

1-28-2013

Attitudinal Outcomes of a Multicultural Learning Community Experience: A Qualitative Analysis

Michael W. Firmin

Cedarville University, mfirmi@cedarville.edu

Susan C. Warner

Cedarville University, swarner@cedarville.edu

Ruth L. Firmin

Cedarville University, rfirmi@cedarville.edu

Courtney B. Johnson

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, courjohn@iupui.edu

Stephanie D. Firebaugh

Purdue University, washcenter@evergreen.edu

Recommended Citation

Firmin, M. W. , Warner, S. C. , Firmin, R. L. , Johnson, C. B. , Firebaugh, S. D. (2013). Attitudinal Outcomes of a Multicultural Learning Community Experience: A Qualitative Analysis. *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, 1(1), Article 9. Available at: <http://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol1/iss1/9>

Attitudinal Outcomes of a Multicultural Learning Community Experience: A Qualitative Analysis

Abstract

Research investigating the long-term effects of learning communities on students is scarce. This qualitative study focuses on the results of 24 in-depth interviews with students three years after participating in a first year learning community at a private, selective Midwestern university. Interview questions were designed to probe students' shifts in personal biases and stereotypes, factors related to their decisions to become involved with the learning community, self-reported levels of satisfaction with the learning community, and suggestions for improving future learning communities. Results of the interviews were positive, and also suggested the value of explicit communication about the purpose of the learning community. The authors point out the value of ongoing continuous improvement efforts.

Cover Page Footnote

This article originally published in: *Journal of Learning Communities Research*, 4(3). (Dec. 2009).

**Attitudinal Outcomes of a Multicultural
Learning Community Experience:
A Qualitative Analysis**

Michael W. Firmin, Susan C. Warner, and Ruth L. Firmin
Cedarville University

Courtney B. Johnson
Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis

Stephanie D. Firebaugh
Purdue University

Learning communities in higher education can serve as powerful connectors among individuals, particularly when integrating minority and White, non-Hispanic students. We conducted 24 in-depth interviews, using qualitative research methodology, with the 2004 cohort of learning community students from a private, selective, Midwestern university. The students, who were seniors at the time of the interviews, reflected on their perceived outcomes of their first-year learning community experiences. We address the students' shifts in personal biases and stereotypes, factors related to their decisions to become involved with the learning community, their self-reported levels of satisfaction, and suggestions for improving future learning communities.

Fostering meaningful multicultural connections among students is a salient challenge for leaders in contemporary higher education (Mio, Barker-Hackett, & Tumambing, 2006). Advancing the goal of diversity, pluralism, and racial reconciliation is an objective that has yet to be fully achieved in American college settings. Naturally, universities show value for these objectives by dedicating resources in programs that help contribute to multicultural ends. Most often, such programs are generally well received. Challenger (2003), for example, found that both faculty and students generally desire to foster diversity awareness and appreciation on college campuses.

2 *Journal of Learning Communities Research* 4(3), December 2009

One type of formal program sometimes implemented in higher education involves the formation of learning communities. These typically are clusters of students who are brought together for the express purpose of interacting in academic and social realms. The purpose of learning communities, as noted by MacGregor and Smith (2005), is to “foster community, coherence, and connections among courses and more sustained intellectual interaction among students and teachers” (p. 3). Learning communities can also become the means for multicultural engagement, often lacking at colleges comprised mostly of a student body with one racial or cultural background. Learning communities in higher education involve placing groups of students in cohorts with the goal of enhancing diversity encounters as part of the overall collegiate experience (Tosey & Gregory, 1998). Moreover, these intimate cohorts can provide a more holistic learning environment for some students (Cross, 1998; Heuser, 2007; Tinto, 1998). Thomas (1993) offered that during the first year of college it is vital for students to create a firm foundation on which to build the subsequent years of higher education. Specifically in regard to learning communities, Zhao and Kuh (2004) reported that students involved in some aspect of a designated learning group demonstrated heightened academic achievement, believed their institution to be a positive environment, and reported personal self-gains. Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004) included diversity as well as other issues, such as community and active learning, as key components to their model of core practices for learning communities. Overall, learning communities tend to increase college retention rates (Hegler, 2004) and also can impact student recruitment (Dabney, Green, & Topalli, 2006).

