiting the communities.

[8]Engstrom and Tinto (2008); Tinto (1997).

[9]Johnson and Johnson (1991).

[10]Throughout this report, the word "faculty" is used to refer to both full- and part-time instructors.

[11]Engstrom (2008).

In addition, faculty in learning communities are expected to communicate regularly about their shared students. Faculty can share information and strategize together about challenges that a student may be facing, or they can discuss behavior problems that appear in each of the linked classes.

Student Engagement

Tinto's theory of integration suggests that many students who leave college do so in part because they have not established a commitment to the institution and its social communities.[12] Subsequent work has validated this theory, showing that the more academically and socially involved students are, the more likely they are to persist.[13] Studies show that enrollment in well-implemented learning communities tend to improve students' sense of engagement with the college and with their studies.[14]

Strong relationships among students are facilitated by enrolling the same group of students as a "cohort" in the linked classes, so that they see each other and work together in multiple classes. This arrangement also facilitates group work and project-based learning. Usually, the linked classes are scheduled back-to-back, and often take place in nearby classrooms, to allow for more seamless transitions between classes and to be more convenient for students' busy schedules. The academic and social networks enabled by the student cohort can create a feeling of belonging and support that is otherwise often lacking at community colleges, where many students are on campus only to attend their scheduled classes.[15]

Strong relationships between students and faculty can occur when faculty work to be more accessible to their students and to be aware of any issues that students may be facing, through extra outreach, sitting in their teaching partner's class, and communicating regularly with their teaching partner about the students in the cohort.

Integration of Student Support Services

Students can also become connected to the college community through the student support services that are available on campus, such as advising, tutoring, and financial aid. The resources and guidance that students can access through these services may make the difference between staying in school and dropping out. Researchers and practitioners are coming to believe that information about services and encouragement to access them should be delivered

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[12]Tinto (1975).
[13]Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000); Tinto (1998).
[14]Engstrom and Tinto (2008); Scrivener et al. (2008); Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo (1994); Zhao and Kuh (2004).
[15]Minkler (2002).

directly in the classroom, the one place where students are most likely to be. In addition, this approach can underscore the relevance of these services to success in the classroom.[16]

The "integration" of support services with academic instruction may require an unprecedented level of communication between the academic instruction and student support divisions, which tend to function separately on community college campuses. For example, asking a counselor to come into a learning community and speak about services and planning for subsequent semesters would require coordinating with that individual; replicating this practice across the learning community program would require building a relationship with the department. Though it may require more work and planning up-front, such integration seems especially suited for learning communities, where faculty may have an unusually high level of information about their students from communicating with their teaching partner, and where connection to the campus community is a central goal.[17]

Following are examples of strategies to integrate student support services into learning communities:

- Link a developmental-level course with a "student success" course, which is designed to teach study skills and other strategies for succeeding in college.

- Assign a dedicated tutor or counselor to the learning community, to make regular presentations and be a familiar face for students to seek out.

- Include presentations by student services staff, such as financial aid advisers.

- Ensure that faculty know about services and encourage them to refer students who are in need.

- Require participation in services (for example, a visit to an adviser or the student success center) for course credit.

The Learning Communities in the Demonstration

Site Recruitment and Selection

The goal in designing the Learning Communities Demonstration was not to evaluate the most well-established programs in the country, but to capture the range of possible learning community experiences that are currently available to students who are enrolled in

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[16]Matus-Grossman et al. (2002); Tinto (1997); Weissman et al. (2009).
[17]Engstrom (2008).

community colleges across the country. The site recruitment and selection process was guided by several factors:

- **Previous experience offering learning communities.** Colleges needed to have an established program on their campus, which they were interested in expanding to serve more students.

- **A program built around a developmental education course.** Learning communities that paired developmental-level classes with a variety of other courses were of primary interest for this research.

- **The extent of curricular integration in the learning communities.** Programs with both higher and lower levels of curricular integration in the learning communities were sought for this research.

- **Willingness to meet the requirements of participating in a random assignment study.** College leaders needed to be interested in scaling up their program to serve at least 500 students over the course of three or four semesters and, if necessary, reconfigure the links in their existing learning communities to include a common "anchor" course in all of the learning communities that were being evaluated in the study.[18] In addition, the colleges needed to be willing to adopt procedures in the registration process to randomly assign students to either the program group, whose members were eligible to enroll in learning communities, or to a control group, whose members were not given the option of enrolling in learning communities.[19]

- **Colleges needed to serve an at-risk population of students.**

To find colleges that met these criteria, researchers spent many months speaking with experts in the field, with practitioners running learning community programs, and with college administrators and faculty at more than a dozen colleges that were being considered for inclusion in the study. Researchers also conducted classroom observations to get a sense

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[18]Both prior to and during the course of the demonstration, most of the colleges also offered a few other learning communities in addition to those that were evaluated.

[19]Colleges that were selected for the study had to meet several further operational benchmarks for participation in random assignment. Random assignment requires a large sample size to ensure that effects can be measured successfully; college leaders at each college demonstrated that they had a large pool of interested and eligible students, and that enough demand for learning communities could be generated to both make random assignment possible and to meet the sample size goal for the study (1,000 students enrolled over three or four semesters). In addition, administrators and staff had to be willing to host multiple site visits and be willing to make necessary modifications in the normal registration procedures to accommodate study intake and random assignment.

of the learning communities in action. By fall 2007, the six colleges in the demonstration had been chosen:

- The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) (Baltimore, Maryland)

- Hillsborough Community College (Tampa, Florida)

- Houston Community College (Houston, Texas)

- Kingsborough Community College (Brooklyn, New York)

- Merced College (Merced, California)

- Queensborough Community College (Queens, New York)

How the Six Learning Community Programs Were Selected

The colleges in the study had a wide range of prior experiences with learning communities, from a handful of learning communities taught by a few, passionate instructors to a fully established program with structured faculty training. At each college, leaders were interested in scaling up the program and were willing to submit the learning communities to rigorous evaluation.

In addition, each college serves a diverse and at-risk population, consistent with national enrollment trends for most community colleges. Large numbers of their students are low-income or attend college part time. (See Table 2.2.) More specifically, the students served by the learning communities were primarily academically underprepared and ethnically diverse, and many were the first in their family to attend college. (See Table 2.3.)

The six colleges also met the other selection criteria for participation in the study, as described next.

Building Programs Around a Developmental Education Course

Developmental-level students tend to be more at risk of failure than students who are academically prepared to begin taking college-level courses immediately, and building evidence about strategies for helping them succeed is a top priority for researchers and practitioners alike. Five of the six colleges in the demonstration built their learning communities around an "anchor" developmental course, designed to support success among these students.

At The Community College of Baltimore County, Hillsborough Community College, and Merced College, the anchor course was developmental English or developmental reading;

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Table 2.2

Selected Institutional Characteristics of the Colleges in the Learning Communities Demonstration, 2008-2009

Characteristic	The Community College of Baltimore County	Hillsborough Community College	Houston Community College	Kingsborough Community College	Merced College	Queensborough Community College
Fall enrollment (N)	20,673	24,037	48,169	15,739	10,836	13,752
Student characteristics (%)						
Enrollment status						
Full time	35.0	36.0	29.0	55.0	45.0	54.0
Part time	65.0	64.0	71.0	45.0	55.0	46.0
Gender (%)						
Male	38.0	43.0	41.0	43.0	41.0	43.0
Female	62.0	57.0	59.0	57.0	59.0	57.0
Race/ethnicity (%)						
White	55.0	51.0	19.0	38.0	30.0	23.0
Black	31.0	19.0	25.0	31.0	5.0	24.0
Hispanic	2.0	23.0	28.0	14.0	41.0	23.0
Other[a]	12.0	7.0	28.0	17.0	24.0	30.0
Age[b] (%)						
24 years and under	57.0	64.0	56.0	76.0	57.0	76.0
25 years and over	43.0	36.0	44.0	24.0	43.0	24.0
Pell Grant receipt (%)	37.0	33.0	35.0	56.0	47.0	50.0

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

NOTES: Data are from fall 2008 unless otherwise specified.

　Distributions may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

　[a]"Other" includes Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacfic Islander, American Indian or Alaskan Native, race/ethnicity unknown, and nonresident alien.

　[b]Data are from fall 2007.

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Table 2.3

**Characteristics of Students Assigned to Learning Communities:
Fall 2007, Spring 2008, Fall 2008, and Spring 2009 Cohorts**

Characteristics	The Community College of Baltimore County	Hillsborough Community College	Houston Community College	Kingsborough Community College	Merced College	Queensborough Community College
Gender (%)						
Male	40.2	44.3	35.2	41.7	50.7	44.8
Female	59.8	55.7	64.8	58.3	49.3	55.2
Age (%)						
18-20 years	77.2	70.2	61.3	58.0	62.1	78.1
21-25 years	11.9	15.9	21.7	28.3	19.1	14.5
26-30 years	4.9	5.9	7.3	5.0	6.9	3.2
31 years and over	6.0	8.0	9.7	8.8	12.0	4.3
Average age (years)	20.5	21.2	21.9	22.1	22.6	20.1
Race/ethnicity[a] (%)						
Hispanic	4.7	32.2	59.6	19.4	57.3	35.5
White	31.7	25.8	3.3	29.9	17.4	16.0
Black	56.6	35.3	36.6	34.1	9.5	28.9
Asian or Pacific Islander	3.2	4.1	--	13.0	12.9	12.9
Other[b]	3.8	2.7	0.5	3.7	2.9	6.9
Has one or more children (%)	16.8	18.7	30.5	12.4	27.4	7.5
Average age of youngest child (years)	6.0	4.9	3.9	7.2	5.6	3.6
Received financial aid during semester of random assignment (%)	44.9	25.3	40.0	54.2	28.5	29.6
Does not know	20.1	32.0	28.6	14.3	24.5	34.5
Highest grade completed (%)						
11th grade or lower	7.0	13.2	14.0	11.8	10.2	15.4
12th grade	93.1	86.8	86.0	88.2	89.8	84.6

(continued)

Table 2.3 (continued)

Characteristic	The Community College of Baltimore County	Hillsborough Community College	Houston Community College	Kingsborough Community College	Merced College	Queensborough Community College
Diplomas/degrees earned[c] (%)						
GED certificate	9.4	14.5	12.6	16.4	7.7	17.6
High school diploma	90.1	84.4	83.7	82.4	85.0	79.6
Occupational/technical certificate	5.7	5.9	7.3	2.3	6.1	3.3
Two-year degree or higher	--	1.0	0.5	3.0	0.2	0.2
None of the above	1.5	0.4	2.8	0.5	6.1	2.1
Student status[d] (%)						
Incoming freshman	61.3	94.8	NA	--	57.5	82.2
Returning student	33.3	2.0	NA	50.2	39.8	9.0
Transfer student	5.3	3.2	NA	49.8	2.7	8.8
Taken any college courses (%)	28.5	8.0	13.5	80.1	41.0	21.5
First person in family to attend college (%)	26.9	28.8	42.4	24.1	36.9	26.9
Does not know	0.7	2.9	2.4	1.9	2.4	3.8
Working personal computer in home (%)	85.9	85.8	66.6	91.7	66.0	89.8
Language other than English spoken regularly in home (%)	9.4	28.9	48.2	40.0	44.5	40.3
Sample size	411	709	433	420	459	608

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using Baseline Information Form data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table used all available data for the 3,040 sample members who were randomly assigned to learning communities.

Random assignment ratios vary across cohorts. Estimates are weighted to account for probability of being assigned to learning communities.

Distributions may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

GED = General Educational Development. NA = not available. Double dashes indicate that no respondents fell into that category.

[a]Respondents who said they are Hispanic and chose a race are included only in the Hispanic category.

[b]"Other" race/ethnicity includes American Indians/Alaskan Natives and those who marked "other race/ethnicity" or more than one racial/ethnic category.

[c]Distributions may not add to 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.

[d]This question was not asked at Houston.

at Houston Community College and Queensborough Community College, it was developmental math. These colleges linked another developmental course, a college-level "content" course (usually the introductory course for an academic subject), or a student success course with the anchor course. Each college chose its anchor developmental course — and the course or courses to which it was linked — based on faculty and administrator perceptions of student need and interest at their college.

Kingsborough Community College was the only college in the demonstration where the learning communities did not involve any developmental courses. Instead, the anchor course was an "integrative seminar," which supported work in two college-level courses in a particular major.[20] MDRC had already evaluated Kingsborough's developmental-level learning communities,[21] and the positive results from that study were the impetus both for the larger-scale Learning Communities Demonstration and for the expansion of Kingsborough's learning communities to this innovative model, which serves students who have already fulfilled their developmental requirements and chosen a major.

Expectations of Curricular Integration: Variations Across the Colleges

In addition to the course offerings, a central guiding protocol for selection was the extent of curricular integration in the learning communities program as it was designed and planned by the college. Of the key components described above, curricular integration was seen as the one that could most influence teaching and learning in the classrooms of the learning community. To meet the goal of choosing sites that represented the variety of learning communities available to students across the country, it was important to include learning communities with both higher and lower levels of curricular integration.

Based on initial conversations and observations at the college, each program's learning communities were classified along a continuum of "most basic," defined as "a cohort of students taking at least two courses together," to "most integrated," defined as "a cohort of students taking at least two courses together as part of a coordinated studies program in which faculty team-teach . . . integrated curricula."[22] Finding colleges with learning communities at the higher end proved to be more of a challenge, because several of the colleges in the country with well-established, highly integrated programs were not interested in participating in the study

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[20]The integrative seminar was designed to support work in the other two courses by focusing on college success topics such as research and writing skills. During the demonstration, CCBC's learning community model had a component with a similar role: a "Master Learner" course, which was a weekly, one-hour, noncredit seminar on "learning to learn" in the context of the college-level course.

[21]See Scrivener et al. (2008) for more about the findings of the Opening Doors evaluation of first-year learning communities at Kingsborough.

[22]This classification system is proposed in Price and Lee (2005).

(because of the demands of random assignment and scaling up) or did not meet other criteria (such as serving developmental education students).

At the time the sites were selected, learning communities at CCBC and at Kingsborough tended toward the most integrated end of the spectrum; learning communities at Hillsborough and at Houston fell closer to the most basic end; and learning communities at Queensborough and at Merced lay in the middle. Chapter 4 of this report, which addresses the teaching and learning that took place in the learning communities, discusses the findings of the implementation research in regard to the level of curricular integration in the learning communities as they were implemented.

Profiles of the Learning Community Programs at the Colleges

The following profiles provide an overview of each college and its learning communities program. Each profile is organized by the anchor course of the learning community, and includes a diagram that shows which course or courses each college chose to link with the anchor course. At colleges where the anchor course was linked with a variety of courses, each student enrolled in a learning community that linked the anchor course with only one of the variety of courses, not all of them.

In each college's profile, "Implementation at a Glance" sums up the findings of the focus groups and interviews that were conducted about a year into the demonstration. While these observations represent the best understanding that the team had of the program at that point in time, the focus groups and interviews were conducted with a limited number of individuals, and thus are illustrative but not necessarily generalizable to the experience of everyone in the program.

Anchor Course: Developmental English or Reading

The Community College of Baltimore County

The College and Student Population. CCBC is a large, urban community college serving around 20,000 students each semester. Two of CCBC's three campuses, Essex and Catonsville, participated in the demonstration. Across all campuses at the time of the demonstration, over half of the student population was white and almost a third was black. Two-thirds attended college part time. (See Table 2.2.)

Key Features of the Learning Communities. The learning communities program at CCBC has been in existence for nearly a decade. The program offerings are wide-ranging and have included both college-level and developmental learning communities, as well as learning communities specially designed for the honors program and the "English for Speakers of

Other Languages" program. The developmental learning communities in the demonstration are designed to accelerate students into credit courses and contextualize learning, two important goals of the administration's vision for developmental education. Only about one-fourth of the learning communities at CCBC that were run during the demonstration period were part of the study. During the course of the demonstration, the learning communities had a lead program coordinator and campus-specific coordinators, who reported to the Dean of Developmental Education and Special Academic Programs of the college overall.

The learning communities in the demonstration linked the highest level of developmental English or reading with a college-level course, such as psychology, sociology, or business. Students in the learning communities also take a Master Learner course, a weekly, one-hour, noncredit seminar on "learning to learn" in the context of the college-level course. (See Figure 2.1.)

Characteristics of Students in the Study. CCBC's learning communities are open to both new and returning students who are in need of the highest level of developmental English or reading. During the first three semesters of CCBC's participation in the demonstration, 20 learning communities were offered for the 411 students who were randomly assigned to the program. (See Appendix Table A.1.) Over half of these students are black, and just under one-third are white. Nearly 80 percent were 20 years of age or younger at the time of the study. Seventeen percent had at least one child, and 27 percent are the first in their family to attend college. (See Table 2.3.)

Implementation at a Glance: CCBC's First Year in the Demonstration

The Master Learner seminar, designed to help students make connections between their English or reading courses and the college-level course, was an innovative piece of the model at CCBC that was initially difficult to implement. Faculty were responsive as program leaders became clearer over time about their expectations for curricular integration and the Master Learner role; however, by the end of the demonstration period, the college was moving toward revamping the Master Learner component of the program.

- The level of curricular integration varied substantially across learning communities at CCBC. Some featured a high level of integration, including joint assignments and projects; integration in others was much more limited.

- Faculty collaboration was variable at CCBC, but tended to be limited at the beginning of the demonstration. As the year progressed, however, program leaders clarified their expectations and began to require that faculty submit their syllabi for approval before receiving their stipends (which instructors at

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Figure 2.1

**The Learning Community Model Studied at
The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC)**

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                                              │   Health    │
                                              └─────────────┘

                                              ┌─────────────┐
                                              │ Psychology  │
                                              └─────────────┘

  ┌──────────────────────┐                    ┌─────────────┐
  │ Developmental English │                   │   Speech    │
  │     or Reading        │                   └─────────────┘
  └──────────────────────┘
              │                               ┌─────────────┐
           ◇ Master Learner ◇                 │  Sociology  │
                                              └─────────────┘

                                              ┌─────────────┐
                                              │   History   │
                                              └─────────────┘

                                              ┌──────────────────┐
                                              │     Computer     │
                                              │ Informational Systems │
                                              └──────────────────┘
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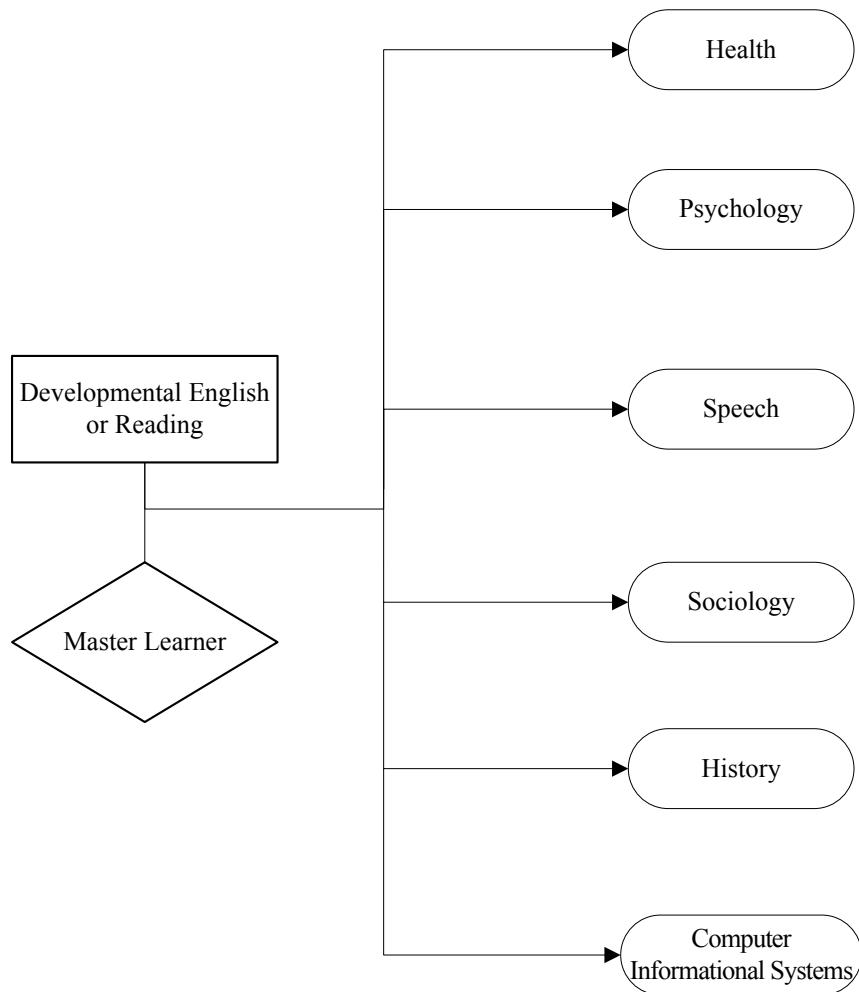
*In the demonstration, learning communities at CCBC linked the highest level of developmental English or
reading with one of a variety of college-level courses. All students also take a Master Learner course.*

all the colleges received for teaching in a learning community), a step taken to encourage more and better faculty collaboration.

- Many faculty employed teaching styles that encourage active, collaborative learning, although this practice also varied across the learning communities.

- Faculty generally reported positive relationships with the students in their learning communities, reporting that students seemed more comfortable because two faculty members were working with the same group of students. Both faculty and students reported stronger relationships among students in the learning communities than among students in stand-alone classes.

- The Master Learner course is the primary connection to support services in the learning communities. It was an innovative and relatively costly piece of the model at CCBC, and implementing it consistently across the learning communities proved to be a challenge. For example, it was difficult to recruit faculty to teach these courses, but the problem was resolved when the college decided to primarily use the faculty member from the English or reading course to teach the Master Learner course for the learning community. However, without a clear vision for the role from the program administrators, faculty acting as Master Learners had divergent perspectives on how to use the course, with some faculty emphasizing cross-curricular connections between the two courses in the learning community, and others seeing the time as an opportunity to provide tutoring or other academic support to the students.

