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The Critical Nature of Intentionality When Supporting Academically Underprepared Students Through Learning Communities

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Abstract

More and more academically underprepared students enter our colleges and universities, and research suggests that traditional efforts at remediation can exacerbate the self-doubt often experienced by at-risk students. While learning communities have been shown to offer under prepared students the support they need to become active participants in their learning, the success of learning communities for this population depends upon the intentional implementation of four key features: integrative learning, collaborative classrooms, co-curricular support, and increased faculty-student interaction.

Keywords

remedial/developmental education; collaborative classrooms; co-curricular support; faculty-student interactions; integrative learning; retention

Barnes and Piland (2010) estimate that 42% of recent high school graduates enter college unprepared academically and require remedial coursework to graduate. More recently, the Center for American Progress (Jimenez, Sargrad, Morales, & Thompson, 2016) surveyed research and discovered that between 40% and 60% of first-year college students require remediation in English, mathematics, or both. According to the most recent data available from the National Center for Education Statistics, only 38% of twelfth-grade students are at or above proficient reading levels, while only 27% percent of that same population are at or above proficient writing levels (Snyder, de Brey & Dillow, 2016).

Many of these underprepared students are transitioning to college after completing a K-12 experience with limited resources, poor academic rigor, and a culture that does not promote interactions with teachers and is absent of self-reflection and assessment. Academic failure after academic failure can lead to a fear of taking academic risks, of being wrong. It can seem safer for students to avoid work and receive a failing grade than to put forth effort and fail. These students may then enter college and compare themselves to their more academically prepared peers. They become mindful of their under-preparedness and, despite having been admitted to their college or university, they question whether they belong and doubt their ability to flourish in college. To succeed, these students must overcome not only their lack of academic preparedness, but also the self-doubt and learned helplessness that it generates.

Institutions have an opportunity to be proactive, rather than reactive, in supporting academically at-risk students on our campuses. In an effort to empower these underprepared students, institutions should shift away from traditional models of remedial education where students might languish in non-credit bearing courses—a situation that can be marginalizing and discouraging. In fact, a growing body of research has argued for a more holistic approach to developmental education than solely developmental coursework. Early studies revealed the importance of the use of college-level materials to build on the potential of struggling students (Cross, 1971, 1976). According to Roueche and Roueche (as cited in Malnarich, 2005), a healthy balance of access and academic excellence delivered through a coherent curriculum is a criterion for success. More recent studies have shown that developmental coursework is more likely to result in positive student outcomes, including earning more credits toward graduation and persisting to degree attainment, when combined with college-level courses (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013).

Learning communities can provide the support that academically at-risk students need to succeed in college-level courses. Learning communities designed to offer curriculum devoted to building academic skills through connecting remedial and content coursework responds to the current academic landscape and can assist in the transition of underprepared students into confident and competent college students (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). When faculty create intentional connections across courses, truly blending remedial and content based courses through purposefully designed assignments, students can make practical use of developmental skills learned in remedial coursework through application in content coursework. This is a more effective pedagogical approach compared to remedial coursework, which claims to be a gateway

but in reality can serve as a barrier, requiring that students earn the right to take content level coursework. When students take remedial coursework that is isolated from content-level coursework, they can perceive their first term (or year) of college as an extension of high school rather than living the academic experience of a college student. This only augments self-doubt. Through a purposefully designed curriculum, underprepared students can be engaged in an intensive learning community experience that includes multiple classes, each of which functions independently with its own classrooms and learning objectives; however, they also function as a unit and are mutually supportive, with each course contributing to the learning objectives of the other course(s) (Rodriguez & Buczinsky, 2013). This design provides students with a unique and rich experience, inviting them not only to learn more, but most importantly, to learn better (Tinto, 1998).

The learning community provides a space for faculty to work more closely to improve and enhance coordination between course expectations, learning outcomes, and assignment timelines for multiple learning community courses. Establishing an even closer collaboration between learning community courses can occur through teaching two learning community courses in a block, with both instructors present for and participants in both courses. This reinforces the faculty partnership to academically at-risk students in a highly visible way and also creates a readily available space for cross-curricular dialogue. If done intentionally and purposefully, this classroom experience grants students the immediate opportunity to make practical use of readings and content from one learning community course in their other course. For example, discussions about argumentation in a developmental writing course in the first half of a two course block provides students a framework to then actively work through the process of developing a clear thesis and outlining supporting arguments in their first-year seminar in the second half of the block. This method of co-instruction can prove rewarding for both faculty and students and can shift the attention away from student deficiencies to instead building on student potential (Malnarich, 2005).