Chavez (2007) reported that minority students often find it challenging to navigate successfully through a milieu where their culture and values are not always shared with the dominant culture of the campus. This challenge also is shared by international students across many American universities (Shirayev & Levy, 2004). Most college administrators desire for their campuses to be open and inclusive for all cultures. Good-faith initiatives to help lessen the impact of these dynamics operating against optimal student learning are warranted. The establishment of multicultural learning communities is one means of helping to address this concern (Lardner, 2003).

When selecting colleges, minority students often look for institutions where their personal goals will be appreciated and encouraged as well as where opportunities abound for campus involvement and change (Tatum, 2004). When comparing college adjustment of nonminority to minority students, Eimers and Pike (1997) found that minority students generally

received less external social support and, as a result, benefit from academic integration into the institution. In learning communities, students have the potential for enhanced engagement and social connections with peer and faculty that likely would not occur without the structured experience (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Cox (2004) reported generally positive findings when such communities were supervised and conducted with apt sensitivity. Brower and Dettinger (1998) cautioned learning community directors regarding the necessity of defining explicit goals for each community. Clearly defined objectives can generate specific outcomes, leading to effective communities for the students and faculty members involved. The converse, of course, likely works against a learning community's ultimate success.

In terms of educational gains, learning often is enhanced when undertaken in an environment occupied by a diversified student body (Chung & Sedlacek, 1999). While cultural attitudes and values ingrained from childhood affect students' perceived value of academic achievement (Roach, 2004), learning communities provide a positive learning environment where individual and group goals may be rewarded (MacGregor, 1991). Particularly in regard to White, non-Hispanic students, those experiencing greater degrees of racial diversity presented themselves with a heightened motivation to grasp perspectives of individuals differing from themselves. Moreover, these diversity-exposed students also demonstrated the greatest interest in earning graduate degrees (Roach, 2004).

A diversified social and educational environment can reduce inaccurate stereotypes and stimulate critical thinking skills (King, 1999). Meacham, McClellan, Pearse, and Greene (2003) showed minority and nonminority students alike believed that a diversified classroom enabled opportunity for addressing complex issues and garnering cultural knowledge. Learning communities comprised of first-year students can serve as a social resource, allowing students to network with individuals perhaps unlikely to interact without the established community group (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004). Antonio (2001) also reported that interracial interaction can foster students to develop and refine leadership skills as well as increase cultural awareness.

In sum, potential benefits for student participation in learning communities generally appear favorable. Nonetheless, any formal program warrants outcome assessments in order to understand how a specific program that was applied in a particular context was received by the student participants. With the backdrop of the literature available, we sought to help appraise whether a pilot year of a learning community at a selective,

4 *Journal of Learning Communities Research* 4(3), December 2009

private, Midwestern university would provide these boons implied in the research literature. Multiple means are apt for such assessments, of course. We selected qualitative research protocol since it would provide the depth of expression among the participants to allow us best to assess both the potential strengths and weaknesses of the program. The method allows for engagement in thick-description analysis in ways that the quantitative method (with all its potential benefits) does not (Creswell, 2008).

Seniors at the time of interviews, the participants of the 2004 pilot year at this particular institution reflected on the experiences of the learning community while an active member and commented on perceived lasting effects of their participation, if any. We approached the study inductively and made deliberate attempts to appraise the learning community program objectively—apart from preconceived biases or attempts to favor or disfavor the program’s implementation. In qualitative research terms, we worked diligently to bracket (Raffanti, 2006) our own sentiments, attempting to approach the study as straightforwardly as possible. To some degree, qualitative research is always context dependent (Silverman, 2006). Nonetheless, we do believe that the report from the present outcomes assessment has potential benefit and insight for future learning community directors. That is, to the degree that future learning communities share characteristics of the present sample, some reasonable degree of external validity is warranted (Firmin, 2006).