Hillsborough Community College

The College and Student Population. Hillsborough is a large, multi-campus urban community college in Tampa, Florida, that serves around 24,000 students each semester. Three of Hillsborough's five campuses — Dale Mabry, Ybor City, and Brandon — participated in the demonstration. Across the college, just over half of the students are white, with black and Hispanic students each making up almost one-fifth of the remaining student population. Over one-third of all students are 25 years of age or older, and about two-thirds attend college part time.

Key Features of the Learning Communities. In the decade prior to participation in the demonstration, Hillsborough had experimented with learning communities on several of its campuses, running links involving freshman English, sociology, history, psychology, speech, and developmental reading, writing, and math. However, the program really took hold as part of

Hillsborough's participation in Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national initiative designed to support community colleges in their use of data to inform efforts to help their students succeed, particularly low-income students and students of color.[23] College leaders looked at their student data and saw that retention and other positive academic outcomes seemed to be correlated with enrollment in a student success course — which is now mandated for all students who are required to take one or more developmental courses.

Building on this finding, Hillsborough's learning communities linked developmental reading with a student success course (Figure 2.2). During the demonstration, the learning communities program at Hillsborough was overseen by an overall program coordinator, and managed by an individual campus coordinator at each campus.

Characteristics of Students in the Study. Hillsborough's learning communities were designed for first-time students whose test scores placed them into developmental reading. During the three semesters of Hillsborough's participation in the demonstration, 24 learning communities were offered for the 709 students who were randomly assigned to the program (Appendix Table A.1). There was no racial majority among these students: 35 percent are black, another 32 percent are Hispanic, and 26 percent are white. About 30 percent are the first in their family to attend college, around 20 percent had at least one child at the time of the study, and almost 30 percent lived in a home where a language other than English was spoken regularly. (See Table 2.3.)

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Figure 2.2

The Learning Community Model Studied at Hillsborough Community College
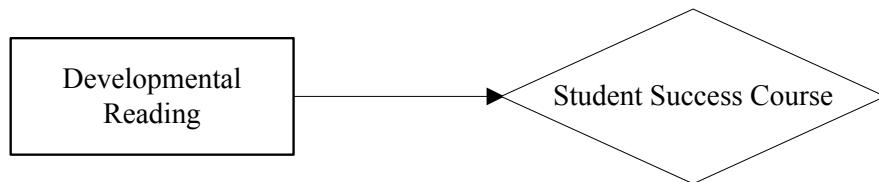
In the demonstration, learning communities at Hillsborough linked developmental reading with a student success course.

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[23]For more information about Achieving the Dream, see Brock et al. (2007) and the initiative's Web site, www.achievingthedream.org.

Implementation at a Glance: Hillsborough's First Year in the Demonstration

At Hillsborough, the requirement that each learning community have a theme was put in place during the first year of the study. This was a useful guideline for faculty to encourage curricular integration without imposing too much structure: faculty chose the theme themselves and then coordinated assignments and projects around it.

- Curricular integration was minimal at the start of the demonstration, but the overall level of integration increased over the course of the demonstration, mostly because of professional development activities. During this time, Hillsborough adopted a theme-based approach to integrating its learning communities. Faculty members developed at least three joint assignments related to the theme of the learning community, as well as adapting lessons for their individual course to fit with the theme.

- Similarly, the level of faculty collaboration varied a great deal at the beginning of the demonstration. The need for faculty to plan together became more obvious as the coordinator clarified expectations over the first year of the demonstration, and collaboration increased across the board.

- Faculty encouraged active learning by assigning group projects and, in some cases, by requiring a service-learning activity that was related to the theme of the course.

- The learning communities fostered stronger relationships between faculty and students than are seen in stand-alone courses, with faculty reporting that students felt more comfortable in their courses because the same group shared two instructors. Relationships between students in the same cohort also seemed to benefit, as students established friendships and support networks with other students in their learning community.

- The student success course, which teaches study skills and introduces students to college life, was the main connection to resources on campus.

Merced College

The College and Student Population. Merced is a rural college in California's Central Valley serving almost 11,000 students each semester. The main campus, at which the demonstration took place, is located in the town of Merced; there is also a small satellite campus. Thirty percent of the campus population is white, and Hispanic students make up another 41 percent. Forty-three percent of all students are age 25 or older, and 55 percent of all students attend part time. (See Table 2.2.)

Key Features of the Learning Communities. The learning communities program at Merced has developed over nearly a decade. In the early years of the program, faculty members experimented with pairing courses from many departments, including vocational programs, but there was minimal structure prescribing the way that the courses were integrated. The program became more cohesive as faculty leaders attended the Evergreen Summer Institute and won a grant to participate in Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC).[24] As part of SPECC, the learning communities program became mostly focused on serving students in need of developmental English. A learning communities faculty group was formed and "best practices" around curricular integration and faculty collaboration were established through a series of monthly discussions. Leadership of the program shifted near the beginning of the demonstration, when program coordination was taken over by a student affairs professional who managed the logistics of the program such as scheduling and faculty recruit-ment, replacing a faculty member who had been more focused on leading the faculty inquiry group that was in place under SPECC.

The learning communities in the demonstration linked a developmental-level English course with one of a wide variety of courses, including developmental reading, developmental math, a student success course, or an introductory college-level course. During the demonstra-tion, the college offered many learning communities that had previously been established, but also developed creative new links, such as pairing English with math, music, or criminology (Figure 2.3).

Characteristics of Students in the Study. The learning communities were designed for both new and returning students who place into developmental English. During the first three semesters of Merced's participation in the demonstration, 21 learning communities were offered for the 459 students who were randomly assigned to the program. (See Appendix Table A.1.) Fifty-seven percent of these students are Hispanic, 17 percent are white, and 13 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander. Twenty-seven percent had at least one child at the time of the study, 37 percent are the first in their family to attend college, and 45 percent lived in a home where a language other than English was spoken regularly. (See Table 2.3.)

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[24]The Evergreen Summer Institute is run by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Under-graduate Education at The Evergreen State College, which is renowned for its training on learning community theory and practice. SPECC was a three-year "action-research project," led by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, designed to improve teaching and learning for basic skills (developmental) students in California. In addition to learning communities, Merced's grant proposal included work to strengthen Supplemental Instruction and to add Reading Apprenticeship to its developmental reading courses. See http://www.carnegiefoundation.org for more details.

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Figure 2.3

The Learning Community Model Studied at Merced College
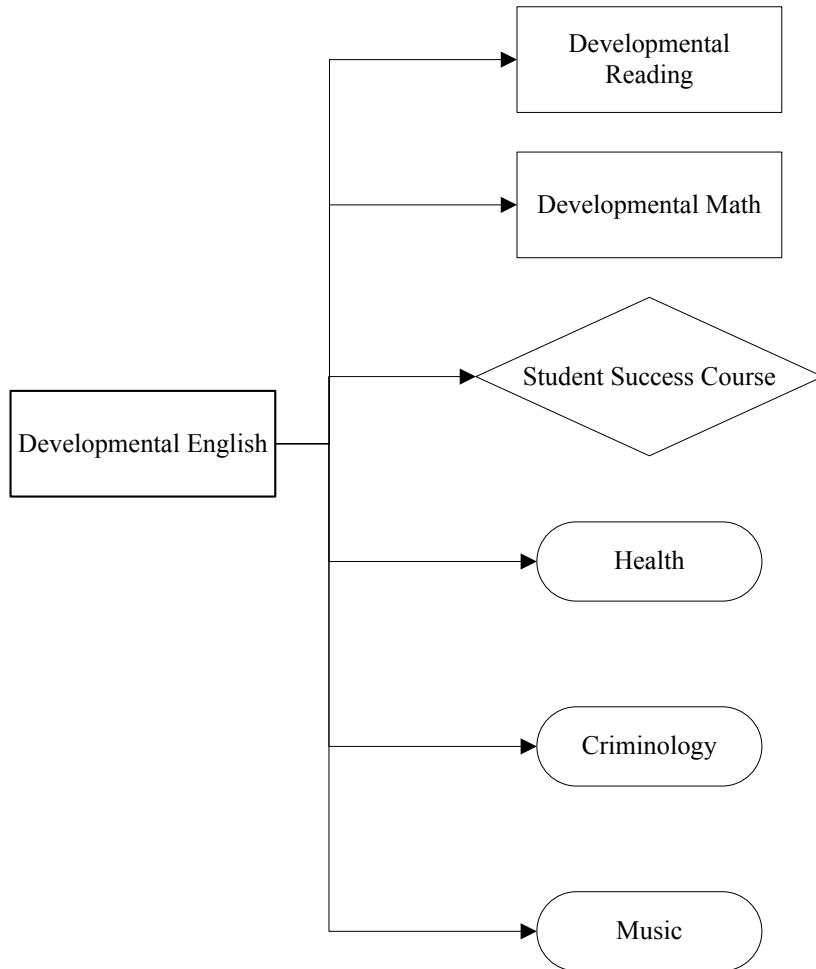
In the demonstration, learning communities at Merced linked developmental English with one of a wide variety of courses, including a student success course, developmental-level courses, and college-level courses.

Implementation at a Glance: Merced's First Year in the Demonstration

As a result of the switch in program leadership and other shifts in institutional organization at Merced, the first year of the study saw less support for the pedagogical collaboration than had previously taken place among the learning communities faculty. The previous experience of the faculty provided a valuable foundation for the program, however, as they were able to continue improving their own learning communities and share "best practices" with newer faculty despite diminished institutional support for such collaboration.

- Across the learning communities at Merced, curricular integration took place consistently and at a fairly high level, though the nature of the integration varied. All the learning communities had themes, and integration ranged from linked syllabi that were "parallel," though with very few linked assignments, to a link in which both courses used a single, combined syllabus and assignment calendar. Newer faculty were encouraged to develop higher levels of integration over the course of several semesters teaching the link; experienced faculty believe that new pairs need the first semester of partnering to learn how to best work together, to collaboratively plan curricula, and to work out the kinks of the integration.

- The learning communities faculty pairs met before each semester to plan, create joint assignments, and coordinate course calendars. Faculty pairs met at different times depending on personal preference, schedules, and experience, but all met at least once before the semester began, to synchronize their syllabi.

- Faculty across the learning communities encouraged active learning through group work and discussions.

- Many faculty at Merced said that their learning community students have a high level of comfort and sense of belonging, to which these instructors attributed a higher level of engagement and participation. Students, however, were less expressive about the benefits of being part of a cohort. Neither faculty nor students reported that learning communities made a major difference in their relationships with each other.

- The strongest link to support services on campus was provided by the learning community that included the student success course, which was taught by a counselor at Merced and focused on teaching strategies for succeeding in college. In addition, some of the learning communities em-

ployed a supplemental instructor — a former student who attends classes and is trained to serve as a tutor and academic resource for the students.

Anchor Course: Developmental Math

Houston Community College System

The College and Student Population. Houston Community College System is a very large, urban community college in Houston, Texas, serving around 48,000 students each semester on its many campuses. Three of the campuses participated in the demonstration: Northline, Southeast, and Central.[25] Across all campuses at the time of the demonstration, black and Hispanic students each made up about one-fourth of the population, and white students made up about one-fifth. Almost half of all students were 25 years of age or older, and nearly three-fourths of the students attended part time. (See Table 2.2.)

Key Features of the Learning Communities. A major impetus for the development of Houston's learning communities was the college's participation in Achieving the Dream. After examining student records, college leaders noted the alarmingly high failure rates of students who were enrolled in developmental math classes, as well as the fact that large numbers of students put off taking these classes until late in their college career. Learning communities that link developmental math with a required student success course made sense as a strategy to support students' work and boost the pass rate in these math courses (see Figure 2.4), and to encourage students to take the developmental math class earlier. During the demonstration, each campus had an individual faculty coordinator for the program who worked independently of the other coordinators.

Houston's "theory of change," as articulated by deans, coordinators, and some faculty members, emphasized the influence of student cohorts for developing strong relationships among students; this was felt to have more potential to create positive outcomes than curricular integration. In large part, this belief is an outgrowth of the institutional environment at Houston: a large, complex system of commuter campuses spread across one of the country's most sprawling cities can mean that it is even more difficult for students to feel a sense of community than at most other community colleges. The cohorts in the learning communities may go far in counteracting the estrangement and sense of anonymity that such a large institution can create.

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[25]The campuses staggered their entrance into the demonstration: Northline entered in spring 2008, Southeast in fall 2008, and Central in spring 2009. As part of Achieving the Dream, several other Houston campuses are also running and scaling up their learning community programs, though they are not participating in the demonstration.

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Figure 2.4

The Learning Community Model Studied at Houston Community College
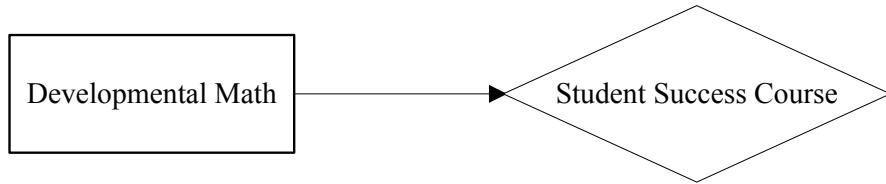
In the demonstration, learning communities at Houston linked a developmental math course with a student success course.

     Characteristics of Students in the Study. Houston's learning communities were designed for first-time students who placed into the lowest level of developmental math. During the first three semesters of Houston's participation in the demonstration, 20 learning communities were offered for the 433 students who were randomly assigned to the program. (See Appendix Table A.1.) Nearly all these students are either Hispanic (60 percent) or black (37 percent), and 65 percent are female. Thirty percent had at least one child at the time of the study, 42 percent are the first in their family to attend college, and 48 percent lived in a home where a language other than English was spoken regularly. (See Table 2.3.)

Implementation at a Glance: Houston's First Year in the Demonstration

     The study provided much-needed resources to support the expansion of learning communities at Houston, as the three campuses that were involved had previously had minimal to no experience with this way of structuring courses. Over the first year of participation, coordinators and faculty developed their idea of what their learning communities would look like, based largely on expectations that were clarified in faculty development events facilitated by experts in the field.

- The level of curricular integration varied somewhat across the learning communities, but in the typical learning community this practice tended to be minimal, particularly in the first two semesters. By the end of the year, most learning communities featured at least one joint assignment.

- Similarly, collaboration between faculty teaching partners varied greatly

between the learning communities. Planning discussions were limited and informal, if they took place at all.

- Faculty used a variety of techniques to encourage active, collaborative learning, including group work and online interactive resources. Each learning community also went on a field trip once a semester, to a museum exhibit or cultural event that was relevant to the course in some way.

- Students in the learning communities reported that being in both classes with the same group of students created a more comfortable classroom environment and made them feel supported both personally and academically. However, relationships between faculty and students did not seem to differ substantially from those in stand-alone classes.

- The student success course was the main connection to resources on campus. In addition, there were efforts at one campus to utilize a dedicated math tutor, but this was implemented irregularly across the learning communities.

Queensborough Community College

The College and Student Population. Queensborough is in Queens, New York, and serves almost 14,000 students each semester. Part of the City University of New York (CUNY), Queensborough's student population at the time of the demonstration was almost equal parts African-American, white, Hispanic, and other ethnicities/races. Three-fourths of these students were under 25 years of age, and around half attended part time. (See Table 2.2.)

Key Features of the Learning Communities. Though Queensborough had been running learning communities since 2000, the college did not focus on developmental students until it entered the demonstration. Previously, the program focused on upper-level and honors courses, and pairings were made by faculty who were interested in working together, under the auspices of the CUNY-wide Coordinated Undergraduate Education initiative. The shift to developmental-level learning communities was based on research done by the college, which led its leaders to believe that learning communities would benefit their developmental-level students. Leaders' "theory of change" rested on the premise that first-semester students who enroll in learning communities become better acquainted with their professors, contribute more to class discussions, and attend class more regularly than their counterparts who do not enroll in learning communities.

When the study began in fall 2007, the learning communities in the demonstration linked developmental math with developmental English or college-level English composition. When the college experienced enrollment problems with these offerings, the decision was made

in spring 2008 to link developmental math with various college-level courses to better match students' needs and interests. (See Figure 2.5.) The program coordinator worked under the Academic Affairs division, but also worked closely with Student Affairs.

Characteristics of Students in the Study. The learning communities in the demonstration targeted first-year students whose score on the placement exam placed them into the lowest levels of developmental math. Transfer students who had less than a semester of credits and continuing students who had failed one of the developmental math courses were also eligible to enroll in the learning communities. During the four semesters of Queensborough's participation in the demonstration, 26 learning communities were offered for the 608 students who were randomly assigned to the program. (See Appendix Table A.1.) Twenty-nine percent of these students are black, and 36 percent are Hispanic; 13 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, and nearly 80 percent were 20 years of age or younger at the time of the study. More than 25 percent are the first in their family to attend college, and 40 percent lived in a home where a language other than English was spoken regularly. (See Table 2.3.)

Implementation at a Glance: Queensborough's First Year in the Demonstration

The learning community program at Queensborough strengthened and became more cohesive over time, as the leaders figured out which courses to offer through learning communities and found faculty who were interested in teaching them. As the coordinator's role became clearer, she began reaching out to students to serve as their link to support services on campus.

- Curricular integration varied in the learning communities but increased over the course of the demonstration. By the second semester, most of the links had themes and most featured at least two joint assignments, but several faculty reported challenges integrating the content of their college-level courses with lessons that would help students improve their math skills. Learning communities that were taught by more experienced faculty generally reached higher levels of curricular integration.

- The level of faculty collaboration varied across the learning communities, though it increased over time to support higher levels of integration. On the whole, Queensborough faculty collaborated at a relatively low level.

- Faculty generally seemed supportive of collaborative and project-based learning.

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Figure 2.5

The Learning Community Model Studied at Queensborough Community College

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                                   ┌─────▶│     English     │
                                   │      │   Composition   │
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                                   │
                                   │      ┌─────────────────┐
                                   ├─────▶│  College Reading │
                                   │      └─────────────────┘
                                   │
                                   │      ┌─────────────────┐
                                   ├─────▶│     Speech       │
   ┌─────────────────────┐         │      └─────────────────┘
   │  Developmental Math  │────────┤
   └─────────────────────┘         │      ┌─────────────────┐
                                   ├─────▶│    Business      │
                                   │      └─────────────────┘
                                   │
                                   │      ┌─────────────────┐
                                   ├─────▶│    Astronomy     │
                                   │      └─────────────────┘
                                   │
                                   │      ┌─────────────────┐
                                   └─────▶│    Sociology     │
                                          └─────────────────┘
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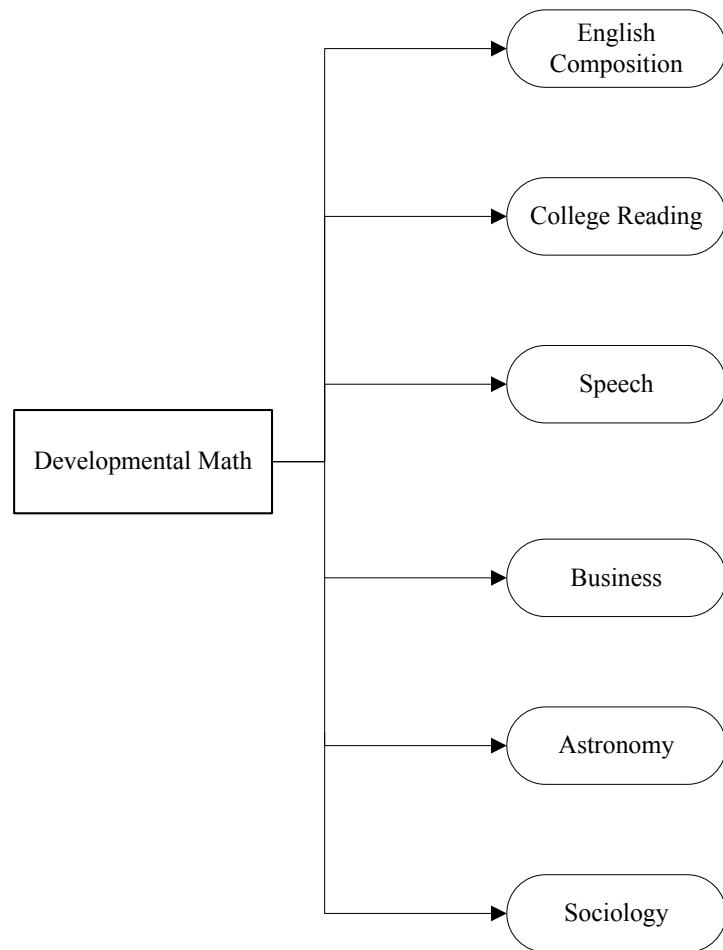
In the demonstration, learning communities at Queensborough linked developmental math
with one of a variety of college-level courses.

- In general, students reported forming stronger relationships with their learning community cohort than they generally do with their peers in stand-alone classes. Faculty also described bonding that occurred among their learning community students. The learning communities did not seem to make a major difference in relationships between students and faculty.

- The primary connection to student services was provided by the program coordinator, who communicated frequently with faculty members about students who were struggling academically or not showing up for class. She also contacted students directly to learn about the issues they faced and to recommend services that might help them overcome any obstacles.

Anchor Course: Integrative Seminar

Kingsborough Community College

The College and Student Population. Kingsborough Community College is in Brooklyn, New York, and serves nearly 16,000 students each semester. Part of CUNY, Kingsborough's student population at the time of the demonstration was 38 percent white, 31 percent black, and 14 percent Hispanic. Seventy-six percent of these students were under 25 years of age, and 45 percent attended college part time. (See Table 2.2.)