While moving away from the traditional model of remediation, learning community faculty must be encouraged to deviate from the traditional classroom experience, which assumes that learning can only happen in the classroom. Students' lives are focused not only on their disciplinary experiences but also, more importantly, on their diverse lived experiences, and these experiences must be channeled to help students integrate knowledge by making sense of the complex issues that are faced through the varied lenses and perspectives they encounter in their learning process (Newell, 1999). When co-curricular opportunities are developed and rooted into the learning community, learning is extended beyond the classroom in ways that allow faculty to tap into students' lived experiences.

To respond to the problems of under-preparedness and self-doubt outlined above, it can be helpful to engage at-risk students early in the first year in a structured retreat that focuses on building community, encouraging self-confidence, strengthening self-understanding, and developing communication skills. It is here that learning community faculty can establish a culture within their community that allows students to translate strategy into actionable leadership, to reduce fears of making mistakes, to consider what it means to make thoughtful decisions and bring about personal change, and to welcome

the support that is offered across campus rather than refuse it. Through conversations and interactive exercises with their faculty, students may begin to become more aware of their beliefs, identify their own self-defeating patterns, and discuss ways to overcome these self-sabotaging beliefs. An experience like this may also lead to increased faculty-student interactions. Faculty may begin to prioritize developing rapport with their students, tapping into students lived experiences because they perceive this “personal connection as critical to motivating and exciting students to engage in their academic coursework” (Beckowski & Gebauer, 2018, p. 754).

Faculty must be active participants in these co-curricular opportunities. It’s here that students are able to view their faculty in a non-authoritative light and see their faculty as learning partners who also serve as living members of the learning community rather than just “leading” the community. Understanding the depth of influence that faculty-student interactions have on students in these less structured environments and formats allows faculty to embrace these spaces as settings where the intersection between life experiences and academic exploration can and should occur (Beckowski & Gebauer, 2018). When faculty engage in meals, travel to local towns and/or cities to engage in experiential learning opportunities, participate in service, and/or (if applicable) create a presence in the residence halls, academically at-risk students are empowered and motivated and become more confident.

Patience is crucial when working with academically at-risk students. It takes time for students to welcome this support and to develop a sense of trust in their learning community faculty. It may feel odd to many academically at-risk students that their faculty are invested in their academic and social success on campus if this had not been a recognizable feature of their previous educational experiences. It can take a semester or even a full academic year for academically at-risk students to begin to remove the walls they may have built up when working with faculty. Yet faculty must persist in their efforts to build and sustain relationships with their underprepared learning community students.

Learning communities, if done well, can assist academically at-risk students in improving their learning at levels that exceed their non-at-risk peers (Rheinheimer & Mann, 2000). Although integrating developmental and college-level courses is a positive step in the right direction to challenging the traditional model of remediation, it isn’t enough. Faculty must do more to support academically at-risk students by making the classroom a space where active and collaborative learning can occur. Whether this occurs through team teaching, blocked course sequencing, or hands on learning that allows students to make practical use of new knowledge, faculty should remain open-minded and exhibit flexibility when considering the pedagogical approaches necessary to close the educational gap facing academically at-risk students (Cross, 1976). This curriculum must be delivered in conjunction with co-curricular activities that not only support classroom experiences and help students apply their learning to real life but also, maybe more importantly, build community between students and their faculty. It’s these relationships that encourage students to become more active participants in their learning environment (Tinto, 1998)

Learning communities serve as a pedagogical approach that offers students a distinct learning environment, atypical of the traditional college experience. As the number of academically at-risk students entering college increases, institutions must move away from expecting students to be “college ready” and instead adapt the delivery of curriculum and co-curriculum—in a way that is reflective of the campus culture—to become more “student ready.” If learning communities are done well, that is, are offered intentionally, they can serve as a venue to close the educational gap facing underprepared students.

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