Method

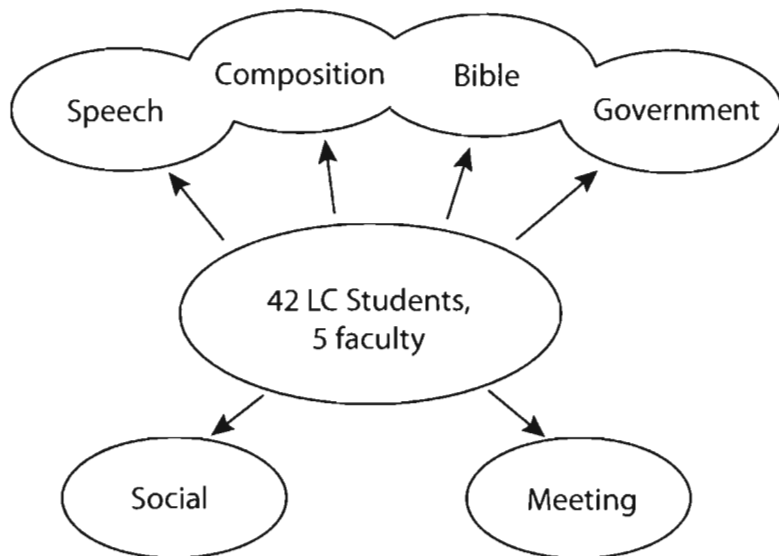
The University’s Learning Community Program

The learning community used in the present study was a program implemented at a private, selective, comprehensive university in the Midwestern region of the United States. Student enrollment for this institution was slightly over 3,000. During the pilot year of the learning community in 2004, the university received grant funding to explore the ramifications of the learning community on a college campus of the nature previously described. The majority of students attending this university were White, non-Hispanic with only 6% being minority.

The intended purposes of the learning community was to provide incoming minority students with a learning environment in the classroom with racial diversity, to give these new students a social network in the early days of their first-year experience, and to link faculty members who would act as mentors as well as instructors in the classroom. Four professors, teaching courses filled exclusively with learning community students, joined the learning community as faculty advisors and met with

the students both in class and outside of class during social events and bimonthly group meetings. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Organizational structure of learning community



For their first year, learning community students were placed, when possible, in four general education courses (two classes per semester), with these course sections comprised solely with learning community members (e.g., their speech class). In addition, social events for students and learning community professors, such as dinner at the house of a learning community professor, field trip to a museum, and bimonthly group meetings provided apt opportunities for learning community members to engage one another. During the bimonthly gatherings, an educational or cultural activity was utilized to provide a loose format of structure and purpose for the meetings. The course cohesion and activity opportunities were maintained for the duration of the 2004–2005 academic year, terminating formally with the start of students' sophomore year.

The University's Learning Community consisted of a group of multicultural freshman students with five faculty. Incoming freshman students who identified their minority racial status were placed in this community along with a random selection of Caucasian students. Forty-two students were involved in the LC, with approximately equal numbers of Caucasian, African American, Asian, and Hispanic students. These students were registered together as a cohort for two or three general education courses during their first two semesters as freshman. The

courses included in this were Fundamentals of Speech, Composition, Government, and two Bible classes (Christian Life and Thought and Spiritual Formation). In order to keep the class sizes small, the cohort was divided in half and one part took two of the courses together while the other half took the other three courses. The following semester, this same method was reversed with the cohorts taking the courses they had not had the previous semester. The exception to this was for the Bible courses. The entire cohort was kept together for the two Bible courses, one during fall semester and one during spring. Fundamentals of Speech, Composition, and Government were offered both semesters, but only half of the cohort took the classes at one time. By the end of the first year, the LC participants had taken all five of the courses offered with each of the professors.