Key Features of the Learning Communities. The learning communities program at Kingsborough is one of the most well established in the country and has been operating for more than a dozen years. Kingsborough's first-semester learning communities for developmental students were evaluated in an earlier MDRC demonstration.[26] The results from that study led to the scaling up of these learning communities on the campus and growing interest from the college leadership in expanding and extending the learning communities experience for continuing and transfer Kingsborough students. The learning communities in this demonstration are part of this expansion effort. Designed for students in their second semester, the "career-focused learning communities" are meant to help students who have chosen a major explore their career goals. An unusual feature of the Kingsborough program is the high level of commitment of top leadership to learning communities and a strong emphasis on faculty development. The Director of Academic Affairs managed a program coordinator, who oversaw student enrollment and advisement, as well as a faculty coordinator, who led faculty development and training.

The learning communities in the demonstration were organized around seven majors: business, accounting, allied health, mental health, early childhood education, tourism and

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[26]Scrivener et al. (2008).

hospitality, and liberal arts. The learning communities linked a single-credit "integrative seminar" with two courses that are required for the major. The integrative seminar was designed to support work in the other two courses by focusing on college success strategies, such as research, small group work, and writing skills. (See Figure 2.6.)

Characteristics of Students in the Study. During the first three semesters of Kingsborough's participation in the demonstration, 25 learning communities were offered for the 420 students who were randomly assigned to the program (see Appendix Table A.1). There was no racial or ethnic majority among these students: 34 percent are black, 30 percent are white, 19 percent are Hispanic, and 13 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander. Around 24 percent are the first in their families to attend college and 40 percent lived in a home where a language other than English was spoken regularly. About half were continuing students at Kingsborough and the other half were students who had transferred from another college. (See Table 2.3.)

Implementation at a Glance: Kingsborough's First Year in the Demonstration

- As Kingsborough expanded its established learning communities program to include the newly developed model for second-semester students, college leaders faced challenges in selecting courses to link that would interest students, finding faculty to teach them, and adjusting the established faculty development structure to support the faculty roles in the new model. Strong institutional support for the program, which had been building for several years thanks to the Opening Doors learning communities,[27] was central as these challenges were overcome.

- Despite the emphasis of Kingsborough's in-house professional development on highly integrated courses featuring themes and many joint assignments, the level of curricular integration in each of the learning communities varied a great deal. While several learning communities in the demonstration — especially those taught by faculty with years of experience teaching in learning communities — lived up to these expectations, others fell short.

- Faculty teaching teams typically met during the six-week period prior to the start of each semester to come up with common learning objectives and

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[27]As noted in Chapter 1, Opening Doors was a multisite study that tested interventions at six community colleges designed to help low-income students stay in school and succeed.

Figure 2.6

The Learning Community Model Studied at Kingsborough Community College

Allied Health

- Biology — Psychology
- Philosophy — Mental Health

Accounting

- Psychology — Business Computing
- Business — Business Computing

Business Administration

- Psychology — Business

Early Childhood Education

- Psychology — Biology
- Early Childhood Education — History

Integrative Seminar

Mental Health

- Mental Health — Anthropology

Tourism and Hospitality

- Destination Geography — Tourism and Hospitality Technology

Liberal Arts

- English — Philosophy
- English — Sociology

In the demonstration, the learning communities at Kingsborough linked an integrative seminar with two college-level courses required for one of seven majors.

to align their syllabi, and met if needed during the semester. The most seasoned learning community faculty pairs were so accustomed to teaching in this way that they found they did not need to meet as often as the less experienced faculty. This consistently high level of collaboration was in part a result of the contract that all Kingsborough learning community faculty sign to indicate their understanding of the work involved with teaching in a learning community.

- Most faculty encouraged active learning through projects and group work.

- In general, students in Kingsborough's learning communities reported forming stronger relationships with each other than they did with their peers in stand-alone classes. Interestingly, some students seemed to feel limited by these relationships, a sentiment that some faculty also reported. Relationships between students and faculty did not seem to differ substantially more than those in stand-alone classes.

- The integrative seminar was the primary student support service to which students were connected through the learning community. In addition to the cross-curricular work conducted by the instructor, each seminar had an assigned supplemental instructor who provided small group or one-on-one support in both reading and writing.

Implementation Across the Colleges

As described above, the colleges in the study had a wide range of prior experience with learning communities, and their administrators and faculty had varied sets of goals and expectations. As the colleges scaled up their programs during the first year of the study, however, they had some similar experiences.

- **Though scaling up created challenges initially, each program improved over the first year of the study.**

During the first year of the study, program leaders at each college needed to increase their offerings of particular learning communities and recruit new faculty to teach in them. In several cases, the learning community model was entirely new to the campus, and expectations about how it was to be implemented were not entirely clear. The program coordinators also initially spent a considerable amount of time implementing procedures around random assignment for the study, detracting somewhat from other priorities such as faculty recruitment and development. However, as coordinators became clearer and more specific about their expectations for collaboration and integration, as more faculty development took place, and as new

faculty gained more experience, many faculty responded positively to the challenges of changing their teaching practice.

- **Even as the programs improved, there was much variation in the implementation of the individual learning communities.**

Though the learning communities program at each college succeeded in linking the designated courses and enrolling the same group of students in the links, there was great variation between the practices of the faculty members in the individual links, particularly around the levels of faculty collaboration and curricular integration. This was primarily a result of the varied levels of experience teaching in learning communities among the faculty, initial inconsistency on the part of program leaders to specify what was expected of instructors, and in some cases inadequate professional development opportunities for new faculty. As much variation within colleges as across colleges was observed throughout the first year of implementation.

- **Student cohorts led to strong relationships among students, leading to both personal and academic support networks.**

As program leaders and faculty at all of the colleges worked to develop the curricular and pedagogical content of the learning communities, one element was implemented successfully from the beginning: the same group of students enrolled in each of the classes in the learning community. Faculty, students, and administrators expressed the belief that this structure enabled strong relationships to develop between students, helping them to build both social and academic support networks.

Chapter 3

Designing and Managing Learning Communities

Although all the colleges in the Learning Communities Demonstration had operated at least a few learning communities before the study began, new or strengthened administrative structures were required as the colleges expanded their programs for the demonstration. Running six or more learning communities per semester taught by as many as a dozen or more instructors, while enrolling several hundred students, requires a different level of management and administrative support than does running a handful of learning communities spread across many departments.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the colleges had a variety of prior experiences offering the particular learning community model that was to be evaluated in the demonstration. In most cases, colleges began with a pilot that was conducted during the semester prior to the start of the demonstration. During the pilot, they ran a small number of learning communities to try out the link, and over the course of the demonstration, increased the number of learning communities offered. For example, at Kingsborough Community College, four career-focused learning communities were run as a pilot in spring 2007. The same number was run during the first semester of the demonstration, and offerings grew over subsequent semesters to reach nine in the fourth semester of the demonstration. Similar patterns were evident at Houston Community College, Merced College, and Queensborough Community College. At Hillsborough Community College and The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), a similar number of learning communities was offered both before and during the demonstration, though at CCBC the Master Learner component had not previously been a consistent part of the model, as it had only been part of the learning communities that included developmental reading. (See Appendix Table A.1.)

The six colleges faced similar operational challenges posed by scaling up the number of linked courses, faculty, and students, but they were able to overcome these challenges with strong leadership and support for faculty. This chapter describes the operation and organization of learning community programs, with a particular focus on the role of the coordinator and other upper-level administrators; how the courses in the learning communities were organized and linked; and how the colleges handled faculty recruitment and support — all against the backdrop of the demands of scaling up.

The Role of the Learning Community Coordinator

Learning community coordinators were invaluable and central to the successful implementation of the demonstration. At each college, coordinators performed many tasks, including organizing or overseeing faculty development events (both on and off campus), recruiting students and faculty, and serving as a liaison to student services both to schedule classes and links and to coordinate study intake. Box 3.1 illustrates the range and type of responsibilities of the campus coordinators for one college (CCBC). These responsibilities were similar to those of coordinators across the colleges. Compensation for the majority of the coordinators was covered at least in part by a grant from the National Center for Postsecondary Research (NCPR).

Upper-level administrators recognized the critical roles that their coordinators played. One vice president said of the coordinator at his campus, "Throughout the project, [our coordinator] has been a keystone and has made it work. I really facilitated, and 'cheerled' the project." Another vice president said, "From all my years on grant projects, I've learned that it's the people who make the difference. [Our coordinator] is a poster child for that. From beginning to end she bettered our chances for success."

At CCBC, Houston, and Hillsborough, all the coordinators had worked at the college prior to assuming the role of learning community coordinator. At five of the learning community programs — CCBC, Hillsborough, Houston, Kingsborough, and Queensborough — coordinators reported directly to senior leadership within the Academic Affairs division at the college, whether they were faculty or not. At Merced, the office of the Vice President of Academic Affairs was in transition during much of the demonstration, so the program was overseen by senior leadership in Student Services. At CCBC and Hillsborough, where multiple campuses were participating in the demonstration, one coordinator for the entire system oversaw each of the campus coordinators. In the case of Houston, a multicampus site where each campus enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, the organizational structure was more decentralized, as each campus organized its own learning communities program with its own coordinator. At two campuses, the coordinator was a faculty member, and the third campus had a coordinating team consisting of a faculty member and a counselor.[1]

The coordinator's professional background and position at the college influenced the design and operations of the different programs as well as their evolution over time. At Queensborough and Kingsborough, for example, coordinators reported routinely calling absent students

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[1]The administration of the program at Southeast differed from Northline and Central, and so different styles and practices emerged. This model allowed for a greater degree of faculty autonomy and program customization, but also led to substantive differences among the campus programs.

Box 3.1

**Roles and Responsibilities of a
Learning Community Program Coordinator at
The Community College of Baltimore County**

- Oversee and review learning community (LC) budget of participating faculty members.

- Work with the steering committee to plan professional development activities and ensure LC program standards.

- Meet with the coordinators from the other campuses to discuss LC business, new marketing strategies, and continuing development of LC standards.

- Evaluate and standardize LC curriculum materials.

- Develop a variety of interdisciplinary LC options.

- Recruit new LC instructors and Master Learners.

- Plan professional development activities that include outreach to current and new faculty.

- Meet once a semester or by request with LC professors and Master Learners to discuss ways to enhance the program and individual communities.

- Mentor new faculty members and continue training for current LC faculty.

- Schedule and manage existing LCs.

- Develop and implement new LCs.

- Monitor enrollments of LCs for accuracy during summer and winter breaks, and notify records and registration of problems that occur.

- Communicate with counseling and advising department through weekly e-mail communications during registration periods, and attend one meeting per semester to introduce new LCs and promote existing ones.

- Distribute, collect, and evaluate midterm and final teacher evaluations.

SOURCE: Based on a document provided by The Community College of Baltimore County.

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at home, recommending tutoring and other academic supports to students as needed, and helping students find transportation to the college. These coordinators worked closely with faculty to learn about the needs of the students in the program.

In contrast, in programs where the coordinator was a current or former faculty member, working with faculty tended to be the most important priority. Leadership structures at Merced and Kingsborough illustrate this point. At Merced, the program had been formally coordinated by a faculty member who stepped down around the beginning of the demonstration and was replaced by a student affairs professional who was new to the college. Soon after, the Vice President of Instruction retired, and oversight of the program was passed to the Vice President of Student Services during the transition. Appropriately, the newly hired coordinator focused on enrolling students in the learning communities and recruiting enough faculty to teach in them as the program scaled up. However, this left a dearth of faculty leadership and created a difficult transition for Merced faculty. As one faculty member reminisced, "All we ever did was talk about teaching, teaching, teaching…. I think the teachers loved that feeling, but now it's become, 'How do we get these numbers [of students] and how do we fill these classes?'" In contrast, Kingsborough addressed this issue by supporting these functions in different roles: while the coordinator was a student affairs professional who dealt with issues of scheduling and student recruitment, a faculty leader worked with an academic affairs leader and department chairs to recruit faculty and train them.

These differences between faculty-led and student affairs-led programs display a range of program management styles and illustrate how faculty and students are likely to be served differently depending on program leadership. It also suggests that when staff from both student affairs and academic affairs team up, such as they did on one campus at Houston, both faculty's and students' needs tend to be well served.[2]

Importance of Strong Support from College Leadership

Across all the colleges — particularly at the outset of the demonstration — there was variation in how much direct support presidents, vice presidents, and deans provided for the learning community programs at their campuses. Strong support from college leadership and the prioritization of learning communities helped administrators and faculty operate the programs as designed.[3]

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[2]Prior research by MDRC and others points to the need for stronger collaborative ties between faculty and student affairs to help realize the full potential of programs and innovations like learning communities. See Smith and Williams (2007); Weissman et al. (2009).

[3]A recent MDRC report that examined the implementation of student support services programs in community colleges in California also found that programs were implemented more smoothly at colleges where the support of senior leadership for the programs was secured. See Weissman et al. (2009.)

Both Kingsborough and CCBC had a long history of running learning communities, and senior leaders at those sites were particularly strong supporters of the program.[4] In an interview, the president of Kingsborough talked with passion about the importance of learning communities for the population the college serves: "The students who come here don't have great high school experiences. They don't come from college backgrounds; many are the first in their families to attend college…. This is a commuter campus. In a commuter school you need to build community." Among other supports, Kingsborough leaders encouraged the expansion of the program by counting teaching in learning communities as service to the college in terms of credit toward tenure and promotion for faculty.

At CCBC, the senior leadership was also supportive of the learning communities. One example of this support is the college's five-year plan to improve student achievement and retention, which includes a proposal to expand learning communities. A vice president who had taught in learning communities for many years spoke of the value of taking classes together for the colleges' students: "All my experience has been that affiliation and identification take place because [the students] are together six hours a week, not three hours a week. I'm convinced that [a learning communities program] works and that it enriches learning."

At the other colleges in the demonstration, support for learning communities grew stronger over time. Hillsborough is one example of how scaling up the learning communities evolved into a central priority for senior leaders. As part of the Achieving the Dream initiative, the college vice presidents and campus presidents at Hillsborough identified learning communities as a strategy to improve student outcomes. The Achieving the Dream grant was used to organize a team to oversee a pilot of learning communities at the college's three campuses.[5] When the college analyzed outcome data for these students, it found that students in these classes appeared to be performing better than similar students who weren't participating in learning communities. These results, and further experience in the demonstration, gradually helped to garner more upper-level support for the expansion of this strategy at Hillsborough.

Across the colleges, leaders facilitated the distribution of the resources that are necessary to run learning communities, such as faculty stipends or release time, and helped build buy-in on the campus outside the program. Promotion of the learning communities was particularly important to encourage more faculty to get involved in the program (and encourage department

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[4]Both of these colleges already had administrative structures for learning communities in place, before they joined this demonstration. These structures were expanded and modified for the study.

[5]Achieving the Dream recommends that colleges implement the principles of institutional improvement through a five-step process. The first step that the initiative recommends is that a college's senior leadership, with support from the board of trustees and faculty leaders, commits to making the changes in policy and resource allocation necessary to improve student outcomes, and organizes a team to oversee the process. See Zachry (2008.)

chairs to support their faculty's work in learning communities), and raise awareness among student services staff that it was important to work with coordinators around issues such as student recruitment and scheduling.

Choosing the Links

One of the first decisions that colleges need to make when designing a learning community program is which and how many courses to link. In smaller programs, links tend to develop organically, when two or more faculty come together and decide they want to team up and form a learning community. This approach was the initial source of the learning communities at many of the demonstration colleges. But when a college is trying to scale up or strengthen its learning communities program, it might opt to expand particular links, based on a "theory of change," or at least an intentional plan, about what it believes will work best for its students.

In the Learning Communities Demonstration, it was necessary for all of the participating learning communities within each college to have the same "anchor" course. As described in Chapter 2, the anchor course was developmental English or reading at CCBC, Merced, and Hillsborough; developmental math at Houston and Queensborough; and, at Kingsborough, an "integrative seminar" that was linked with two courses within a particular major. Colleges were free to decide which and how many courses would be linked with the "anchor" course.

Learning Communities with Developmental Courses

Learning communities for developmental-level students are a relatively recent phenomenon. When learning communities began to appear in community colleges in the 1970s, they were typically offered only to honors students; the critical thinking that was believed to be encouraged by curricular integration and collaborative learning was considered appropriate only for high-level students. As discussed in Chapter 1, learning communities for academically underprepared students have become increasingly popular as community college leaders and practitioners look for new ways to support their students' learning. But these links create new questions: Does it make sense to link two developmental-level courses? Will linking with a college-level course cause students to flourish or flounder? Does it work to link a student success course with a developmental-level course?

Why the six sites chose the anchor and linked courses they did was in part a function of each college's past practice with learning communities, in part leaders' expectations about what would work best for students, and in part the availability of interested faculty pairs for those links. State policies on course prerequisites also influenced the choice of links. With the developmental-level anchor courses, the colleges in the study linked another developmental

course, a college-level course (usually the introductory course for an academic subject), or a student success course.

At Merced, some of the learning communities linked developmental English with another developmental course in reading or in math. Merced's model was driven by convictions on the part of the faculty about what content would be best supported by work in the developmental English course and vice versa. For example, links between English and reading allowed an integrated approach to teaching knowledge and skills that span both disciplines. One English faculty member described how she and her teaching partner were able to take advantage of the learning community structure by teaching a grammar concept that was difficult — verbs — in both the writing and reading classes, because the class had already grasped the writing concept of "illustration" (that is, using examples to explain an idea).

> They meet Tuesday and Thursday with [my teaching partner] and they meet every day with me. It was clear by Wednesday that they understood illustration. They had three days with me, they had two days with him, so I was able on Thursday and Friday to introduce verbs and have two extra days on that.… whereas if this was a stand-alone class, I wouldn't have been able to do that because I would have to give my attention to both the reading and the writing.

Other faculty at Merced believed that pairing a developmental English course with their introductory college-level course — in health, political science, or criminology — would support student work in a course that may otherwise have been beyond the students' skill levels in reading and writing.

CCBC chose to link the highest level of a required developmental English or reading class with a college-level course such as psychology or sociology, in part to give students the opportunity to take credit-bearing courses earlier rather than later, and to progress more quickly toward completing a degree or certificate. In contrast, Houston chose to link the lowest level of developmental math to encourage students to take this class earlier rather than later. Leaders at this college worried about students postponing developmental math, a prerequisite for many classes. Linking this course with the required student success course "forced" students to take math in the first or second semester rather than wait until the second year or beyond, and through the student success course they received the help they might need to succeed in math.

Linking with a Student Success Course

Student success courses are an increasingly popular strategy that community colleges are adopting to increase the number of students who complete courses, persist, and earn a certificate or degree. For this reason, including a student success course in a link is often considered a natural next step toward supporting work in developmental-level courses, to help academically underprepared students learn good study habits and how to navigate postsecondary education suc-

cessfully. All of the learning communities at Hillsborough and Houston included a student suc-cess course; at Hillsborough, the course was linked with developmental reading, and at Houston, the course was linked with developmental math. In addition, one learning community each semester at Merced included a student success course. As one faculty member at Houston put it,

> …if you have math and another course like the 1270 [student success] course that is just backing, supporting the students with study skills and integrating these assignments and keeping them working together, I think that's a really good model for that course.

At both CCBC and Kingsborough, a component of the learning community model had similar goals to those of a traditional student success course, though with distinct practices to accommodate the different levels of the students in the learning communities. At CCBC, a Mas-ter Learner class was added to links between a developmental English or reading course and a college-level course. Students in learning communities were exempt from taking CCBC's re-quired student success course because the Master Learner curriculum was very similar to that offered in the student success course. The class met for one hour a week and was often taught by the same instructor who taught the developmental English course in the link.

At Kingsborough, the integrative seminar covered college success strategies that are appropriate for students who have passed through their developmental requirements and chosen a major. The class met for two hours a week and was taught jointly by two instructors, one who focused generally on strategies such as research, critical thinking, exploring a career path, and synthesizing material from the other two courses with regard to the work world, and the other focusing on grammar and writing, using assignments from the two college-level courses.

Filling the Learning Communities

All of the colleges found that, at least in the first semester or two, filling the linked courses with students was somewhat harder than they had anticipated. This difficulty generally arose for one of two reasons: the links as initially designed did not meet students' course needs, scheduling constraints, or interests; or students were simply not informed about the new learn-ing communities.

Two colleges changed their links one or two semesters into the demonstration because of problems filling them. Both Kingsborough and Queensborough experienced low enrollment rates during the first semester of the demonstration as a result of offering learning communities that were not well aligned with students' interests or needs. At Queensborough, the link was initially between developmental math and either developmental- or college-level English. Program ad-ministrators found that not enough students were willing to devote the majority of their schedule to developmental courses, as would be necessary when enrolling in the link between develop-

mental math and developmental English. In the second semester of the demonstration, the learning communities linked developmental math with a college-level class, such as sociology, speech, or business. This opportunity to enroll in a college-level class was much more popular among students, and there was little trouble filling the learning communities from that point on.

At Kingsborough, the learning communities were offered for students in a particular major, who were primarily interested in taking courses that were required for that major. However, for several of the majors, the initial links had been between a required course and a course that was "highly recommended" — but not required — by the department. When first planning these links, administrators had thought that the highly recommended courses offered students flexibility and better transfer options. Also, the faculty felt that offering these courses in a learning community would highlight the interdisciplinary value of the course. As it turned out, students failed to enroll in the learning communities at the expected levels, and after reviewing the past and current enrollment patterns for these courses and speaking with students about their perceptions, the administrators changed the links to two required courses for the major. This strategy paid off as enrollment improved.

Another reason that students may not have enrolled in learning communities during the early phases of the demonstration was that they were simply unaware of the opportunity to take their courses this way or what the potential benefits were for doing so. Program coordinators, with support from the demonstration, began to work with counselors and other student services staff to perform better outreach, attract more students, and steer eligible students appropriately. In addition, the colleges in the demonstration spoke with two marketing consultants to get advice about targeting their student recruitment and garnering buy-in among student services staff. CCBC was one of the colleges that took advantage of this opportunity, following the advice of the consultants to create and modify strategies for outreach to both students and staff, through creative flyers, posters, and information packets. At all but one of the colleges in the demonstration, the total number of students who eventually enrolled in learning communities exceeded the target, confirming the usefulness of these strategies.

Scheduling the Links

Most of the learning communities in the demonstration combined two courses that were scheduled back-to-back — often called "block scheduling" — so that students could travel as a cohort from one class to the next. Some colleges tried to schedule these courses in classrooms that were close to each other to further enhance the development of stronger relationships among students. But block scheduling was a logistical challenge for several of the colleges, es-

pecially at the beginning of the demonstration.[6] At Queensborough, block scheduling was not prioritized initially and the college experienced a number of registration challenges. The coordinator learned quickly that blocks had to occur at certain times or classes would not fill. A similar problem was encountered at Hillsborough. One administrator pointed out, "The 5:30 student is not the same as the 4:00 student, so we're not going to put a link that starts at 4:00, the next one at 5:30. It's a 5:30 and then a 6:45. Those are the night people. They get off from work during the day…and then you have morning and morning. You don't have it morning and then at 1:00." Hillsborough began to schedule learning communities in morning and afternoon blocks, which led to increased enrollment. By the end of the second or third semester, most of the colleges had worked out the "kinks" in scheduling learning communities so that most were block scheduled and fully enrolled.

Which courses to link and how many courses to put in the link is both an art and a science. However, links of all kinds are possible as long as they include courses that students want and need to take, and as long as there are faculty who are interested and qualified to teach them. The latter is the topic for the next section.

Recruiting and Supporting Faculty

Recruiting faculty to teach the growing number of learning communities was a challenge for most of the colleges. Other than Kingsborough, none of the colleges had a well-developed strategy for communicating with faculty who had never taught in a learning community, disseminating information about what was involved in teaching in one, and training faculty once they decided to participate in the program. At Kingsborough, CCBC, and Merced, faculty members with previous learning community teaching experience who were interested in seeing the programs grow were initially instrumental in recruiting their colleagues to the program. At Queensborough and Hillsborough, department chairs were responsible for recruiting faculty to teach in the learning communities, which required coordination with the program coordinator. Later at Merced, recruitment was left to the program coordinator, who was a student affairs professional and may not have been in the best position to identify willing faculty, much less assign them to classes, pair them up with another instructor, or encourage them to participate in professional development activities. Certain links proved harder to staff than others. For example,

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[6]The logistical challenge was twofold. Scheduling courses from different disciplines in adjacent time slots and in the same room (or at least a nearby room) required an unusual amount of coordination and communication with student services. This coordination — and, sometimes, technical sleight-of-hand — was also required to link the courses in the registration system (colleges in the demonstration used Banner, PeopleSoft, and DataTel software applications) such that students were required to enroll in all of the courses, and could not drop only one.

Houston and Queensborough had to work hard to recruit math faculty, who were not easily convinced that pairing courses would not undermine the mathematics content within the link.

Added to this difficulty was the need to continuously recruit new faculty to fill vacancies as others left the program. Most of the colleges experienced considerable turnover among faculty during the first few semesters of the demonstration. On average, colleges recruited seven new faculty members each semester that the program operated — growth driven in part by turnover and in part by the addition of new learning communities. Kingsborough experienced the largest single-semester expansion, adding 13 new faculty members in the fourth semester.

The following section uses the Kingsborough experience to demonstrate how a college with committed leadership, a strong team, and a long history of learning communities went about recruiting and supporting faculty to staff its growing learning communities program.

Faculty Recruitment at Kingsborough

Some of the faculty who agreed to teach in Kingsborough's career-focused learning communities did so enthusiastically, particularly if they had enjoyed teaching in the college's earlier learning community initiatives. However, in order to expand the program, administrators needed to identify faculty who had never taught in learning communities from the departments that were involved in the career-focused learning communities.[7] The academic affairs administrator with lead responsibility for planning the program at Kingsborough worked with the faculty coordinator — a faculty member with years of experience teaching in learning communities, who had an official training role — to recruit faculty at the college.

First, the two went directly to the chair of the department in which the major for specific learning communities belonged, to identify faculty members who were interested and seemed suitable for teaching in the learning community. In an interview, the faculty coordinator explained that interested faculty "should be integrative and have innovative views about teaching." The academic affairs administrator added, "I don't want folks there [in that department] who are unhappy. I talk to the chairs and say that I want people [faculty] who have a commitment." Another administrator identified a helpful strategy, which was for the college to ask all new candidates who were interested in teaching at Kingsborough about their openness to teaching in learning communities.

Once an interested instructor was identified, the faculty coordinator presented a contract to the instructor that detailed the expectations and supports for teaching in a learning communi-

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[7]The departments that were involved in career-focused learning communities were business, accounting, allied health, mental health, early childhood education, tourism and hospitality, and liberal arts.

ty at Kingsborough.[8] The "Learning Community Agreement," designed by the faculty coordina-
tor, is candid and clear about the reality of teaching in a learning community. For example, it
states that, "While most faculty have enjoyed the opportunities that linking offers — to experi-
ment with new pedagogies, collaborate with colleagues, and get to know their students better —
it is not for everyone."

While this process may appear to be smooth, when asked about challenges, the lead
academic affairs administrator at Kingsborough described what could have been the experience
of recruiting faculty at any of the colleges: "It has been a process of trial and error to match up
the right classes and the right links and the right faculty to teach those links." A chair of one of
the departments with faculty involved in the learning communities said, "It's hard to get faculty
involved. There are financial incentives, but it's not anywhere near the effort faculty show. Es-
pecially with the older faculty who have their ways and traditions, it's very difficult to get them
to participate." Financial compensation, as well as the faculty development necessary to train
faculty to teach in learning communities, were used as incentives by all six colleges to motivate
faculty to try teaching in learning communities, and are described next.

Supporting Learning Community Faculty

Support for learning community faculty at each college was provided in two major
ways: faculty development to teach or refresh learning community practices such as curricular
integration, and compensation in one form or another for the extra time and effort required to
plan and teach in a learning community. Each of the colleges offered a version of these sup-
ports, and learning community faculty took advantage of them in a variety of ways.

Professional Development

Program coordinators recognized that faculty, particularly those who were new to learn-
ing communities, needed training and orientation to guide them in developing their learning
communities and related practices. The opportunity to participate in faculty development was
considered a benefit by faculty who were excited about learning new instructional practices that
could take advantage of the learning community structure: many of the faculty pairs who began
to experiment with cross-curricular instruction attributed their growing interest and skills to the
professional development opportunities afforded them by participating in the demonstration.

Professional development was an integral part of the program at Kingsborough and
CCBC before the demonstration began — but for the most part, the colleges needed both tech-

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[8]After learning about this agreement, several other colleges in the demonstration adopted the practice of
having their faculty sign a "contract" indicating that they understood the responsibilities of teaching in a learn-
ing community.

nical assistance and resources to implement professional development activities. In response, NCPR offered a variety of supports to the colleges to assist with professional development for both new and continuing faculty. Opportunities ranged from teams participating in demonstration-wide, off-site training events to college-specific "home-grown" events led by experienced faculty members. All six colleges received at least one visit from consultants who worked with faculty on curricular integration and other learning community practices.[9] In addition, program leaders from each college participated in annual meetings facilitated by NCPR, designed in part to give them the chance to share promising strategies, such as how to recruit and support learning community faculty.

All six colleges sent faculty teams to four days of training offered by the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities at the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College; five colleges attended in the summer of 2007, and the sixth college attended in 2008.[10] This was the first time that many faculty were systematically exposed to the expectations for teaching and learning in learning communities and how they differ from stand-alone classes. As a student success course instructor in the learning communities program at Merced noted afterwards:

> We went to the Evergreen and that's where I really got a sense of what true integration is…. Obviously you still have to focus on student learning outcomes, but there are certain things that actually blend and they can go from one class that goes to another, seamless. Like in guidance, [we do] scholarship searches, which seamlessly go with how to write a scholarship essay. In guidance, [we have students] applying to a university and preparing personal statements in English courses. And these are all things students should know.

Kingsborough's long history of running learning communities had resulted in the creation and financing of staff positions to design and implement a formal professional developmental program for learning community instruction. A team of faculty leaders each received three hours of reassigned time to run faculty development for one of Kingsborough's types of learning communities; one "faculty coordinator" was assigned to the career-focused learning communities and conducted a six-week training module for faculty in advance of the semester, including exercises for planning integrative assignments and syllabi. In addition to organizing internal training sessions, the team ran the college's two-day summer institute, which is at-

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[9]The faculty survey shows that about 50 percent of learning community faculty participated in some kind of professional development at least two times each term, although these events were not necessarily related to the demonstration or to learning communities.

[10]The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College is renowned for its training on learning community theory and practice. Experts at the Washington Center provided all of the colleges with technical assistance to support their programs.

tended by interested practitioners around the country, including faculty teams from Hillsborough and Queensborough during the demonstration.

Other colleges received at least one visit from the leaders of the Washington Center, who observed learning community classrooms at CCBC, for example, and conducted a workshop for more than 30 faculty teaching in learning communities from all three of CCBC's campuses: Essex, Catonsville, and Dundalk. Faculty at Houston and Queensborough were also given the opportunity to participate in workshops led by these consultants, on subjects such as faculty collaboration, planning integrated assignments, and active learning instructional strategies. For Houston in particular, this was an important step at the beginning of the demonstration, when both faculty and college leaders were still developing their ideas about what they wanted the learning communities to look like.

Compensation

Teaching in learning communities requires more time and effort than a typical, stand-alone class. Teaching partners are expected to plan together in advance of the semester and to coordinate with each other throughout the semester. To compensate faculty for this extra work, the learning community programs at each of the colleges offered their faculty members additional stipends and release time.

Kingsborough's compensation system represents one of the more structured and generous approaches to compensating faculty. As laid out in the agreement that faculty sign, faculty who are linking their courses for the first time are paid for 25 hours to support time for planning and collaboration. For each semester of teaching, all full-time faculty also receive one hour of release time a week. Slightly different arrangements are made for part-time faculty and are set up to provide incentives to encourage part-timers to continue teaching in learning communities each semester. Other colleges in the study offered faculty stipends of between $200 and $1,000 for each semester they taught in the learning communities. In some cases the stipend was combined with release time for developing the learning community or it was based on the thoroughness of revisions to course syllabi.[11] Some faculty members emphasized the important role that paid leave time played in their ability to plan and implement learning communities at their schools.[12]

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[11]Table 2.4 in Weissman et al. (2009) presents various faculty compensation structures for several other community college learning community programs.

[12]In addition, a previous MDRC report found that the colleges' support of faculty through paid leave time played an important role in the implementation of interventions designed to improve outcomes for students in developmental education (Zachry, 2008).

Conclusions

Although the six colleges each had a different starting point, they faced similar challenges around setting up the administrative and management systems needed to scale up and operate the learning community programs, cultivating the needed support from college leadership, settling on appropriate links, and attracting both faculty and students to the learning communities. The solutions they used to overcome these challenges varied, and some were more successful than others, but — with time — all six colleges made substantial progress in the first year in overcoming earlier difficulties.

- **A paid coordinator and committed leaders were essential to managing and scaling up learning communities.**

Each site received a grant from the demonstration funds to support a coordinator position filled by a faculty member or other staff person to oversee all project activities. The coordinators — some from the academic and others from the student services side of the college — played indispensable roles, including recruiting faculty, organizing faculty development events, working with registration staff to enroll students in the learning communities, and taking on a host of other responsibilities. In addition to enlisting the services of the coordinators, colleges learned that clear and visible commitment and support from top leaders in the college can "make or break" an effort to scale up learning communities. Strong examples of visionary leaders for learning communities were not always present at the outset, but with time this support emerged at all six sites.

- **Recruiting and supporting enough motivated faculty was an ongoing challenge at most colleges.**

Prior to the demonstration, most of the colleges had operated only a few learning communities of the kind required by the study. As a result, they had to scale up rather quickly as the demonstration got under way, doubling or sometimes tripling the number of learning communities they offered. To do so meant that they had to recruit faculty who might not otherwise have volunteered to teach in a learning community. Coordinators learned to use many strategies to motivate and support faculty, including providing incentives such as stipends and access to training, clearly communicating expectations about what it meant to teach in a learning community, and offering ongoing support to help instructors learn how to collaborate and teach integrated material.

- **Choosing which courses to link was sometimes difficult initially, but leaders learned how to make strategic decisions to both meet student needs and attract enough students to fill the learning communities.**

Colleges that seek to expand and strengthen their learning communities need to make sure not only that there are enough trained and enthusiastic faculty to teach the new linked courses, but also that there are enough students to fill them. The colleges in the demonstration became much more adept at this as time went on. Program coordinators learned to link courses strategically to maximize enrollment by analyzing past trends in enrollment patterns and considering factors such as time of day and student course preferences. They also learned that actively marketing learning communities through the use of flyers, brochures, and videos designed to appeal to students helped them meet their enrollment goals.

Chapter 4

Teaching and Learning in Learning Communities

Most learning community advocates believe that there is much more to learning communities than simply organizing student cohorts so that groups of students take classes together and get to know each other better. Also at the core of the theory of change behind learning communities is the concept of curricular integration and a pedagogy that transforms instruction from passive, individual learning to active, collaborative learning. As Tinto puts it:

> [Learning communities] change the manner in which students experience the curriculum and the way they are taught. Faculty have reorganized their syllabi and their classrooms to promote shared, collaborative learning experiences among students across the linked classrooms. This form of classroom organization requires students to work together and to become active, indeed responsible, for the learning of both group and classroom peers.[1]

Tinto acknowledges that not *all* learning communities change the way learning occurs. Furthermore, practices that encourage collaborative learning can and do exist in classrooms outside as well as inside of learning communities. And yet, the *structure* of learning communities — back-to-back scheduling of two classes that share the same cohort of students — is a critical *facilitating* factor that may make such teaching more likely and more effective. A key goal of the demonstration was to foster a different approach to teaching that could take advantage of this structure.

In Chapter 2, a detailed discussion of the core elements of learning communities highlights how teaching and learning are expected to be different in learning communities. Put simply, if one were to walk into a class that is linked in a learning community, one would expect to see or hear different behaviors, on the part of both the teacher and the students. The teacher might make a few references to the other class in the link when giving a lecture or working with an individual student. Students in a whole-class discussion might debate a connection they see between their math class and their sociology class. The observer might notice that students are seated at small tables rather than theater-style seating and that they are working on a group project. If the observer picked up the syllabus from the class, she might see mention of an overarching theme that connects the two courses or a description of an assignment that is required in both classes. Or there may even be a single syllabus for both courses in the link.

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[1]Tinto (2008).

This chapter explores the challenges and strategies observed in all six colleges as they tried to bring more of these practices into their learning communities to transform the ways in which teaching and learning take place in the classroom. An important part of that story, however, was that, especially at the start of the demonstration, college leaders, coordinators, and faculty each had their *own* views about how or even whether teaching *should* change in learning communities. While some saw integrative teaching practices as a key goal, others were more focused on creating a sense of community and belonging for students. Most striking was the significant variation in how much emphasis this issue was given within each college, particularly among faculty.

To describe the instructional practices in use by the colleges, how much those practices varied, and how they changed over the course of the demonstration, the research team drew data primarily from on-site interviews with the coordinator, faculty, and students, as well as from a few brief, informal classroom observations. The experiences and perceptions collected from these interviews were not representative of all students and faculty. To supplement these qualitative data, selected results from a survey of faculty who were teaching in learning communities during the demonstration period are also reported.[2]

Finally, findings from an examination of syllabi that were collected from the learning communities in three colleges (Hillsborough Community College, Merced College, and Queensborough Community College) are reported.[3] An explanation of how the syllabi were rated appears in Appendix B and is summarized briefly here. The research team examined each syllabus to note evidence of integrative practices and pedagogy that stressed active and collaborative learning. Evidence included mention of overarching themes, the term "learning communities," mention of the other class, joint assignments or readings, and so on. Each reference was assigned a single point, and if both instructors in a learning community earned a point for the same practice, they were awarded a bonus point. Syllabi that showed more examples of these practices were given high ratings, and syllabi that exhibited fewer such practices were given lower ratings. Selected results from this analysis are reported throughout this chapter; the full results, as well as a complete list of indicators, appear in Appendix Table B.1.

Readers should also interpret these findings with caution. Some syllabi may not accurately reflect actual practice. For example, a learning community instructor who used a number of integrative practices may not have gotten around to changing the syllabus, and a faculty member who used few such practices may have put together a syllabus that showed more

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[2]As of fall 2009, 162 learning community instructors across all six sites had responded to the survey. The results for select questions are given in Appendix Table A.2.

[3]Results from the analysis of the syllabi for the three remaining colleges are not yet complete and will be included in later reports.

practices than he or she actually used. Taken as a whole, however, this analysis is intended to provide another source of evidence that is particularly valuable when rigorous and comprehensive classroom observations were not an option.

Faculty Collaboration

The discussion in this chapter begins with the "prerequisite" for integrated practices: collaboration between faculty teaching pairs. If two faculty members who are paired up to teach in a learning community never or rarely meet to discuss how they plan to make those cross-disciplinary connections, then it is unlikely that the connections will be made at all. If they don't meet regularly during the semester to check in with each other, the plans they do make to connect their courses may fall apart. The extent to which faculty pairs collaborated evolved and generally increased over the course of the demonstration.

Instructors and faculty at postsecondary institutions tend to do their jobs mostly alone. They may meet on occasion with other faculty at department meetings, faculty senate gatherings, or union meetings. They may even discuss curriculum, assessment, or pedagogy with other faculty. But doing so is not normally an essential or compensated part of their work.

In contrast, instructors in a learning community are not only expected to talk to each other, they are expected to meet often and at length to plan their learning community courses. Experienced faculty often spend many hours either before or during the semester collaborating on such decisions such as:[4]

- Selecting an engaging and relevant theme and a name for their learning community, and ensuring that the name is displayed on course materials

- Coming up with shared grading system, attendance, or class participation policies

- Articulating common course goals and learning objectives

- Creating joint projects and assignments to encourage students to use content from both classes and think critically about their connections

- Determining whether or how much time each teacher should spend in the other's classroom

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[4]Faculty pairs in learning communities are also expected to collaborate on noncurricular matters such as checking in with each other about individual student progress. This topic is addressed in Chapter 5.

The survey of faculty who had taught in learning communities showed that, by the third semester into the study, about 60 percent of those who responded reported that they met at least twice each term to discuss curriculum with other instructors.[5] About half of the respondents agreed with the statement that "collaboration with other faculty on syllabi or course material was very important." However, according to interviews conducted with faculty at each college, whether and how often faculty pairs met varied greatly, both within and across colleges. At the beginning of the demonstration, faculty collaboration tended to be minimal. In fact, a few pairs seemed to know little more than the name of their partner. But by the end of the first year, most instructors reported at least some form of communication with their partners.

Some of this variation was related to the challenge of scaling up the program relatively rapidly and the need to recruit faculty who had never taught in a learning community or in the specific links to be included in the program. Such faculty typically had limited knowledge of what it meant to teach in a learning community, including the expectation that they would need to meet with their partner. Others were recruited, or matched with their faculty partner, at the last minute, leaving no time to plan even if this expectation was communicated. For these faculty and others who may have felt pressed into service by their department chairs or other leaders, enthusiasm for teaching in the learning community was not particularly strong — at least initially. To make matters even more challenging, some novice faculty were paired with others as inexperienced as themselves in teaching learning communities. Finally, all six sites relied on part-time instructors (adjunct faculty) to teach the learning communities despite their relatively marginal connections with the college. The faculty survey indicates that about 42 percent of all the learning community instructors across all six colleges were adjuncts. Many adjuncts work or teach elsewhere and are only on campus during the time they are teaching. Even though many were as enthusiastic about the learning communities as full-time faculty, adjuncts (and their teaching partners) were often at a disadvantage when it came to collaboration because their time on campus was much more limited.

Some colleges already had access to a relatively large number of experienced, motivated faculty who were used to collaborating in pairs. The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), Kingsborough Community College, and Merced College had operated a relatively large number of learning communities prior to joining the demonstration, and therefore could take advantage of veteran learning community faculty and understood the expectations for collaboration. Kingsborough, for example, had run dozens of learning communities through its Opening Doors program for first-semester freshmen for several years before joining

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[5]This question on the survey did not ask faculty to distinguish between faculty in general and their learning community partner in particular. For this reason, it is likely that some of the reported meetings were with faculty other than the partner.

the demonstration.[6] Some of the faculty who were recruited to teach in the new career-focused learning communities had already taught in Opening Doors, or if they hadn't, they may have known other instructors who had. To help any faculty who were new to learning communities, Kingsborough's paid faculty coordinator was available to meet regularly with pairs or individuals to review their plans and syllabus.

Kingsborough's approach to promoting faculty collaboration was among the most structured and well developed. Faculty pairs typically met during the six-week module prior to the start of the semester to come up with common learning objectives and to align their syllabi. If this process was done properly upfront, faculty found that they needed only quick "check-ups" throughout the semester to make sure everything was running smoothly. The most seasoned learning community faculty pairs were so accustomed to teaching in this way that they found they did not need to meet as often as the less experienced faculty.

Merced also had a relatively long history of operating learning communities and an established "culture of collaboration." Most instructors were accustomed to working as a pair to plan, create joint assignments, and coordinate course calendars, and faculty who were getting involved with learning communities for the first time often learned about the practices expected of them from these veterans. Like Kingsborough faculty, Merced instructors invested time before the semester to plan and then needed to only "tweak" their course during the semester. Faculty pairs met at different times depending on personal preference, schedules, and experience, but all met at least once before the semester began to synchronize their syllabi. One seasoned faculty pair said that they would get together for one weekend of intense planning before the semester started, and then needed to meet only once or twice during the semester.