Participants

Of the original 42 students placed in the learning community specified courses, we interviewed 24 individuals, 14 female and 10 male. True to the nature of this learning community, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds ranged significantly among participants, with students stating the following ethnicities: Asian; Hispanic; White, non-Hispanic; Multiracial; and African American. Of the original group of 42, 27 students were still attending and were seniors at the time of the interviews. Ten of the original group of students had left after their first year at the university. Thirteen of the students we interviewed self-reported moderate to high levels of involvement with activities that occurred outside the classroom in the learning community during their first year at the university, 2 rated themselves as medium-level participants, 5 claimed low involvement, and 3 simply were not involved (while still placed in classes with other learning community students, this obviously did not guarantee a commitment to learning community participation in areas other than classroom activities). Learning community members were notified by faculty of their selection into the learning community classes prior to their arrival on campus, primarily through phone calls. Additionally, a letter of explanation was sent to the students' homes.

Data Collection and Analysis

Among the multiple traditions of qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 2004), we designed the present investigation to be a phenomenological research study. As such, our interest was to assess the participants' own perceptions and garner their feedback as to how they viewed their learning community experiences from three years prior (Creswell, 2007). We were interested in examining the long-term

impacts on students from belonging to the learning community in their first year. Consequently, our prime research question focused on what the participants remembered, how they felt about their involvement, and in what ways they perceived potential benefit and potential improvements from their previous involvements. Since the purpose of the present project was to generate an inductive, qualitative research study, we did not collect quantitative data. This approach is left for subsequent research that will use our present findings to generate meaningful hypotheses and use qualitative measures (Berg, 2004; Flick, 2006).

Based on our own philosophical commitments to the qualitative research process and consistent with accepted qualitative methodology practice (Johnson & Christensen, 2004), we deliberately avoided the use of theory in the data analysis. Although we acknowledge the spectrum of protocols among qualitative researchers, including the views of some qualitative researchers who view theory as central to research design (e.g., Anfara & Mertz, 2006), ours is in the more traditional paradigm where theory is understood to be the role of the reader to apply rather than the role of the researcher to superimpose on the data and write-up in behalf of the reader (Creswell, 2007). This is stated forthrightly so the reader understands that the lack of theoretical discussion in the article's literature review and discussion section of this article is not an oversight, but, rather, a deliberate choice by the authors.

Semistructured interviews were conducted with the participants during the spring 2008 semester. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. All names used in the present article are pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of learning community faculty and members. We utilized semistructured interviews in order to provide greater degrees of flexibility when interviewing, allowing the participants to elaborate on various points and take the interviews where they wished to go at times (Seidman, 2006). We believe this enhanced the overall quality of data obtained, given the research objective and aims.

The research team met repeatedly in order to code the data and generate potential themes. Following Maxwell's (2005) protocol, we utilized an open coding process, following an inductive approach whereby we progressed from the general statements from the data to what we believed were general, overarching themes. Constant comparison techniques (Bereska, 2003) were employed as we contrasted and matched the responses provided by the participants, both within and among the various transcripts. The coding process involved reading the transcripts multiple times and assessing them for reoccurring words, ideas, and constructs. Some codes that we had assigned initially were discarded later

for lack of support throughout the majority of the participants' interviews (Marshall, 2002). The coding process also was enhanced through asking key questions, conducting an organizational review, using concept mapping, and creating visual displays of the findings (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2008).

Internal validity for our data analysis was enhanced through a number of means. One was through generating a data trail (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Daytner, 2006). That is, we created a direct link from each of our themes to the data in the transcripts. The use of NVIVO 8 software was particularly helpful in forming this data audit through the coding process. Consistent with Lewins and Silver (2007), the computer analysis of the data enhanced the grounding of our findings to specific quotations that best represented the consensus of the participants. Creating a data audit also has the benefit of enabling future researchers to see the connections between our conclusions and the undergirding support in the interviews.

Consensus among the multiple researchers in the study provided additional internal validity support for the study (Silverman, 2006). Namely, the only themes reported in the article are ones where all the researchers agreed clarity existed and ones that represented the general consensus of the students who participated in the learning community during their first-year experience. Additionally, we employed the use of an outside qualitative researcher, independent of the data collection process, to appraise the methodology and conclusions that were grounded in the transcripts (De Wet & Erasmus, 2005; Merriam, 2002). The researchers were able to follow the links between the conclusions drawn in our study to the data that adequately supported the findings.