However, the overall trend at Merced is somewhat surprising given the relatively high level of faculty experience with learning communities. Learning communities had strong support among faculty before the demonstration began, and the program featured strong faculty collaboration, both between and across pairs, as well as a strong emphasis on integration and a tradition of professional community among faculty who taught in learning communities. This professional community, unfortunately, began to decline shortly before the beginning of the demonstration as some veteran learning community faculty relinquished leadership roles in order to devote more time to other college initiatives, funding for professional development was diminished, and the college as a whole suffered significant funding cuts and administrative turnover. Although some pairs continued to function very well together, there was less structure for newer pairs to develop their learning communities, and this may have led to uncertainty

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[6]Opening Doors was MDRC's multisite demonstration to evaluate programs aimed at improving student achievement in community colleges. See Scrivener et al. (2008) for details on the program at Kingsborough.

about the need to spend time with each other to plan. On the whole, however, Merced faculty collaborated at a level that was among the highest in the demonstration.

As coordinators in the six colleges clarified their expectations that faculty pairs must get together and plan their learning communities, including requiring joint assignments and other activities, faculty pairs collaborated more. For example, during the first two semesters at Hillsborough Community College, the expectation that learning community faculty would offer an integrated curriculum may not have been clearly communicated, and the need for pairs to plan together was therefore less obvious. The result was that most faculty pairs spent little, if any, time collaborating with each other, which is reflected in the syllabi for the learning communities. In the first semester, only three points were awarded for syllabi that included integrated/shared assignments; by the third semester, the number grew to nine points (see Appendix Table B.1).

Even in sites with considerable experience running learning communities, variation in the amount of time that faculty pairs spent coordinating their courses was quite evident. At CCBC, for example, some instructors said that they knew they *should* be planning together — the college's philosophy of learning communities and its emphasis on integrated learning and curricular coherence are stated clearly on the college Web site — but had difficulty finding time to meet with their partner. As the year progressed, however, program leaders clarified their expectations and began to require that faculty submit their syllabi for approval before receiving their stipends, a step taken to encourage more and better faculty collaboration.

Some faculty actively resisted collaborating because they did not fully embrace the idea of a learning community, at least initially. Math instructors at Queensborough Community College, for example, initially worried that if they did not focus exclusively on their own curriculum, more students would fail the math class, and failure rates were already alarmingly high. But over time some of this resistance began to fade as faculty warmed to the idea. This trend can be seen in the number of points awarded for referencing the theme of the learning community (Appendix Table B.1). In the first semester, no syllabi used by Queensborough faculty included mention of any themes, nor were themes reflected in assignments; by the fourth semester, a theme was mentioned seven times and reflected in assignments five times. On the whole, however, Queensborough faculty collaborated at a relatively low level compared with Kingsborough and Merced.

This gradual increase in collaboration at Queensborough exemplified the trend that was observed throughout the demonstration: At the start, during the rapid ramping up of the program, collaboration between faculty pairs tended to be somewhat weak. But by the end of the first year, even some of the most resistant faculty began to make time for closer collaboration with their partners and with other learning community faculty. As a long-time learning commu-

nity instructor from Merced put it, "I really think there's a learning curve with learning communities and you really have to do the same learning community with the same partner a couple of semesters — at least two semesters, but hopefully more to really get it down."

Moving Toward Curricular Integration

As faculty collaboration increased, more pairs began to adopt integrative practices, such as coordinating their course calendars so that similar topics were taught in the same week, and creating joint assignments. But even after one year of operation, the learning curve described by the Merced instructor above was still very much in evidence in all six colleges. Teaching an integrated curriculum is deeply challenging in any circumstance; in the context of scaling up a large program in a short period of time, changing pedagogical approaches in classrooms was particularly daunting.

At all six colleges, the coordinators were preoccupied at the beginning of the study with scheduling the links, training staff in study intake procedures such as random assignment, and marketing and filling the learning communities. Changing teaching strategies and pedagogy was given relatively low priority at first — particularly in colleges that were essentially new to learning communities and in learning communities taught by less experienced faculty. It was only after the programs began to stabilize that leaders' and faculty's attention could turn in earnest to this component, and most of the colleges began taking more steps to encourage faculty to use integrative practices.

The syllabi from the three colleges suggest that integrative practices increased at both Hillsborough and Queensborough, while at Merced, references to integrative practices declined slightly. References included mention of team teaching, synchronized assignments, integrative/shared assignments, assignments and reading that reflect the theme, and shared grading. The total number of references to integrative practices across all syllabi sets at Hillsborough increased from just 3 in the first semester to 33 in the third semester. At Queensborough, the number of practices also increased, from 2 in the first semester to 15 in the third semester. The number of integrative practices shown in the syllabi from Merced declined from 57 in the first semester to 45 in the third semester.

Across the six colleges, the general trend toward increased curricular integration can be understood as a reflection of increasing clarity around and commitment to the use of integrative practices; increasing participation of faculty in professional development opportunities provided by the college, often with support from demonstration funding and resources; and, in some cases, the use of incentives to further encourage faculty to adopt these practices. The colleges' experiences using specific practices that are associated with curricular integration are discussed in more detail below.

Combining Calendars, Aligning Topics, and Synchronizing Reading Lists

Synchronizing topics and readings so that materials in both courses in the link were mutually reinforced was one of the easier changes in teaching strategies that faculty could undertake, partly because it could be done without much direct contact between partners. As can be seen in Appendix Table B.1, by the third semester of the colleges' participation in the demonstration, 10 points were awarded to syllabi at Hillsborough for referencing synchronized topics and readings, 9 points were given to Merced, and 5 points were given to Queensborough.

Seasoned faculty at Merced routinely prepared joint assignments and "combined assignment calendars" each semester — and at least one pair created a fully integrated, single syllabus for the two courses. "We have a combined syllabus, but we also have a combined assignment calendar so the students are seeing the connection between the two classes on a piece of paper," the English faculty member said. "We do this well in advance so our assignments often complement each other." But one veteran learning community instructor cautioned new faculty against trying to do too much too fast: "The calendar is not something I would recommend for a first-year learning community. But after you've taught it a while, and you know kind of what your plan is going to be … all the assignments are on there week by week."

The story of one learning community at Hillsborough underscores the need for faculty pairs to spend time developing an integrated curriculum over several semesters. Two instructors began teaching in a learning community — a link between a developmental reading course and a student success course, like all learning communities in the demonstration at Hillsborough — with little attempt to link their syllabi or align topics. In the fall of 2007 the same group of students enrolled in their two courses, but it was as if these courses were stand-alones. In the following semester, one of the instructors teamed up with another partner, and the new pair began to collaborate in earnest. They met to combine their calendars, come up with a theme, and introduce more interactive instruction in their classes. By the third semester, the pair had completely merged their curriculum so that there was a single syllabus for the learning community with shared textbooks, fully integrated assignments, and many collaborative learning opportunities.

More typically, faculty tried to find informal ways to link their syllabus with that of their partner without spending a great deal of time actually meeting with the partner. For instance, they might try to schedule a certain lecture to occur the same week that the other instructor is teaching a related topic. At Houston, for example, one faculty member described how she thumbed through the textbook for the math course looking for ways she could align her lessons in the student success course with the math lessons.

Using Overarching Themes to Engage and Contextualize

Within one or two semesters, most of the coordinators had begun to promote the use of themes as a way to communicate the connection between the two courses. During the first semester, among the colleges whose syllabi were reviewed, themes were evident only at Merced. By the third semester, references to themes occurred 4 times in learning community syllabi at Hillsborough, 5 at Queensborough, and 16 at Merced.

Themes for learning communities are chosen intentionally to attract students' attention, often by using a problem or experience that is common to many. One instructor at Hillsborough explained that she chose her theme "because it's something that [the students] can see locally, that affects them." Examples of themed learning communities in several of the colleges are:

- "Money Talks and Numbers Speak," a math course linked with a speech communication course (Queensborough)

- "The Man Who Counted: A Collection of Mathematical Adventures," a math course linked with English composition (Queensborough)

- "Write About Life, Learn How to Live," a developmental English course linked with health (Merced)

- "Fast Food Nation," a developmental English course linked with fitness (CCBC)

- A theme on censorship, linking developmental reading with a student success course (Hillsborough)

- A theme on immigration and diversity, linking developmental English with a student success course (Hillsborough)

Although many theme names were creative and compelling, only a handful of faculty took the next logical step: working the theme into the curriculum itself, in lectures, readings, or assignments. For this reason, students were often unaware that their learning community had a theme. But there were some notable exceptions.

For example, "Treating Families with HIV," selected as a theme for the allied health link at Kingsborough, was infused into nearly everything the students learned and worked on in their link. One faculty member explained,

> We design connections and that's really important. We echo from one course to another. If one instructor talks about the immune system and HIV, then the other instructor talks about childhood stuff related to HIV. We each have a timetable

of what [the] other is teaching. We communicate. This is a *big* feature. We have face-to-face meetings every two weeks and e-mail and phone in between.

Similarly, a learning community in Merced that linked developmental math and English was themed around "ethno-mathematics" — the idea that different ethnicities have different relationships with numbers. Students read and wrote about different ways in which cultures approach numbers, and in the process, they learned mathematical concepts and formulas. As one math faculty member described it, "We're actually asking them to read something about Mayan mathematics — make a connection between writing about Mayan mathematics and the math class that they're taking — to change their relationship essentially to the core content."

Joint Assignments and Project-Based Learning

By the end of the first year of the demonstration, most colleges were encouraging faculty to experiment with joint assignments — homework or in-class work that required students to draw on material from both classes in the link.

For example, the coordinator at Queensborough encouraged faculty to develop several short-term joint assignments each semester (although these did not always show up in syllabi). In one learning community that linked Basic Math with Business Organization and Management, the students had to analyze how the price for a barrel of oil relates to its supply and demand. Faculty were also expected to develop at least two longer-term joint assignments. The following description of two linked, joint assignments comes from a sociology professor at Queensborough:

> **Assignment 1:** The [math professor] and I took our students to the computer lab in the library. The [math] professor started off the class doing a review of the three types of graphs they were learning: scatter plots, bar graphs, and pie charts. I then put up [on] the smart board an Excel spreadsheet of the results of a social [science] survey I carried out with them the first day of class. We went over the responses from the survey. Then I showed the students how to organize the data in Excel, how to graph the three types of graphs, how to label the graphs, and how to calculate the percentages for the pie chart. The students then had to pick three variables and…create a scatter plot or a bar graph or a pie chart. They were then required to write a brief paragraph summarizing the results as depicted in the graphs.
>
> **Assignment 2:** A visit to the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side…. The math professor and I first collected U.S. census data showing the inflow of immigrants from the mid-nineteenth century until late in the twentieth century. For his part of the assignment, the students had to calculate the mode, mean, and median — topics covered in both of our classes — of European and Chinese immigrants from 1871 to 1930, the years of focus at the Tenement Museum. For me, the students took "field notes" as sociologists do when visiting a social

space, talking with people and observing how they live.… The students…have to write up their field notes into a coherent piece of writing in paragraph form. In it they have to discuss what they learned and found interesting about the immigrant experience in the Lower East Side.

Every learning community at Houston included at least one joint assignment, but some pairs voluntarily included more. One instructor said that there were "six assignments where information from GUST [college success courses] is delivered in math, and information from math is delivered in GUST — just a little bit, but not too much." Although Houston faculty rarely met formally to plan integration, many faculty came up with other ways to link the material on their own using techniques such as referring to the other class during a lecture or asking students to reflect on the ways in which the content in the two classes was connected.

Integrative projects in which students worked together in teams on a long-term research project that incorporated material from all of the classes in the link (sometimes called "project-based learning") were rare in the demonstration, even in the two colleges with the most experience with learning communities. The allied health link at Kingsborough again offers a strong example of long-term, project-based, collaborative learning that pushed students to actively search for connections, work in a team, and carry out a semester-long integrative research project. For this project, students had to research two different occupations connected to the treatment and care of people with AIDS in their psychology class. In the biology class, they studied the effects of HIV/AIDS on the central nervous system. In the integrative seminar, they learned research skills such as how to assess the credibility of resources on the Internet and how to create a bibliography for their paper.

Student Reactions to Curricular Integration

As the discussion above illustrates, the level and kinds of curricular integration that were observed at the sites varied widely, both across and within colleges. Interviews with students in learning communities about their experience with integration tended to reflect this variation.[7] Many students who were interviewed in focus groups seemed to barely notice integration. But when students did notice such efforts, they had opinions about how interesting or helpful those efforts were — both positive and negative. Some were enthusiastic about integration and some were less so, although the former outnumbered the latter, at least among the students in the focus groups. One student at Queensborough described her experience when assigned to read the book *Zero,* by Charles Seife, in her English class:

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[7]Only a handful of students (no more than 50 at any college) were interviewed. Observations based on student focus groups are illustrative only and not necessarily generalizable to the population of learning community students.

After reading the book, you see math everywhere. It's in nature. Something was there that I didn't realize. At first I didn't think I would need to know "x equals something." I didn't see that it applies everywhere, and now I do.

At CCBC, the student reaction was mixed. Students in one learning community reported that the connections helped them understand and retain information. They gave an example of studying the transatlantic slave trade in a history class and preparing a PowerPoint slide presentation in their reading class on the same topic. Other students, however, said that they failed to see the point of linking material in the classes and complained that hearing about the same subject over and over in their classes was boring. A student at Merced echoed this sentiment: "I thought the idea was great, but there's no real definition to each class I'm taking. It's just all the same thing. It's just that these two are linked together."

Another Merced student was disappointed that there was too *little* integration (despite the fact that team teaching, as described here, was relatively rare in the demonstration):

To me, both teachers don't really sit in [on each other's class]. There are not two instructors that help me — they're not together all the time. They're in there for 5 minutes or for 15 minutes. There's no linked work. I got told stuff that I assumed was going to happen when I jumped into learning communities that wasn't what it was told to be. It just really didn't help me.

While the teaching and learning in the allied health link at Kingsborough, described above, represents one of the deepest and most comprehensive examples of integration observed in the demonstration, student reactions to the work were still mixed. In a focus group discussion, these and other learning community students had little to say about the integrated assignments and projects. When asked how they liked their learning communities and whether they would recommend them to a friend, one student said — and others agreed — that it "all depends on the teacher."

Promoting Active, Collaborative Learning

If curricular integration is one hallmark of how teaching is expected to differ in learning communities, pedagogy that promotes active and collaborative learning is the second. One student at Kingsborough described her experience of this kind of learning:

The sense that each of us got from being academic learners is that we feel we can state our opinion freely with no judgments. There [are] no right or wrong answers that contribute [to] what we feel, and therefore [we] learn from each other. It encourages us to want to learn. The pace we learn at is very steady. The people remaining the same added to the learning environment. We help each other and in turn we help ourselves. In the end we are all active learners.

Learning community faculty across the colleges used a variety of practices that foster active, collaborative learning, such as avoiding "chalk and talk" lectures in favor of heavy use of group or team work, student or team presentations, peer evaluations, reflective writing, and whole-class discussions, as well as giving credit for participation and arranging field trips or other experiential learning opportunities.

Most faculty who were interviewed or who responded to the survey seemed to embrace the idea of instructional strategies that engaged students in active learning as well as shared learning. Of those faculty who responded to the survey, for example, 64 percent indicated that they "strongly disagree" with the statement that "students learn best from lectures." About half "strongly agreed" that group work is an effective strategy for teaching. However, these active learning strategies were not exclusive to learning communities. Focus groups with faculty who were teaching stand-alone versions of the courses in the learning communities reported using similar practices.

The syllabi show that many learning communities included group work, class discussions, and work that asked the students to reflect on the material they were learning, particularly by the third semester (see Appendix Table B.1):

- 17 points were awarded to Hillsborough, 3 points to Queensborough, and 8 points to Merced for mentioning group work

- 21 points were given to Hillsborough, 8 points to Queensborough, and 18 points to Merced for mentioning class discussion

- 11 points were given to Hillsborough and Merced, and 2 points were awarded to Queensborough for mentioning assignments that asked students to reflect on their own work

As the syllabi analysis indicates, group work was a relatively common strategy in learning communities at all six colleges. At Kingsborough, group work was almost standard: tables and chairs were typically arranged to facilitate small group discussion, and when students walked into class, they automatically sat at a table with their team. Faculty stressed, however, that groups worked best when the total number of students who enrolled in the class was large enough (more than 20 students) to be divided into smaller groups of four to six. In one underenrolled class of 12 students, group work often fell apart when team members failed to show up for class.

Most students at Kingsborough and other colleges tended to talk positively about working in groups: "The intellectual benefits are you get other classmates' opinions and views," said one student. "We work in groups a lot and therefore we can work faster and get work done quickly." However, a few students in several colleges complained about grading policies that

assigned a single grade to an entire team without taking into account differences in individual contributions and performance.

Some instructors at Houston who taught both learning communities and stand-alone classes reported that they liked to use group work in both settings. Collaborative learning is particularly popular for faculty who are teaching students in developmental classes. Sometimes faculty said they had learned how to teach this way in learning communities and then used the practice in their other classes; others said they had always used these strategies.

And yet, significant variation could be found in the use of these practices, even within each college. At one college, about one year after the demonstration began, researchers' observations of three learning community classes on the same day illustrated the wide variety of teaching styles that are used, ranging from lectures to highly interactive classroom discussions:

- One communications instructor had built a deep bond with his students and engaged them in active learning around social justice themes through role-playing. He asked thought-provoking questions and engaged many students in a lively class discussion.

- In another class, a well-prepared history professor mostly lectured during the class but engaged nearly all of the students in routine activities throughout the lecture, including reviewing notes, answering quiz questions, asking questions, and so forth.

- In the last classroom observation, an English instructor led students through a very routine group editing process on a sample text. The activity required little of the students; the energy in the room was low and few students appeared to be actively engaged.

Conclusions

This chapter examined the experience of the six colleges in the demonstration in implementing key components thought by proponents of the learning community model to be major agents of change in the classroom setting: faculty collaboration, integrative teaching practices, and pedagogy that promotes active, shared learning. The extent to which changes in the ways teaching and learning took place depended in large part on the degree to which program coordinators emphasized these key components in their expectations and responded to opportunities to train and support faculty, while at the same time coping with the challenges of scaling up the program.

These observations underscore the fundamental challenge of changing teaching and learning in community colleges, whether in the learning community classroom or other classrooms: college instructors traditionally enjoy almost complete autonomy in the classroom both in what they teach and how they teach it. Although learning communities tend to attract instructors who care about pedagogy as well as content, changing the practice of instructors who are not interested in developing integrative teaching practices is difficult — although not impossible — to do in an environment where instructors are accustomed to such autonomy. Regardless of the clarity of those expectations or the richness of the professional development opportunities, college instructors were free to teach as they wanted — and that was the main source of variation in the use of these practices.

- **Some faculty pairs took time to plan their learning communities together while other pairs had little or sometimes no direct communication with each other.**

All six colleges worked hard to scale up their programs to enroll 100 or more students in learning communities per semester and recruit enough instructors to teach in them. This meant that they had to tap faculty who lacked experience with learning communities and may not have been fully informed about what was expected of them. In some cases, faculty were paired up just days before the semester began. These factors, combined with high turnover in faculty from semester to semester, meant that many faculty pairs got a rather slow start collaborating with each other to plan their learning community. Fortunately, most colleges recovered from this uneven start, and by the end of the first year more faculty pairs began to collaborate more effectively, stimulated in large part by the training and consultations they received as part of the demonstration.

- **As coordinators became clearer and more specific about their expectations for collaboration and put into place the support and training needed, faculty tended to respond positively to the challenges of changing their teaching practices.**

Colleges that had less experience in operating learning communities prior to the demonstration — notably, Houston, Hillsborough, and Queensborough — were particularly responsive to the opportunities for coaching and training that were offered and worked hard to encourage faculty to make the most of them. Those opportunities ranged from a multiday training program on pedagogy at the Washington Center to on-site consultations from experienced learning community faculty from other colleges. As coordinators began to feel more comfortable with clarifying and communicating expectations, there was an increase in the prevalence of practices such as naming learning communities to emphasize their interdisciplinary connections and assigning students work that asked them to draw on those connections.

- **Despite this progress, learning communities varied greatly in terms of faculty's use of integrative and other instructional practices, both within each college and across the six colleges, even by the end of the first year of implementation.**

Learning communities in most colleges typically featured a few integrative practices, such as coordinated calendars and one or two joint assignments. More intensive practices such as common grading and project-based learning were relatively rare even by the end of the first year. The strongest integration tended to be concentrated in learning communities where faculty pairs had worked together before the demonstration, sometimes for several years, most evident at Kingsborough, Merced, and CCBC.

Chapter 5

Building Support for Students Through Learning Communities

It is not out of the ordinary for a community college student — who most likely has a job and family obligations beyond her schoolwork — to show up for her classes and leave for the day as soon as they are finished. She will probably see different faces in every classroom and have instructors who are only dimly aware of the other work she's been assigned. She may struggle to balance her personal and academic commitments, without being aware that there are resources on campus that could help. These experiences can make her feel isolated and discouraged; after a few weeks or months, she may decide that college is not for her.

Stories like this one are all too common on community college campuses across the country. Learning communities are designed to address these issues by creating connections that will support students as they pursue their academic goals: connections with their fellow students, between students and faculty, and to the support services that are available on campus. These connections can lead to a sense of engagement and belonging on campus, which can in turn lead to stronger academic and personal support, and better academic outcomes. As stated by the Vice President of Instruction at one of the colleges involved in the Learning Communities Demonstration, "We are mainly a commuter campus.… The more attached that the students become to the class, the teachers, or anything related to the college, the more likely they are to make better grades and to retain."

In the interviews and focus groups that were conducted at the six colleges, the potential of learning communities to create connections for students stood out as a consistent and powerful theme. Faculty, students, and administrators reported that the learning community structure enabled strong relationships between students, helping them to build both social and academic support networks. In addition, learning communities that formally incorporated support elements — in the form of a student success course or in systematically implemented tied-in services — seemed to connect students to resources that they may not have otherwise accessed.

Putting the Community into Learning: How Learning Communities Build Relationships

The development of stronger relationships — particularly among students — was central to the "theory of change" for learning communities at several sites, as expressed by the program coordinators and other leaders. Many faculty and administrators felt that the academic benefits that they saw arising from learning communities could be attributed in large part to the

fact that students enrolled in multiple classes together, and that faculty teaching in learning communities attempted to be more accessible and aware of challenges that their students were facing by communicating with their teaching partner regularly.

The extent to which these structures and practices were implemented — and whether they successfully created a sense of engagement and belonging for the students in the learning communities — varied within the program at each college. Across the colleges, however, definite trends stand out: student cohorts were generally considered by faculty and students alike to encourage bonding and a productive classroom environment, while — somewhat surprisingly — relationships between faculty and students seemed to differ only slightly from those in non–learning community classrooms.[1]

Student Cohorts

The most basic element of learning communities is the "student cohort": a group of students enrolled together in multiple classes, which are often scheduled back to back. Student cohorts were successfully implemented at all six colleges in the demonstration, as nearly every learning community enrolled the same students in every course and did not allow students to enroll in only one course of the link.[2] Being a member of a cohort was the element of the learning community that students most readily identified as unique about their course-taking experience.

Seeing and working with the same people in multiple classes was often described as students' favorite aspect of the learning community, and was the basis for favorable comparisons with their other, stand-alone classes. Most students reported that being part of a cohort helped them feel more comfortable in the classroom and more supported by — and supportive of — their fellow students. Learning community faculty at all six colleges made similar observations about signs of mutual support and community among their students. Many faculty also believed that the cohorts created a strong feeling of accountability among their students. According to responses on the faculty survey, 53 percent of learning community faculty strongly agree with the statement, "Students do better in class if they get to know each other and form relationships." Though most of the anecdotes were positive, both students and faculty also

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[1]At each college, interviews were conducted with the majority of learning community faculty, but with only a handful of students (no more than 50 at any college). Observations based on student focus groups are illustrative only and are not necessarily generalizable to the population of learning community students.

[2]In several of the colleges, one or two learning communities enrolled a few students in one of the linked courses but not in the other course or courses in the link. This was done primarily to ensure that the classes were fully enrolled; the practice was more common in the first semester or two than in later semesters. Students who were enrolled in only one class were not included in the study sample.

shared some stories of student cohorts that had little obvious effect on student relationships, or — in one or two cases — had negative consequences for classroom management.

The most straightforward — and possibly the strongest — element of student cohorts is their ability to create a positive social climate for students in the classroom. Students in learning communities reported feeling strong bonds with the other students from sharing classwork and experiences with them in multiple classes. Several students described entering college knowing only a few people with whom they had attended high school, and becoming close to other students in their learning community faster than they did in their stand-alone classes.

With these connections, the classroom can become a more welcoming, engaging environment, and when this occurred at the colleges in the demonstration, it often led to students supporting each other academically as well as personally. A Merced College faculty member used glowing terms to describe the relationships that students had developed in two of her learning communities:

> I think that in my [learning community], they are very strongly bonded. They call each other. They hang out together on campus.… Last semester's [learning community], they were like best friends, at each other's houses. The last day of school, they wanted to have a potluck and bring food and...have a party together.

She went on to describe the ways that these close-knit social connections had evolved into an academic support network for these students. However, she also acknowledged that the students in another learning community she was teaching that semester had not bonded quite as strongly, though they worked in groups together and talked about their shared experiences in the two classes. Similar variation occurred at the other five colleges: while the students in some learning communities had developed strong socially and academically supportive relationships, other student relationships revolved around sharing notes and relying on each other for class information, but not much more. For some students, however, this was still a higher level of interaction and support than they experienced in their stand-alone classes.

Bonds created by the cohorts at each college meant that students in learning communities were often more comfortable calling on one another when they were struggling academically. Many students and faculty reported that the relationships that students had with each other increased their willingness to ask for help. As one student at Houston Community College pointed out, "If one of us needs help, we can go to the other student and they might know how to do it. And since we already know each other, we're not gonna be, like, shy not to talk to each other." In comparison, a Hillsborough Community College student described the isolation he experienced in his stand-alone classes, saying that in those classes, "It's everybody for themselves."

Many learning community faculty used similarly positive terms to describe their students' support for each other. A faculty member at The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) spoke about the encouragement that her learning community students gave one another during presentations:

> They're much more supportive of one another. If somebody's scared, it's …
> "Okay, you're okay, you're doing great." If somebody … falter[s], it's … "Keep
> going, keep going," and they're doing this verbally to one another.… You don't
> get that in normal classes.

Faculty at all six colleges spoke of their students exchanging phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and working together outside of class. At several colleges, faculty shared anecdotes of students being "protective" of each other by sharing reassuring information with the instructor about another student — that he was running late because he was stuck in traffic, or that she had been sick but they would make sure that she got the homework.

In addition, many faculty believed that the strong relationships that gave students the opportunity to support each other also increased their comfort level in asking questions and engaging in classroom discussion. A faculty member at Merced explained:

> When I've done my stand-alone classes, it's just totally different. Not as many
> students would come and seek resources or seek help as compared to a learning
> community. And I think a lot of it is stimulated from other students. Maybe they
> might ask somebody that they know, "Hey, what about this?" and the other per-
> son would [say], "I don't know; let's ask them [another student]."

Faculty and students at the other colleges shared similar stories. In addition, faculty at almost all of the colleges described the discussions in their learning community classes as more active and engaged than they are used to seeing in similar, stand-alone classes. This was also the case when students worked together in small groups, both in the classroom and on larger homework projects. As discussed in Chapter 4, both discussions and group work were common practices in learning communities used to encourage active, collaborative learning, and, in some cases, learning community faculty used these strategies more frequently than in their stand-alone classes. In addition to taking advantage of the relationships that their learning community students had already developed, these practices appeared to have contributed to building students' relationships with each other by requiring them to work together frequently.

Many faculty also believed that the level of familiarity and comfort that learning community students felt with each other created a sense of accountability to one another that students do not tend to feel in a typical, anonymous college classroom. By feeling "known," students may have had a stronger sense of responsibility about their obligations to other members of their class to be present and to be capable of contributing to group work and class

discussions. Thus, many faculty across the six colleges attributed higher attendance and even better grades to the student cohorts. A faculty member at Merced summed up this belief:

> [Students'] attendance is much better in the learning community, and the grades are much better in the learning community. And I'm basically the same person … it might be because of their sense of community, [because] they spend more time with each other.

Faculty at several of the other colleges made similarly strong statements about the positive influence of the cohort on student behaviors.

Possible Drawbacks to Student Cohorts

Perspectives on student cohorts were not universally positive, however. One concern that a few faculty expressed about student cohorts was that they could encourage strong social bonds without leading to academic support networks. A Hillsborough instructor articulated this concern: "The only thing I have noticed in my learning community, though, is that though they have developed a friendship and a bond and they talk and get along, I don't see them sort of taking care of one another when it comes to school." The faculty member spoke to her class about this concern and encouraged them to look out for each other academically as well as socially, because "that's what friends do."

In addition, some learning community practitioners have noted that these social bonds can actively undermine the academic work being done in the classroom if the cohort reinforces negative classroom behavior, a phenomenon popularly known as "hyperbonding."[3] At several of the colleges, at least one faculty member shared frustrating classroom management stories that may have been related to the fact that students knew each other better than they would have in a typical college class, creating an "us versus them" relationship with the instructor. For example, negative attitudes and poor work habits seemed more prevalent in one learning community because a few students who were not happy to be there exerted a strong influence on the other students. One coordinator pointed out that hyperbonding seemed more likely if students had similar backgrounds or came from the same high school.

A related problem is the forming of "cliques" — a small group of students who bond and leave other students out in the cold. This dynamic can be carried over from one class in the link to the other, thereby enhancing the negative effects on the ostracized students while undermining the desired cohort effect and its associated benefits. In response to the concerns of

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[3]Hyperbonding has not been the subject of much formal scholarship, but interviews with learning community experts, as well as a search of available online resources for faculty, reveal that it is a concern among practitioners. See, for example, http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/lrn/resources/LeaRNing.asp, and the "First Year Experience" archives for October 2007 at http://lists.southernct.edu.

several Kingsborough Community College faculty members who were worried about the cliques forming in their learning communities, the faculty development leader organized a "brown bag" session to discuss strategies for addressing the issue.

Also at Kingsborough, several students expressed frustration with the cohorts. A few students felt that their ability to meet people on campus was limited by the fact that they were taking multiple classes with the same people. Others felt "coddled" by the learning community, perhaps wishing for more anonymity. A faculty member agreed that some of her students had "low morale" and posited that these students might feel that "the link takes away independence." Similar complaints were not heard from students at the other campuses, but as noted above, the research teams spoke with a limited group of students.

Relationships Between Students and Faculty

Proponents of learning communities expect that they will promote strong relationships between students and faculty. When multiple faculty members share the same group of students, it is thought that they can provide insight to one another about struggles that their students may be going through. Moreover, faculty in learning communities are encouraged to initiate contact with students and make themselves accessible.[4] According to the faculty survey, 80 percent of learning community faculty believe that students do better in class if they form personal relationships with faculty.

In the six colleges in the demonstration, student and faculty characterizations of their relationships with each other varied greatly and were not nearly as consistently positive as descriptions of the student cohorts. While there were some reports of the expected type of positive, supporting relationships developing, in general it seemed that the relationships were no different from those in stand-alone classes, or, in one or two discouraging anecdotes, that relationships were actually worse than in the same instructor's stand-alone classes.[5]

Learning community faculty members were more likely to speak positively about their relationships with their students than vice versa. It was interesting that there was some inconsistency in student and faculty accounts of the same relationships; perhaps this demonstrates that faculty have a greater awareness of the difference between the learning community experience and a stand-alone classroom experience than their first-year students do. While faculty accounts from the other colleges tended to be more mixed, faculty members at Hillsborough and CCBC

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[4]Engstrom (2008).

[5]However, in nearly all cases, complaints or accolades seemed to be specific to a certain faculty member or group of students. As noted above, the small number of students interviewed makes it difficult to generalize from these anecdotes to an overarching statement of how learning communities facilitated student-faculty relationships at the six colleges.

generally reported strong relationships with students in their learning communities, and explicitly connected higher levels of comfort among their students with the fact that two instructors shared a group of students. A Hillsborough faculty member summed up this belief:

> The biggest documented benefit of learning communities is that the students are more comfortable with school. They feel that they're given more attention and it's mainly because they know that there's two faculty that know their names, know how they're doing in both classes, which is a huge difference.… It's a nice connection for them to know I know if they're passing the study skills class. The study skills teacher knows if they're passing their reading class, and I think they get a . . . perception that we're actually caring for them more than other teachers, even though we aren't. It's just that we're working together, but they may feel that I am going out of my way, where [they feel that] the math teacher [outside of a learning community] is not. You know, some of the students will say, oh, I like you because you pay attention to what I'm doing or what I'm working on, and they don't realize that it's actually part of the learning community benefit.

In contrast, students across the six colleges tended to state that their relationships with their learning community instructors did not feel very different from their relationships with faculty in their stand-alone classes. Most students did not seek out their instructors for extra help or personal guidance. When they did, it seemed to have more to do with the characteristics of the individual faculty member than with the structure of the learning community. The faculty members who shared stories about providing advice and support for students acknowledged that they tended to have similar relationships with students outside of their learning communities. They simply seemed to be the kind of faculty members whom students felt comfortable approaching.

Across the six colleges, neither faculty nor students reported many efforts over and above typical faculty practices to actively try to reach students or bond with them. One exception is the practices reported by several Hillsborough student success instructors, who said that their role always included regular conferences with students, but that they tended to spend more time and be more detailed in their queries with learning community students than with students in their other classes.

Another example of a more systematic effort to encourage bonding is the field trips that are part of the learning community programs at Houston and Queensborough community colleges.[6] For example, at Houston, each learning community took one field trip per semester, to a museum or other destination chosen by the faculty of the particular learning community.

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[6]Some learning communities at CCBC, Hillsborough, Kingsborough, and Merced included field trips or service learning for the students, but these activities occurred less systematically than at Houston and Queensborough.

Several faculty members reported that the field trips made their students feel more comfortable with each other and with the faculty, and hopefully thereby encouraged persistence to the next semester. One instructor said that she, her teaching partner, and the students had an opportunity to interact "on…levels other than just being in the classroom." Both the students and faculty got to see each other as fellow human beings.

Connecting Students to Services

Another way that proponents of learning communities believe they can support students and make them feel more engaged in the community of the college is to connect them with the support services that are available on campus — services such as academic advising, tutoring, or financial aid, which, for this population, may be the difference between staying in school and dropping out.[7] The connection to services can take place formally, through the structure of the learning community itself (linking the anchor course with a student success course), or by incorporating student support elements into the curriculum or expectations of the learning community; or informally, through regular information sharing, referrals, or course requirements from the faculty.

Most of the colleges in the demonstration included a student success course, or a course that served a similar role, in their learning community model. These courses provided the most explicit connection to services for students and led some students to access services more than they would have otherwise, but the strongest connection appeared to be the academic support provided by the course itself. Other than through these courses, formally connecting students to services tended to be a secondary goal of the learning community programs or not implemented as fully as was intended, if it was included at all. Informal connections provided by faculty through regular information sharing, referrals, or course requirements were implemented fairly regularly, but it is not clear whether this had an effect on students' use of services. Overall, more participation in student support services seemed to occur when the support was integrated closely with the learning community, which required coordination and communication between the instructional and student services divisions in the colleges.

Student Success Courses

Student success courses focus on helping new community college students develop essential skills such as study habits, time management, note-taking, and test-taking, as well as introducing them to the support services that are available on campus. Student success courses are increasingly offered at community colleges across the country and are often particularly

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[7]Weissman et al. (2009).

designed for students at the developmental level. Three of the learning community models in the demonstration involved student success courses, and two others included courses that served a similar role.

Hillsborough and Houston linked a student success course with developmental reading and math, respectively. At Merced, one of the links since the inception of the program had been between a developmental English course and a guidance course. At each college, the decision to link a developmental-level academic course with a student success course was based on the belief that the skills taught in the student success course would directly address the needs of the students in the developmental course. In addition, the Master Learner component of the learning communities at CCBC and the integrative seminar at Kingsborough each played a supportive role that was similar to a student success course.

Many of the connections to services that faculty at Hillsborough, Houston, and Merced described in their student success courses were elements that were in place as part of the standard curriculum for the course, rather than assignments or activities that were developed as a result of the course's inclusion in a learning community. For example, each of the courses included an assignment that required students to learn about the services that were available on campus — either through an activity such as a scavenger hunt through the student services offices, or a more focused research activity that required students to learn about one service in detail and report on it to the rest of the class. Each of the courses also brought in representatives from various campus services — such as financial aid or counseling — to make presentations. In focus groups, students reported that these assignments seemed to raise their awareness about the resources on campus that were available to them. Some students reported using resources they had learned about in their student success course, such as the library, writing labs, and tutoring.

The student success course itself can also be thought of as a campus resource to which the learning community connects the students.[8] Coursework in the success courses provided academic support for students' assignments in the developmental courses. As the student success instructor at Merced said, "These are all things students should know, but that they're not practicing…. Transferring those skills, that's what we're trying to do." The Master Learner course at CCBC and the integrative seminar at Kingsborough played a similar role. In both courses, instruction was focused on supporting academic work in the other courses.

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[8]This is particularly true when the student success course is run through the counseling office and taught by a counselor, as was the case at Merced. This provided students with a direct connection to a very important campus resource: personal advisement and all the resources that a counselor is aware of. The counselor also noted that his teaching partner, an English instructor, was more aware of particular services as a result of working with him in the learning community, which in turn gave her more resources to help students.

Faculty at Merced and Hillsborough described several assignments that took advantage of the learning community design and used elements of the success course to support work in the developmental course, and vice versa. In the Merced learning community, students looked for scholarships and practiced applying to universities in the student success course, and wrote scholarship essays and personal statements for applications in the English class. One of these assignments proved to be particularly fruitful for a student who earned a $1,500 scholarship after completing the scholarship application in class.

A Hillsborough reading instructor described assignments in both classes that built on one another in the beginning of the semester: Her partner taught note-taking; then she asked the students to apply these skills in the first chapter of their reading textbook; and then students used the notes for an assignment in the success course. Later in the semester, the students were required to do a research paper in the reading class, and the student success instructor held one class in the library, teaching research techniques and other library skills.

Students at both Merced and Hillsborough were asked to apply reading and note-taking skills that they learned in the student success course to the texts in their English or reading class. At Houston, a similar transfer of skills was expected to take place with the textbook for the math class, and with the organizational and time management techniques that were taught in the student success course. Moreover, several students described applying skills and techniques that they had learned in the success course in classes outside of the learning community.

The Master Learner course at CCBC was used in a variety of ways, depending on the individual who was teaching the course.[9] The weekly hour functioned as a tutoring session, a study hall (with access to the instructor for help if students were interested), or a study skills class that addressed content in both of the other courses. One Master Learner (who was also the reading instructor in her learning community), described focusing on "the techniques and strategies for learning" that her students could use in both the reading course and the linked psychology course.

Because the career-focused learning communities at Kingsborough were for continuing students rather than for incoming freshmen in developmental-level classes, and because program leaders were committed to more curricular integration than were the other colleges, the integrative seminar differed from a typical student success course in the topics that it addressed. For example, instead of focusing on time management and study skills, the integrative seminar addressed more advanced topics, such as improving research and writing skills for integrated term papers. To support this work, each of the integrative seminars at Kingsborough had an

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[9] The Master Learner role was interpreted differently by different faculty members, and evolved over time. See Chapter 4 for further discussion of this topic.

assigned additional instructor who provided small group or one-on-one support in both reading and writing. In a typical class, the integrative seminar instructor used the first hour to work on material from both courses, and in the second hour the additional instructor helped the students with grammar and writing their term papers for their integrative assignments, which counted toward grades in all of the linked classes.

Other Dedicated or Tied-In Services

In the literature and in practice, learning communities can include supplementary components that connect students to services, such as a dedicated counselor or tutor.[10] By attaching personal and academic help to the courses, these resources are meant to be more easily accessible and provide further support to the students in the learning community. Across the colleges, over half of the learning community faculty had a member of the student services division attend their class at least once, to give a presentation or to help students. Several of the colleges in the demonstration tried to include at least one tied-in service in the program model. Queensborough and Kingsborough used their program coordinators to provide outreach to students, and Houston and Merced incorporated tutoring in the learning communities, although not as consistently as they had first envisioned.

At both Queensborough and Kingsborough, one of the duties of the full-time program coordinator was to initiate contact with the students in the learning communities, especially those who appeared to be at risk of failing or dropping out. The coordinator worked with the faculty to identify students who were having trouble or were not attending class, and called them to discuss the issues they were facing and recommend student services that might be of use. At Queensborough, the coordinator credited this practice with creating better attendance in the learning communities, but acknowledged having a difficult time "selling" the services to students because, as she said, "They feel like there is a stigma attached to needing help." The students in the focus group did not talk about this outreach as part of their learning community experience, quite possibly because they were not the students who were on the receiving end of the coordinator's calls or e-mails. At Kingsborough, the coordinator was also an adviser, and she encouraged learning community students to come see her for advising regularly. She attempted to serve as the first point of contact to services on campus for the students and would recommend particular services to students if they needed them, such as counseling or financial

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[10]Smith and Williams (2007). Having a "dedicated counselor" for the learning community, who gives presentations on services and checks in regularly with the students, is a popular idea in the literature and in several well-regarded learning community programs. Several of the colleges began to experiment with this role near the end of the demonstration, but it was not consistently in place at the time of the implementation research.

aid. Students reported seeing her more than other advisers (if they saw an adviser at all), but did not share many stories about being connected to services after speaking with her.

The programs at Houston and Merced both attempted to add an academic support component directly into the learning community classrooms. At one of the Houston campuses, the program coordinator encouraged the use of a dedicated tutor for the learning communities. The initial idea of the tutoring component was to bring the tutor into the learning community to meet the students and see the coursework and student interaction firsthand. Ideally, the students would become more familiar with the tutor and more likely to use tutoring services outside of class, both in the learning community and in other classes in the future. However, the decision about how to use the tutor was left to the faculty members, and as a result, this component was not implemented consistently across the learning communities. The approach that seemed to work best was used by a faculty member who required her students to visit the tutor weekly and counted these visits as part of their grade, because working with the tutor was a study skill that was part of the student success course curriculum. The coordinator suggested that this version of the tutoring component might be implemented across the learning communities in the future, as it was producing the best results in terms of students actually visiting the tutor.

At Merced, several of the learning communities included a "Supplemental Instructor" (SI), a former student who attended classes and was trained to serve as a tutor and academic resource for the students. The SI program was already in place at the college, and its connection to the learning communities was eased by the fact that the SI coordinator, a learning community faculty member, had also previously served as the learning community coordinator. There were both positive and negative anecdotes about students' usage of the SI. In one learning community, the faculty member described a mini-cohort forming within the larger cohort of students, made up of the group of students who visited the SI outside of class. She reported that the students in the mini-cohort seemed more supportive of each other academically than did the cohort overall. However, in another learning community, the faculty member expressed frustration because none of his students was using the SI; he ended up reassigning the SI to a stand-alone version of the same class, in which the students did end up taking advantage of this resource.