The internal validity of our study was strengthened further through the use of member checks (Padgett, Mathew, & Conte, 2004). Particularly, we garnered input from various participants in the study, asking for their contributions as to the overall validity of the findings. All were in subsequent agreement with the conclusions or themes generated in the article. Saturation (Neuman, 2006) occurred in the data collection and analysis. That is, at around 20 or so interviews, the reoccurring ideas and constructs were relatively consistent and diminishing returns were occurring when new individuals were added to the research sample. Consequently, we believe that the sample size in the present study is adequate for the intended research purpose and is consistent with sound qualitative methods protocol (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Our goal was to generate a research study that met the highest standards in qualitative research design (Cope, 2004; Morse, Barrett,

Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). From the outset of the research process, we implemented a process that would ensure the study possessed rigor in the qualitative tradition. Consistent with experts such as Dixon-Woods, Shaw, Agarwal, and Smith (2004), we took great effort to follow internal validity prompts relating to sampling, data collection, and analysis from the blueprint through the article's write-up.

Results

Three overarching categories emerged from the transcript data into which our present themes naturally fit: social outcomes, attitudinal outcomes, and academic outcomes of the learning community.

Previously, we (Firman, Warner, Johnson, Firebaugh, & Firmin, 2008) presented findings that related to the learning communities' social outcomes, as participants identified the benefits of both networking and establishing a friend base during an incipient stage of their overall collegiate experiences. Further social outcomes included subsequent involvement in campus activities that focused on diversity and related to multicultural issues. Academic outcomes were found to include interaction with the faculty, academic support issues, and some commonalities among individuals who chose not to participate in the learning community.

The attitudinal outcomes of the learning community related here in the present article include four main findings. First, White, non-Hispanic students who participated in the learning community reportedly experienced shifts in personal biases and stereotypes. These students also perceived the learning community to be a "safe" context in which to learn and grow in understanding. Second, participants from all racial backgrounds shared various negative factors they perceived relating to their involvement in the learning community, which included schoolwork and competing extracurricular activities. Third, most of the students involved in the learning community described their overall experiences as generally positive. Personal levels of involvement, which varied from student to student, seemingly were associated with general perceptions of satisfaction relating to learning community experiences. Finally, participants shared suggestions for improving the learning community, including the need to explicitly identify the learning community's purpose and the importance of faculty interaction.

Shifts in Personal Biases and Stereotypes

Most students who participated in the learning community recalled the group's emphasis on multicultural issues and the related discussions held during meetings and activities. In particular, the learning community

10 *Journal of Learning Communities Research* 4(3), December 2009

students who were not minorities on campus reported this aspect of the learning community to have significantly impacted their personal viewpoints relating to issues such as diversity. Most White, non-Hispanic students, such as Karen, affirmed the learning community's positive impact on their own interactions with minority peers and attributed much of their shift in thinking to lessons learned through interacting with other learning community members:

I would say that [the learning community] it helped me get rid of stereotypes and just hesitations during this year, [whether through] friendships or through initiating conversations or through working with people who were truly different from you. Because the relationships, you know, were so different, and when we work altogether, [I thought] "We're not going to understand each other, or we are not going to relate to each other." But that really is not true. It is true that anything that is unfamiliar is going to have an element of fear, but once you get past that element of fear, you realize all the similarities and realize how stupid it was to be afraid of them in the first place.