Informal Referrals or Requirements

Across the six colleges, many faculty described efforts to encourage students to use the services that were available on campus; this seemed to be part of their regular practices and not specific to the learning community. Nearly half of learning community faculty surveyed reported at least five incidents each semester of referring students to resources on campus. Sometimes these referrals were in response to a specific issue faced by a student; at other times they offered information that is typically shared with all developmental students. Most students

in the focus groups knew about services that were available and often attributed this knowledge to their learning community, but only some said that they had utilized the services. The library and reading or math labs seemed to be used most often.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the experience of the six demonstration colleges in implementing the components of learning communities that are designed to create connections for students on campus: the development of strong relationships among students and between students and faculty, and the integration of student support services. Though the program models varied in approaches to including support services, the implementation of student cohorts was a consistent and beneficial element across the colleges.

- **Student cohorts led to strong relationships among students, creating both personal and academic support networks.**

Student cohorts are a basic structural element of learning communities, and, as such, seem to be the easiest to implement, as long as the college overcame the practical challenges of scheduling, linking, and filling the classes. The experiences of the colleges in the demonstration show that student cohorts supported the development of strong personal and academic support networks among students, which increased their sense of community and willingness to ask for help. Across the colleges, seeing and working with the same people in multiple classes was usually described as students' favorite aspect of the learning community. Students said that this helped them feel more comfortable and more supported than in their stand-alone classes. Faculty members agreed that their learning community students supported each other, and many also said that the cohort increased accountability and seemed to improve performance among their students.

- **In general, relationships between students and faculty in the learning communities were not reported to differ greatly from those in stand-alone classes.**

When they occurred, stronger student-faculty relationships often appeared to be related more to the characteristics of particular faculty than to the structure of learning communities. However, a few faculty believed that the learning community made a positive difference in their relationships with students, either because the group of students shared two faculty members or because of activities such as field trips that fostered closer relationships.

- **The most effective connections to student support services seemed to occur when the support was integrated closely with the learning community, through a student success course or tied-in services.**

Linking with a student success course was a popular and seemingly effective approach for connecting students to support services. Systematically implemented, tied-in services, such as outreach from program coordinators or tutoring, also provided support to the students in the learning community. These connections to support services usually required coordination and communication between individuals in the instructional and student services divisions in the colleges. Connections that were implemented irregularly or informally did not appear to increase participation in campus support services.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The Learning Communities Demonstration was designed to inform the field in several ways. The most eagerly awaited findings may be the impacts of learning communities on student outcomes, which will be released in future reports, as described in Chapter 1. But community college leaders and faculty may want to know more than "whether" or "how much" learning communities matter in increasing course completion and persistence rates. If the crowds attending workshops on learning communities at conferences in recent years are any indication, they also need practical answers to the "how to" questions of learning communities: How can the program be expanded from a handful of learning communities serving a few dozen students to dozens of learning communities serving hundreds? How can faculty be motivated and supported to teach in learning communities? How should program leaders decide which courses or how many courses to link? How can learning communities work best for academically underprepared students? How much effort should be invested in curricular integration?

The six colleges discussed in this report tackled all these questions during their participation in the Learning Communities Demonstration. Their experiences in the first year of the demonstration offer many examples and solutions to real-world challenges that other community colleges are likely to face as they design, operate, and scale up learning communities for academically underprepared students. From the analysis of these experiences, several "big picture" themes emerged.

Bringing Learning Communities to Scale

As described in Chapter 2, all six colleges had already operated at least a few learning communities at the time they were approached to assess their interest in participating in the demonstration. But to join the demonstration, college leaders had to be prepared to increase the number of learning communities on their campuses, sometimes dramatically. The challenges of "going to scale" turned out to be greater and more complex than some colleges had anticipated. Any college choosing to bring its program to scale will likely encounter many of the same challenges that the six demonstration colleges faced.

Getting the buy-in from and expanding the ranks of faculty who are willing to teach in learning communities was foremost among those challenges, as Chapters 3 and 4 highlight. Teaching in learning communities is demanding and not necessarily appealing to all faculty. Faculty needed to be aware of the responsibilities of teaching in a learning community, as well as convinced that the structure offered an opportunity to teach their courses in a way that would

benefit their students. The extra time and effort required to plan and teach in a learning community was often a deterrent. To convince faculty of the rewards of working in a learning community, coordinators and administrators in the demonstration learned to use a variety of tactics. For example, small stipends and access to professional development opportunities helped to entice faculty to accept the extra demands of teaching in learning communities. But some coordinators wished they could offer more compensation that was commensurate with the significant level of effort and time it takes to be an effective learning community instructor.

Although winning faculty buy-in takes time, leaders found that investing this time was well worth the effort later on. In the process of building support and enthusiasm for learning communities, leaders found that being very clear about the expectations for how much time should be spent on collaboration, course development, number of joint assignments, participation in training, and other commitments encouraged consistent practices among the learning communities faculty.

Colleges that are expanding and strengthening learning communities need to make sure not only that there are trained and motivated faculty to teach in the new learning communities, but also that there are enough students to fill these links. Part of the solution was knowing which classes were best to link in order to attract the highest number of students. Classes that are in high demand, either because they are required or popular, are more likely to be filled than other classes. Some colleges analyzed current and past enrollment patterns to estimate the number of students likely to enroll in certain links. Another part of the solution was to find attractive times in the schedule for back-to-back classes, for both instructors and students. Perhaps the biggest part of the solution was getting smarter about how to "market" learning communities. Knowing that there are enough students on the campus who are likely to want to enroll in the class is important but not sufficient to make sure that links are fully enrolled. College leaders across the demonstration, with the help of marketing consultants, adopted basic marketing principles and saw their enrollment rates increase as a result.

Learning Communities for Developmental-Level Students

Community colleges are in the midst of a bold experiment in which they are adapting and modifying the learning community model to make it work on their commuter campuses and for their most at-risk students — those who arrive at their doors underprepared academically for college-level work. Today's learning communities, especially those for students whose reading, writing, and math skills are so weak that they are not prepared to handle college-level work, serve a very different mission than the early experiments with learning communities or their contemporary versions at residential four-year colleges. The goal of learning communities for developmental-level students is to help turn around the alarmingly low persistence and completion rates of students in developmental education.

The five colleges in the demonstration that ran developmental-level learning communities tried a variety of links and models but they shared at least two assumptions. The first was that developmental students have needs that are fundamentally different from students who are prepared for college. They face multiple barriers to success. They typically struggled in high school or have spent years out of the classroom; they often have to juggle competing demands from work and family; and many are hampered by learning disabilities or self-esteem problems. These problems call for more support than is often provided at community colleges, whether that support is academic, social, or psychological.

The second assumption was that the structure and pedagogy of learning communities are well suited to addressing the special needs of developmental students. Simply by enrolling with around 25 other students in linked, back-to-back classes, students across the demonstration tended to naturally form bonds with each other. According to both students and faculty, these bonds seemed to help them navigate through many rough spots during the semester they were enrolled in the learning community.

Beyond student cohorts, program coordinators took divergent paths to further shape their learning communities to meet the needs of developmental students. Some encouraged faculty to use integrative practices and strategies to foster active, collaborative learning to further engage and motivate students. Some brought supplemental instructors or tutors into the classroom. Others included a student success course in the link so that students who were struggling with their math or English class could learn strategies such as study skills, time management skills, and how to arrange for tutoring. Still others paired a college-level course with a developmental course so that students could earn college credit while working to strengthen their English or math skills.

Curricular Integration

The six colleges worked hard to encourage and support faculty pairs to collaborate with each other and integrate their two classes. Colleges organized or participated in faculty development events, communicated guidelines and expectations about what an integrated curriculum should look like, and took advantage of opportunities to bring expert consultants to campus — all with the goal of strengthening integrative teaching and learning in the classrooms of their learning communities. As the demonstration entered its second year, noticeable progress was made as more and more faculty responded to these efforts. Yet curricular integration proved to be challenging and time-consuming, especially as colleges worked to scale up their programs, and by the end of the first year, substantial variation across learning communities, even within the same college, was the rule.

The Importance of a Paid Coordinator Supported by Committed College Leaders

The six colleges in the demonstration each relied on a program coordinator, paid from demonstration funds, to oversee project activities, including outreach to students, coordinating staff for study intake and random assignment, faculty recruitment and training, and oversight and monitoring. These hard-working individuals, in turn, relied on the support and commitment of high-level college administrators on their campuses. The importance of visible, strong management and committed leadership in scaling up quality learning community programs cannot be overstated.

A large percentage of community colleges across the country report having learning communities, but the majority of those institutions run only a small number, limited by the typically small number of faculty who want to teach in them. Administrators tend to not pay much attention to these small programs that touch only a couple of dozen students. But when colleges move to scale up their programs to reach a significant portion of students, as did the demonstration sites, the support of the administration is necessary. Running six or more learning communities taught by as many as 12 to 15 instructors, and enrolling a few hundred students, requires management and administrative support of a very different order. Presidents and other high-level administrators (such as deans of academic instruction or student services) can make or break an effort to scale up learning communities. Strong examples of visionary leaders of learning communities could be found at the outset at sites such as Kingsborough Community College and The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC). Coordinators at all six colleges eventually found support at a high level and learned to use that support; to sustain their programs they also need to sustain this administrative and financial support.

Looking Ahead to the Impact Findings

During 2010–2011, a series of reports will be released that will include findings from the impact evaluation and updates from the implementation research. The implementation research reported here suggests that one component of learning communities — curricular integration — was not consistently or fully implemented in all the learning communities, either because integration was not an explicit part of the design of a college's program or because the effort was made to promote more integrative practices but not all faculty teams responded. In contrast, student cohorts consistently created stronger relationships, including academic support networks, which may have led to deeper engagement with and commitment to education among the students. Given this observation, it seems likely that any impacts arising from enrollment in learning communities may be the result of student cohorts rather than curricular integration. Correspondingly, when asked which of the two elements they thought had the most potential to

make a difference in academic outcomes, most college leaders and faculty emphasized cohorts rather than pedagogical practices.

While the Learning Communities Demonstration was not designed to sort out *which* of the key components of learning communities are the mechanisms underlying any impacts, it is expected to shed light on whether and how much learning communities as a whole affect student outcomes. Combined with the results of the implementation research reported here, the impact findings stand to reveal much about the effectiveness of learning communities as well as how colleges can expand and strengthen learning communities to realize their full potential.

Appendix A

Supplementary Tables

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Appendix Table A.1

**Number of Students Assigned to Learning Communities
and Number of Learning Communities Offered, by Semester**

Number of Students and Learning Communities, by College	Fall 2007	Spring 2008	Fall 2008	Spring 2009	Total
The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC)					
Students	--	75	221	115	411
Learning communities	--	4	10	6	20
Hillsborough Community College					
Students	245	216	248	--	709
Learning communities	7	7	10	--	24
Houston Community College					
Students	--	34	227	172	433
Learning communities	--	3	9	8	20
Kingsborough Community College					
Students	67	92	115	146	420
Learning communities	4	6	6	9	25
Merced Community College					
Students	--	89	188	182	459
Learning communities	--	5	7	9	21
Queensborough Community College					
Students	105	118	223	162	608
Learning communities	6	5	8	7	26
Total students					3,040
Total learning communities					136

NOTES: Sites started and finished study intake at different points. Hillsborough, Kingsborough, and Queensborough each started study intake for the fall 2007 semester, while CCBC, Houston, and Merced started study intake for the spring 2008 semester. Study intake was completed in fall 2008 at Hillsborough, spring 2009 at Queensborough, and fall 2009 for the remaining four sites. In this table, semesters during which no study intake occurred are represented by a double dash. As of November 2009, data were available through spring 2009 only.

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Appendix Table A.2

Select Responses from the Survey of Learning Community Faculty

Item (%)	Faculty Response
Faculty status (N = 162)	
Full-time (tenure or tenure-track)	57.4
Full-time (temporary or adjunct)	12.4
Part-time (temporary or adjunct)	30.3
Frequency of faculty activities[a]	
Collaboration with other faculty on syllabi or assigments (N = 161)	
Not at all	5.6
Once per term	32.9
2 to 5 times per term	40.4
More than 5 times per term	21.1
Have student services staff attend your class (N = 162)	
Not at all	42.0
Once per term	27.8
2 to 5 times per term	23.5
More than 5 times per term	6.8
Referring students to services or resources on campus (N = 161)	
Not at all	1.9
Once per term	12.4
2 to 5 times per term	43.5
More than 5 times per term	42.2
Participation in professional development activities (N = 157)	
Not at all	12.1
Once per term	39.5
2 to 5 times per term	22.9
More than 5 times per term	25.5
Opinions on teaching and learning	
Students do better in class if they get to know each other and form personal relationships (N = 161)	
Disagree	3.7
Agree	43.5
Strongly agree	52.8
Students do better in class if they form personal relationships with faculty (N = 157)	
Disagree	19.1
Agree	59.2
Strongly agree	21.7
Students learn best through lectures (N = 160)	
Disagree	80.0
Agree	17.5
Strongly agree	2.5

<div align="right">(continued)</div>

Appendix Table A.2 (continued)

Item (%)	Faculty Response
Group work for students in the classroom is an effective teaching strategy (N = 161)	
Disagree	5.6
Agree	49.7
Strongly agree	44.7
Collaborating with other faculty on syllabi or assignments (N = 161)	
Not at all important	2.5
Somewhat important	47.2
Very important	50.3
Total number of faculty surveyed	162

SOURCE: MDRC Faculty Survey.

NOTES: Calculations for this table show responses for faculty who answered "Yes" to the question on the survey, "Have you ever taught in a learning community?"

The category "Disagree" aggregates the responses "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree."

Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences. Sums may not equal 100 percent because of rounding.

[a]Reference period was the 2007-2008 academic year.

Appendix B

Research Methods and Data Sources

The implementation research findings in this report rely on several data sources, the most important of which include (1) qualitative data collected during visits to each college; (2) a survey of learning communities instructors at each college; (3) learning communities syllabi collected from three colleges; and (4) ongoing documentation of operations at each college.

Qualitative Data Collected During Visits to Each College

A two- to three-day visit was conducted at each college in fall 2008, with the exception of Kingsborough Community College, where the visit was conducted in spring 2008. Each visit consisted of individual interviews with upper-level administrators (the president, vice presidents, and/or deans, depending on the college); the program coordinator(s); student services staff (counselors, advisers, and registration staff); and instructors who taught in the learning communities. In addition, focus groups were conducted with instructors who taught in learning communities, instructors who taught in stand-alone versions of the courses that were in the learning communities, students who were assigned to the program group and enrolled in learning communities, and students who were assigned to the control group and enrolled in other courses. Turnout for these focus groups varied but tended to be higher among both instructors and students who were involved with the program. Finally, direct observations of a small number of classrooms were conducted at all of the colleges except for Queensborough Community College, where administrators chose to restrict access to the classrooms. For those colleges with multiple campuses involved in the demonstration — Hillsborough Community College, The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), and Houston Community College — these data collection activities were repeated at each campus.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed at all the colleges except for Kingsborough and Queensborough community colleges, where the research team was limited to note-taking. These transcripts and notes were used for summary write-ups of the visits, which were then treated as the primary source of data for the implementation study.

Survey of Learning Communities Instructors at Each College

A survey of instructors was administered at all six colleges between November 2008 and October 2009 to document the characteristics and pedagogical beliefs and practices of learning community instructors and to compare these beliefs and practices with those of instructors who taught in stand-alone versions of the courses that were linked in the learning communities. Questions were designed to capture instructional strategies commonly associated with learning communities, participation in professional development opportunities, and teacher characteristics that might be associated with differences in teaching approaches, such as age, gender, seniority, and part-time versus full-time status. (See Appendix C for the complete survey.)

The population that was eligible to complete the survey comprised all instructors, including both full-time instructors and part-time adjuncts, who had taught in any of the learning communities that were included in the study, and instructors who had taught stand-alone versions of the courses that were in the learning communities, during the same time period. Only responses from the learning community instructors are used in this report; a later report may include responses from non–learning community instructors as well. Lists of these instructors with their e-mail addresses were generated with assistance from the program coordinators at each college. At Merced College, CCBC, and Queensborough, the number of instructors who taught in stand-alone versions of the courses was rather large, and so recipients of the survey were randomly selected from among the eligible instructors; at the remaining colleges, all instructors who taught the stand-alone courses were invited to complete the survey.

The survey was initially administered electronically, and instructors were invited by e-mail to take the survey online. In an effort to increase response rates, a second round of administration targeted those instructors who had not yet responded. Those instructors received printed versions of the survey, distributed by the coordinators. All instructors who completed the survey were offered a $30 gift certificate to Amazon.com to thank them for their participation.

Across all six colleges, the survey was administered to 449 instructors, 168 of whom were identified by the coordinators as having taught in learning communities that were part of the demonstration. The remainder were identified by coordinators as non–learning community instructors. Of the 449 who were invited to respond, 265 (59 percent) signed the informed consent form and completed the survey. Of these, 162 (61 percent) responded "Yes" to the question, "Have you ever taught in a learning community?" and were considered learning community instructors for the purposes of the analysis, whether or not they were included in the original lists provided by the coordinators. (Included in this group were 42 instructors who had been identified by the coordinators as non–learning community faculty but who self-identified as having taught in learning communities. Two faculty members who had been identified by coordinators as learning community faculty self-identified as non–learning community faculty.) By this count, the percentage of learning community faculty who responded to the survey was 77.9 percent.

Learning Community Syllabi Collected from Three Colleges

Course syllabi were collected and evaluated to assess the extent to which they included references to learning communities and references to practices commonly associated with learning communities, such as joint assignments and themed curriculum. Although by no means an ideal measure of implementation, the syllabi nonetheless contain indicators of the presence or absence of certain practices. The assumption underlying the syllabi analysis was that the larger the number of such references in syllabi, the more likely that core dimensions of learning

communities had been implemented. Following this logic, the approach used was to simply count such references and assign a total score to the learning community based on the total number of such references. Of course, this is a strong assumption, because what happens in the classroom of a learning community may or may not bear close resemblance to what the syllabus indicates will happen. For example, some instructors may not have gotten around to changing the syllabi to reflect joint assignments even though they were assigned, while other instructors may have included a theme in their syllabi more because they were expected to do so than because their curriculum incorporated the theme.

A rubric was developed to score the syllabi associated with each learning community (see pages 106–107). Two researchers scored each syllabi "set" (all syllabi associated with a particular learning community) independently and then conferred to resolve discrepancies. Practices commonly associated with well-implemented learning communities were sorted into three groups: "Linking," "Integration," and "Active and collaborative teaching and learning," corresponding to the core dimensions of learning communities discussed in Chapter 2 of this report. A learning community received points for each mention of one of the practices, and the number of points corresponded to whether it was mentioned in one or both of the syllabi. For example, if the practice was mentioned in the syllabus for the math course but not the student success course, the score for that practice was just 1 point. If both syllabi mentioned the practice, the score was 3: one for each syllabus and one "bonus" point. A learning community could receive anywhere between 0 points if none of the practices was mentioned to 78 points if all the practices were mentioned in all the syllabi associated with that learning community. The results are reported in Appendix Table B.1 (see pages 108–111).

Syllabi were collected from the majority of learning communities at Hillsborough, Merced, and Queensborough, as follows:

Hillsborough: 23 of 24 learning communities over three semesters (96 percent)

Merced: 19 of 20 learning communities over three semesters (95 percent)

Queensborough: 22 of 26 learning communities over four semesters (85 percent)

Ongoing Documentation of Operations at Each College

An additional data source consisted of "site diaries" maintained by those members of the project team who were directly involved in operations at each college. These running logs provided a detailed record of operations at each college, which supplemented the qualitative data collected during the research visits. The site diaries documented information on random assignment and study intake, setting up and staffing the learning communities, and professional developmental activities. Changes in the learning community programs were documented, along with problems encountered and solutions applied by the college.

Scoring Rubric to Assess Learning Community Syllabi

College/Campus/Semester: _____   **Name of Scorer:** _____

Instructor: _____   **Course A:** _____

Instructor: _____   **Course B:** _____

Instructor: _____   **Course C:** _____

Single Syllabus: ☐

Linking	Linking is referenced by	A	B	C	Both/All	Subtotal
	Mentioning other link/instructor in title					
	Referring to both/all classes as a *learning community*					
	Clear *description* of what a learning community is					
	Theme is mentioned					
	Theme is referenced throughout the syllabus					
	Joint practices such as if students drop one class they must drop both					
	Other:					
Subtotal						
Integration	**Syllabi include reference to**	**A**	**B**	**C**	**Both/All**	**Subtotal**
	Instructors team teach					
	Instructors sit in each other's classes					
	Synchronized assignments					
	Integrated/Shared assignments					
	Synchronized topics/reading					
	Theme reflected in assignments and readings					
	Shared grading					
	Common readings or text books for both classes					
	Other:					
Subtotal						

Active and collaborative teaching and learning	Syllabi include reference to	A	B	C	Both/All	Subtotal
	Group or team work (collaborative, cooperative, pairs)					
	Student or team presentations					
	Peer evaluations					
	Reflections on own work (journals, portfolios)					
	Class discussions (active learning)					
	Credit for participation					
	Theme-connected project-based learning					
	Service learning project reinforcing LC theme					
	Field trip related to LC theme					
	Other:					
Subtotal						
TOTAL						

Notes:

A, B, C designations are for single syllabus. Each element contained in a syllabus will receive 1 point.

The "Both/All" designation refers to the collective set of syllabi for each learning community. If each element is present in the set of syllabi, an extra point will be awarded in this designation.

If there is only one syllabus for the link, check the single syllabus box. Score syllabus as if there were two syllabi and award the extra point for each element present.

Additional hand-out such as integrative assignments will not be weighted.