In a similar manner, participants explained the importance of their personal shifts in thinking, resulting from time spent in the learning community programs. Many of these were directed specifically toward breaking down false presuppositions. In particular, students described a learning process that took place during their learning community involvement. Amy, for example, explained her initial "cluelessness" when interacting with minority students and the subsequent change that occurred throughout her yearlong involvement in the learning community:

The learning community was a good place for me because it worked out a lot of stereotypes that I had just as far as barriers and people who come from different backgrounds from me. They come from predominantly Caucasian high schools. We had a lot of racial issues with African American students, though I just was always hesitant to initiate conversations with people of different backgrounds from me because I always felt like it was kind of weird if I was the White person, and I just feel there was a stigma being a White student. You know, like, singling out the minorities and wanting to be friends with them. I just felt like they would think that I had an ulterior motive, when really I didn't. [The] learning community was

good for me just to break down those barriers and to learn to look beyond what people look like or their background and to learn who they are as individuals, what their stories are, what their goals are, and to see the similarities and also appreciate the differences.

White, non-Hispanic students further described their experiences in the learning community as beneficial because of the ratio reversal they experienced. That is, while participating in learning community activities, meetings, or select classes, students who normally were a part of the “majority” ethnic group on campus experienced being the “minority.” Alex, for example, aptly voiced the sentiments of most White, non-Hispanic participants: “I don’t really think I was prejudiced necessarily before, but I will say though, it was the first time I ever felt like a minority as a Caucasian . . . and I think that was probably a healthy experience!” Further, White, non-Hispanic participants described their experiences as “minority” students within the learning community contexts to be beneficial both personally and for the students of diverse ethnicities. That is, through such experiences the White, non-Hispanic participants seemingly realized the comfort or discomfort created by particular ethnic ratios found in group settings. John summarized most White, non-Hispanic participants while contrasting his typical classroom experiences, where his ethnicity was the majority, with the environments created by learning community participation. He explained how this experience helped shape his understanding of minority students’ experiences:

When, if a minority student is there, they’re not really as much of a minority student anymore in that group. Whereas me, I’m, when I’m in the full student body, it’s not like, the learning community was like a place where I would go and it would be like radically different in terms of the way I felt versus the student body because I was in the majority for that too. So, it probably wasn’t quite the same. But then it was neat too because I didn’t feel it a whole lot, but it was neat to think about how I was kind of the minority I suppose in that group. So I had that opposite kind of effect on it from the majority to the minority and they went from, you know minority to everybody is different so [*sic*].

Through these experiences as the relative “minority” ratio, White, non-Hispanic participants reportedly increased their personal understandings of minority viewpoints. Additionally, as diversity was discussed within learning community contexts, White, non-Hispanic

12 *Journal of Learning Communities Research* 4(3), December 2009

students shared their heightened sensitivity toward these issues. Carl captured the sentiment of most White, non-Hispanic participants while reflecting on his experiences in the learning community and the resultant “enlightenment” he experienced:

It made me think about things sometimes. They would just ask, like sometimes we would talk about, mostly discussion, we would talk about something that encouraged somebody that was a minority would bring something up and I would just be like, “Oh I never thought about that.” Like, I think of people saying, like, you know, if I’m not in class it’s so noticeable, like “Oh, where is such and such,” because I’m the only Black kid in the whole class. And then I was just like, you know I never, I never thought about that, but that is, that is very true. Like, if there’s 29 students in a class, and 28 of them are White, you know when the Black kid is not there, you know. But, it’s easy for us to blend in. So things like that that I had never really given much thought to, well because I didn’t need to, it made me think about. And it’s just, I don’t know, it’s fun, kind of, hearing different, some of it’s just different personalities, but some of it also is a result of backgrounds and situations like that. It was a learning experience from the learning community.

Finally, White, non-Hispanic participants reported that these experiences often realigned their perspectives regarding diversity. While most White, non-Hispanic students interviewed would not have classified themselves as “prejudiced,” participants were surprised to find how much their own perception changed as a result of the learning community and how much they felt was yet to be learned. Additionally, White, non-Hispanic students described the learning community environment as one in which the learning process could take place safely. Susan, for example, encapsulated the views held by most White, non-Hispanic participants when describing the positive dialogue that took place between minority and White, non-Hispanic students that significantly aided their learning:

I realized I had always prided myself on being so, like, like diverse and liking that stuff. But then I really was so ignorant and still am, like, in a lot of ways. But it just kind of exposed my own ignorance and, I mean, I wanted to learn, but I didn’t know nearly as much as I thought I did . . . just, like, [in the learning community] if I’m joking around

with a friend and I say something dumb about their culture that I don't think would be offensive, but really is, they don't chop my head off and say, "You're a racist!" They say, "[Name], you really need to, like, evaluate what you're saying and think about it and this is the reason why it offended me." And [my friends from the learning community] just help me think through the ways, like, they see things sometimes.