The Learning Communities Demonstration

Appendix Table B.1

Results of Assessment of Learning Community Syllabi:
Hillsborough Community College, Merced College, and
Queensborough Community College

Practice	Number of References to Practices		
	Hillsborough	Merced	Queensborough
First semester			
Linking			
Mentioning other link/instructor in title	4	15	2
Referring to both/all classes as a learning community (LC) in the course description	1	15	2
Clear description of a learning community	0	13	0
Theme is mentioned	0	15	0
Theme is referenced througout the syllabus	0	0	0
Joint practices (for example, if students drop one class, they must drop both)	0	13	0
Other	0	6	0
Subtotal	*5*	*77*	*4*
Integration			
Instructors team teach	0	0	0
Instructors sit in on each other's classes	0	0	0
Synchronized assignments	0	1	0
Integrated/shared assignments	3	12	0
Synchronized topics/readings	0	10	2
Theme reflected in assignments and readings	0	15	0
Shared grading	0	7	0
Common readings or textbooks for both classes	0	9	0
Other	0	3	0
Subtotal	*3*	*57*	*2*
Active and collaborative teaching and learning			
Group or team work	19	7	2
Student or team presentations	3	0	0
Peer evaluations	0	8	2
Reflections on own work (journals, portfolios)	17	13	2
Class discussions	19	13	2
Credit for participation	19	7	2
Theme-connected, project-based learning	0	0	0
Service learning project reinforcing LC theme	0	0	0
Field trip related to LC theme	0	0	0
Other	0	0	0
Subtotal	*77*	*48*	*10*
Total references to practices	**85**	**182**	**16**
Total syllabi sets received	**7**	**5**	**2**
Total syllabi sets possible	**7**	**5**	**6**

(continued)

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Practice	Number of References to Practices		
	Hillsborough	Merced	Queensborough
Second semester			
Linking			
Mentioning other link/instructor in title	2	12	5
Referring to both/all classes as a learning community (LC)			
in the course description	3	12	9
Clear description of a learning community	0	10	2
Theme is mentioned	0	12	5
Theme is referenced througout the syllabus	0	0	1
Joint practices (for example, if students drop			
one class, they must drop both)	0	10	0
Other	0	3	0
Subtotal	*5*	*59*	*22*
Integration			
Instructors team teach	0	0	0
Instructors sit in on each other's classes	0	0	0
Synchronized assignments	1	2	3
Integrated/shared assignments	2	9	1
Synchronized topics/readings	0	8	4
Theme reflected in assignments and readings	0	9	7
Shared grading	0	4	0
Common readings or textbooks for both classes	0	9	0
Other	0	3	0
Subtotal	*3*	*44*	*15*
Active and collaborative teaching and learning			
Group or team work	15	8	1
Student or team presentations	3	0	3
Peer evaluations	0	4	3
Reflections on own work (journals, portfolios)	7	11	2
Class discussions	17	14	5
Credit for participation	15	7	5
Theme-connected, project-based learning	0	0	0
Service learning project reinforcing LC theme	0	0	0
Field trip related to LC theme	0	0	0
Other	5	0	0
Subtotal	*62*	*44*	*19*
Total references to practices	**70**	**147**	**56**
Total syllabi sets received	**7**	**6**	**5**
Total syllabi sets possible	**7**	**7**	**5**

Practice	Number of References to Practices		
	Hillsborough	Merced	Queensborough
Third semester			
Linking			
Mentioning other link/instructor in title	17	16	3
Referring to both/all classes as a learning community (LC) in the course description	17	16	5
Clear description of a learning community	1	14	2
Theme is mentioned	4	16	5
Theme is referenced througout the syllabus	0	1	0
Joint practices (for example, if students drop one class, they must drop both)	0	11	0
Other	4	3	0
Subtotal	*43*	*77*	*15*
Integration			
Instructors team teach	0	0	0
Instructors sit in on each other's classes	0	0	0
Synchronized assignments	0	3	5
Integrated/shared assignments	9	9	0
Synchronized topics/readings	10	9	5
Theme reflected in assignments and readings	2	7	5
Shared grading	0	4	0
Common readings or textbooks for both classes	6	9	0
Other	6	4	0
Subtotal	*33*	*45*	*15*
Active and collaborative teaching and learning			
Group or team work	17	8	3
Student or team presentations	3	7	4
Peer evaluations	0	6	3
Reflections on own work (journals, portfolios)	11	11	2
Class discussions	21	18	8
Credit for participation	13	12	8
Theme-connected, project-based learning	0	0	0
Service learning project reinforcing LC theme	0	0	0
Field trip related to LC theme	0	0	0
Other	0	0	0
Subtotal	*65*	*62*	*28*
Total references to practices	**141**	**184**	**58**
Total syllabi sets received	**9**	**8**	**8**
Total syllabi sets possible	**10**	**8**	**8**

(continued)

	Number of References to Practices		
Practice	Hillsborough	Merced	Queensborough
Fourth semester			
Linking			
Mentioning other link/instructor in title	--	--	4
Referring to both/all classes as a learning community (LC) in the course description	--	--	8
Clear description of a learning community	--	--	1
Theme is mentioned	--	--	7
Theme is referenced througout the syllabus	--	--	0
Joint practices (for example, if students drop one class, they must drop both)	--	--	0
Other	--	--	0
Subtotal	*--*	*--*	*20*
Integration			
Instructors team teach	--	--	0
Instructors sit in on each other's classes	--	--	0
Synchronized assignments	--	--	3
Integrated/shared assignments	--	--	2
Synchronized topics/readings	--	--	1
Theme reflected in assignments and readings	--	--	5
Shared grading	--	--	0
Common readings or textbooks for both classes	--	--	0
Other	--	--	0
Subtotal	*--*	*--*	*11*
Active and collaborative teaching and learning			
Group or team work	--	--	2
Student or team presentations	--	--	3
Peer evaluations	--	--	3
Reflections on own work (journals, portfolios)	--	--	2
Class discussions	--	--	10
Credit for participation	--	--	8
Theme-connected, project-based learning	--	--	0
Service learning project reinforcing LC theme	--	--	0
Field trip related to LC theme	--	--	0
Other	--	--	0
Subtotal	*--*	*--*	*28*
Total references to practices	**--**	**--**	**59**
Total syllabi sets received	**--**	**--**	**7**
Total syllabi sets possible	**--**	**--**	**7**

SOURCE: MDRC analysis using learning community syllabi collected from each college.

NOTES: The first semester at Queensborough and Hillsborough is fall 2007, the second semester is spring 2008, the third semester is fall 2008, and the fourth semester (Queensborough only) is spring 2009. The first semester at Merced is spring 2008, the second semester is fall 2008, and the third semester is spring 2009.

Appendix C

Learning Community Faculty Survey

Dear [college name] faculty member,

Here is your opportunity to contribute to community college research funded by the U.S. Department of Education – **and receive a $30 gift certificate to spend at Amazon.com to thank you for your participation!**

You have been selected to participate in a national survey for community college faculty members. As a faculty member, you have unique insight into the teaching and learning that takes place in the classrooms of community colleges. We'd like to tap into that insight to draw a broader picture about faculty attitudes and practices in colleges across the country.

The survey should take approximately **12-15 minutes to complete**. Your answers will be confidential; all answers will be analyzed and reported in a manner that protects your identity. You may skip any question that you would prefer not to answer.

When you finish the survey, please put it in the enclosed blank envelope and seal it. This will protect the anonymity and confidentiality of your responses. Then, return the sealed envelope to the large envelope outside [coordinator's] office or mail it directly back to MDRC using the envelope provided.

Your $30 Amazon.com gift certificate will be sent to you electronically at **[email address]**. *If you would prefer to receive the gift certificate at another email address, please write it here:* _____.

Please complete the survey by Friday, May 15.

Thank you for your time and attention. Your participation in the survey is completely voluntary and your decision to take the survey will not affect your standing at your school in anyway. But we hope you will choose to participate in this important learning activity. By taking the survey, you are making a valuable contribution to knowledge about teaching and learning in community colleges.

If you have any questions or would like additional information, please contact the MDRC research team at [e-mail address] or [telephone number]; or contact [coordinator] at [e-mail address] or [telephone number].

Voluntary Informed Consent Process

Before you begin the survey, we'd like to make sure that you know what it means to participate. You'll be asked to indicate your consent below after reading a description of the research and your rights as a survey participant.

What is the purpose of the survey?

As part of the National Center for Postsecondary Research, supported by the Institute for Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, MDRC is conducting a survey of faculty at your college. MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy and education research organization based in New York. This survey will be used to provide insight into faculty attitudes and practices around teaching and learning. If you'd like more information about either of these research organizations, please see www.postsecondaryresearch.org and www.mdrc.org. It is important to know that the data being collected will not be used to evaluate individual faculty members.

Who is being asked to respond to the survey?

Approximately 100 faculty members at [name of college] are being asked to respond to the survey. In addition, the survey is being administered at five other colleges across the country.

What does it mean to participate in this survey?

The survey will take about 12 to 15 minutes to complete. You may skip any question that you would prefer not to answer. After completing the survey, you will receive a $30 gift card from a major online retailer to thank you for your participation.

What are the possible risks of participating in this survey?

There are no anticipated risks of participating in this study. You will not be engaged in any activities that pose dangers or risks other than those that normally occur in the school. Information collected will not be used for evaluative purposes. Information identifying individual participants or schools will not be released to any person outside of the research team. You will not incur any costs as part of the study; all research costs will be borne by the research organization.

What are the possible benefits of participating in this survey?

One benefit you may receive from participating in this research is the satisfaction of knowing that you are part of a study aimed at improving outcomes for community college students across the country.

Who will know about my participation in this survey?

All of your responses will be kept confidential. All records related to your involvement in this research study will be stored in a secure, locked location or in automated data files to which only the researcher listed below and her staff has access. Your identity on those records will be indicated by a case number rather than by your name, and the information linking these case numbers with your identity will be kept separate from the research records. Your research records will be destroyed when such an action is approved by the sponsor of this study or, as per MDRC policy, at 5 years following study completion, whichever should occur first. You will not be identified by name in any publication of research results unless you sign a separate form giving your permission.

Is my participation in this survey voluntary?

Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study and, if you decide to take part and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. As mentioned above, you may choose to skip any question which you would prefer not to answer. Your current and future status at the school will be the same whether you participate or not. But we hope you will participate; your views are very important to us.

If I have additional questions, how can I get them answered?

You can contact the MDRC research team at [e-mail address] or [telephone number] or [alternate contact name] at [e-mail address] or [telephone number].

Voluntary consent

In order to participate in the survey, please read and affirm the voluntary consent statement below.

I have read and understood the information describing the survey above, and all of my current questions have been answered. I understand that I am encouraged to ask questions about any aspect of this research during the course of taking the survey, and that such future questions will be answered by a qualified individual. Any questions I have about my rights as a research participant will be answered by the Human Subject Protection Advocate at MDRC [contact name and phone number].

What Signing This Form Means:

I agree to participate in this research study. I know that being part of this study is voluntary and that all information about me will be kept private. I know that I can refuse to provide any information and I can end my participation in the study at any time.

Print your name	Sign your name	Date

Faculty Survey – Learning Communities Study

1. HOW MANY YEARS HAVE YOU TAUGHT AT THIS INSTITUTION? _____	2. HOW MANY YEARS HAVE YOU TAUGHT AT **ANY** COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY? _____

3. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT EMPLOYMENT STATUS AT THIS INSTITUTION? (CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER) $_1$O FULL-TIME (TENURE OR TENURE-TRACK) $_2$O FULL-TIME (TEMPORARY OR ADJUNCT) $_3$O PART-TIME (TEMPORARY OR ADJUNCT)	4. WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING BEST DESCRIBES YOUR ROLE AT THE COLLEGE? (CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER) $_1$O COUNSELOR $_2$O ADVISOR $_3$O INSTRUCTIONAL FACULTY $_4$O ADMINISTRATOR $_5$O OTHER: _____

IN YOUR OPINION, HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES FOR BEING AN EFFECTIVE TEACHER? (CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER PER LINE)	NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	VERY IMPORTANT
5. PROVIDING ORAL AND/OR WRITTEN FEEDBACK TO STUDENTS PROMPTLY (BY THE NEXT CLASS PERIOD)	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
6. HELPING STUDENTS WITH ASSIGNMENTS IN CLASS	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
7. BEING AWARE OF CURRENT RESEARCH ON "BEST PRACTICES" IN TEACHING	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
8. PARTICIPATING IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHING	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
9. COLLABORATING WITH OTHER FACULTY ON SYLLABI OR ASSIGNMENTS FOR YOUR COURSE	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
10. WORKING WITH STUDENTS OUTSIDE OF CLASS	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
11. ADVISING STUDENTS ACADEMICALLY	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
12. ADVISING STUDENTS ON CAREER PLANNING	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
13. COMMUNICATING WITH OTHER FACULTY ABOUT SHARED STUDENTS	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
14. BEING AVAILABLE TO STUDENTS DURING SCHEDULED OFFICE HOURS	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
15. WORKING WITH STUDENT SERVICES STAFF	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
16. GETTING TO KNOW STUDENTS ON A PERSONAL LEVEL	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
17. BEING AWARE OF STUDENTS' OTHER COURSEWORK AND OBLIGATIONS	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
18. HELPING STUDENTS SEE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE MATERIAL FROM YOUR COURSE AND OTHER COURSES THEY MAY BE TAKING (FOR EXAMPLE, THROUGH LECTURES OR ASSIGNMENTS WHICH DRAW ON MATERIAL FROM BOTH COURSES)	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
19. CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT ENCOURAGES POSITIVE AND RESPECTFUL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN STUDENTS	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
20. RAISING/DISCUSSING ISSUES OF RACE AND ETHNICITY IN THE CLASSROOM	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O
21. ENCOURAGING INTERACTION IN THE CLASSROOM BETWEEN STUDENTS OF DIVERSE RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUPS	$_1$O	$_2$O	$_3$O

	NOT AT ALL	ONCE PER TERM	2 TO 5 TIMES PER TERM	MORE THAN 5 TIMES PER TERM
22. DISCUSS TEACHING PRACTICES WITH OTHER FACULTY AT YOUR INSTITUTION	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
23. DISCUSS TEACHING PRACTICES WITH FACULTY AT OTHER CAMPUSES OR AT CONFERENCES	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
24. COLLABORATE WITH OTHER FACULTY ON SYLLABI OR ASSIGNMENTS FOR YOUR COURSE	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
25. COMMUNICATE WITH OTHER FACULTY ABOUT SHARED STUDENTS	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
26. WORK WITH STUDENTS OUTSIDE OF CLASS	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
27. ATTEND STUDENT PERFORMANCES OR ACTIVITIES	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
28. DISCUSS COURSE CONTENT WITH OTHER FACULTY AT YOUR INSTITUTION	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
29. ADVISE STUDENTS ACADEMICALLY	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
30. ADVISE STUDENTS ON CAREER PLANNING	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
31. ADVISE STUDENTS ON PERSONAL ISSUES	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
32. ASK STUDENTS IN YOUR CLASSES FOR FEEDBACK ABOUT YOUR TEACHING AND THEIR LEARNING	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
33. HAVE STUDENT SERVICES STAFF ATTEND YOUR CLASS (FOR PRESENTATIONS OR TO HELP STUDENTS)	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
34. REFER STUDENTS TO SERVICES OR RESOURCES ON CAMPUS	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
35. HELP STUDENTS SEE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE MATERIAL FROM YOUR COURSE AND OTHER COURSES THEY MAY BE TAKING (FOR EXAMPLE, THROUGH LECTURES OR ASSIGNMENTS WHICH DRAW ON MATERIAL FROM BOTH COURSES)	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O

	NOT AT ALL	ONCE PER TERM	2 TO 5 TIMES PER TERM	MORE THAN 5 TIMES PER TERM
HOW FREQUENTLY ARE THE FOLLOWING SERVICES PROVIDED DURING SCHEDULED CLASS PERIODS IN YOUR CLASSROOM BY SOMEONE OTHER THAN YOU? (CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER PER LINE)				
36. SUPPLEMENTAL INSTRUCTION	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
37. TUTORING	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
38. CAREER ADVISING/PLANNING	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
39. STUDENT STUDY GROUPS/LABS	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
40. ACADEMIC ADVISING/PLANNING	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
41. WRITING/READING SUPPORT	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O
42. HOMEWORK HELP	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O

43. ACROSS ALL OF YOUR CLASSES, ABOUT WHAT PERCENTAGE OF YOUR TOTAL TIME SPENT IN THE CLASSROOM DO YOU SPEND ON THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES IN A TYPICAL WEEK? (TOTAL SHOULD ADD TO 100%)

LECTURE   _____ %

WHOLE-CLASS DISCUSSION   _____ %

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITIES   _____ %

OTHER   _____ %

	WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS? (CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER PER LINE)	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
44.	STUDENTS DO BETTER IN CLASS IF THEY FORM STUDY GROUPS OUTSIDE OF CLASS	₁O	₂O	₃O	₄O
45.	ONE ROLE OF FACULTY IS TO HELP STUDENTS GET THE SERVICES AND RESOURCES THEY NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN COLLEGE	₁O	₂O	₃O	₄O
46.	STUDENTS DO BETTER IN CLASS IF THEY GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER AND FORM RELATIONSHIPS	₁O	₂O	₃O	₄O
47.	STUDENTS DO BETTER IN CLASS IF THEY FORM PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH FACULTY	₁O	₂O	₃O	₄O
48.	STUDENTS WHO DO NOT FEEL CONNECTED TO THE COLLEGE COMMUNITY TEND TO DO MORE POORLY IN THEIR COURSES	₁O	₂O	₃O	₄O
49.	STUDENTS LEARN BEST THROUGH LECTURES	₁O	₂O	₃O	₄O
50.	GROUP WORK FOR STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM IS AN EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGY	₁O	₂O	₃O	₄O
51.	THIS INSTITUTION DOES A GOOD JOB PROVIDING SUPPORT SERVICES TO STUDENTS WHO NEED THEM	₁O	₂O	₃O	₄O
52.	IT IS MORE IMPORTANT TO FOR FACULTY TO KNOW THEIR SUBJECT WELL THAN TO KNOW THE LATEST THEORY ON "BEST PRACTICES" IN TEACHING	₁O	₂O	₃O	₄O

53. DOES YOUR COLLEGE OFFER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES FOR FACULTY? ₁O YES (GO TO 9A) ₂O NO (GO TO 10)

53A. HOW FREQUENTLY HAVE YOU PARTICIPATED IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES FOR FACULTY WITHIN THE LAST ACADEMIC YEAR (2007-2008)?
₁O ONCE   ₂O 2-3 TIMES   ₃O 4-5 TIMES
₄O MORE THAN 5 TIMES

53B. DID ANY OF THE ACTIVITIES YOU ATTENDED ALSO INCLUDE STUDENT SERVICES STAFF?
₁O YES
₂O NO

54. WHAT IS THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION YOU HAVE ATTAINED? (CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER)
₁O SOME COLLEGE
₂O BACHELOR'S (BA, BS)
₃O MASTER'S (MS, MSW, MBA)
₄O DOCTORATE (ED.D, PH.D)
₅O PROFESSIONAL (MD, JD OR OTHER)

55. IN WHAT DISCIPLINE DID YOU EARN YOUR MOST ADVANCED DEGREE?

_____

56. DO YOU CURRENTLY TEACH ANY DEVELOPMENTAL COURSES (I.E., REMEDIAL OR PRE-COLLEGIATE)?
₁O YES
₂O NO

57. WHAT DEVELOPMENTAL SUBJECT(S) DO YOU TEACH? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)
A☐ ENGLISH (READING)   B☐ ENGLISH (WRITING)
C☐ MATH

58. HAVE YOU EVER TAUGHT IN A "LEARNING COMMUNITY" (I.E., TWO OR MORE COURSES LINKED WITH THE SAME COHORT OF STUDENTS TAKING ALL COURSES TOGETHER)?
₁O YES (GO TO 59)
₂O NO (GO TO 61)

59. DO YOU CURRENTLY TEACH IN A "LEARNING COMMUNITY" (I.E., TWO OR MORE COURSES LINKED WITH THE SAME COHORT OF STUDENTS TAKING ALL COURSES TOGETHER)?
₁O YES (GO TO 60)
₂O NO (GO TO 61)

60. HOW IS TEACHING IN A LEARNING COMMUNITY DIFFERENT FROM TEACHING REGULAR COURSES?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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_____

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_____

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_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

61. HOW WOULD YOU CATEGORIZE YOUR RACE AND/OR ETHNICITY? (CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER)

1 O WHITE, NON-HISPANIC

2 O BLACK, NON-HISPANIC

3 O HISPANIC/LATINO(A)

4 O ASIAN/ASIAN-AMERICAN

5 O AMERICAN INDIAN/NATIVE ALASKAN

6 O MULTI-RACIAL

7 O OTHER: _____

9 O DECLINE TO ANSWER

62. WHAT IS YOUR AGE?

1 O 60 OR HIGHER

2 O 50-59

3 O 40-49

4 O 30-39

5 O 20-29

6 O LESS THAN 20

9 O DECLINE TO ANSWER

63. WHAT IS YOUR GENDER?

1 O MALE

2 O FEMALE

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Rationale, Sites, and Research Design
An NCPR Working Paper (National Center for Postsecondary Research)
NCPR, 2008. Mary G. Visher, Heather Wathington. Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Emily Schneider, with Oscar Cerna, Christine Sansone, Michelle Ware.

A Good Start
Two-Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College
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Early Results from the Opening Doors Demonstration at Kingsborough Community College
MDRC, 2005. Dan Bloom, Colleen Sommo.

Learning Communities and Student Success in Postsecondary Education: A Background Paper.
MDRC, 2005. Derek V. Price, Malisa Lee.

NOTE: All the publications listed above are available for free download at www.mdrc.org.