Negative Factors Affecting Student Involvement

Students described varying obstacles that hindered their plenary participation in the learning community. While the finding discussed previously focused on the White, non-Hispanic respondents, the next findings encompassed all respondents regardless of racial or ethnic backgrounds. For many participants, simply the busyness of their schedules limited the time that they felt able to commit to learning community involvement. Carla, for example, summarized the rationales shared by many participants when describing the regularity of their learning community participation: "I was pretty involved. I went to most of the meetings. I went to the first 4 hour meeting on getting started weekend . . . and the cookout and all the fun stuff we did and the activities with the professors, like, the more educational side of it . . . if I didn't go, it was just because of homework." Students further explained that simultaneous extracurricular activities often competed for their time. Particularly, students who were involved in sports or other university-sponsored organizations, clubs, or teams found it difficult to participate in the learning community because of prior time commitments. Alfanso summarized the vantage point of most participants who had significant time demands from involvement in other programs on campus, such as sports teams:

I was on the soccer team my freshman year, so I had a lot of team stuff to do during the season. [With playing a sport,] there really is no time for participating in any other activities, and I don't really know what I'm missing out on. I'm not happy that I didn't do [learning community] stuff, but I don't exactly regret it. Things just sort of [had to] turn out the way they did.

Participants did conclude, however, that the first year was an ideal time for learning community involvement. Students explained a general trend that involvement in campus activities tends to increase with grade levels due to added responsibilities on campus and also a greater desire to

14 *Journal of Learning Communities Research* 4(3), December 2009

participate in campus-wide activities and opportunities for involvement. As a result, participants perceived the first year to be the era of one's college career best suited for learning community involvement in terms of time commitment. Additionally, most participants did not view their learning community involvement as an overwhelming time commitment. Kailee summarized by describing her own level of involvement and her perception of business that learning community involvement added to her schedule:

There's not a huge time commitment [for learning community involvement]. I know we try to do things every now and again, but [the] freshman year you're not involved in as many things as you are [the] sophomore or even [the] junior year. I mean, there are always a few overzealous individuals who try to tackle everything their first year here. Because that wasn't a problem for me, I mean, I'd do some things, but I wouldn't tackle myself with them! Even if I did, and even individuals who did make their schedules really hectic, the learning community didn't really take up a vast majority of our time. I'm pretty sure that others who had other commitments would rather be at the learning community, or they'd try to work around them! So, I know that [for most people] the time frame thing really wasn't a hard thing.

Overall Satisfaction

Looking back on their experiences as learning community members, most respondents, White and non-White, reflected on their personal involvement with overall satisfaction. Interestingly, most students viewed their individual level of participation in the learning community as sufficient, regardless of their actual participation level. That is to say, whether students were moderately or significantly involved, the trend was that participants generally were pleased with their own level of participation in the learning community. Joshua fittingly described the role most students found the learning community played during their first year, reflecting the overall appreciation each member had for his or her involvement:

I felt like [the learning community,] it was another tool to get to know students here and especially that was good for me because coming to [the university] I didn't know anyone, I didn't have any connections to [the university], no ties at all. So for [the learning community] to come

about, for this to happen, I deeply appreciated it, because it got me to get to know other people here on campus, especially in my class.

In addition, most participants described their overall learning community experiences as positive components of their college experiences. Repeatedly, students emphasized the fun and social elements of their learning community involvement and attributed many of their positive sentiments to these aspects of the program. Nicole summarized most participants' descriptions of the learning community, recalling her experiences to have been good ones:

It was fun. It was a good place to meet new friends. And it provided an opportunity to get to know people outside of my major. It was a nice place to relax and not think about school for a little bit and it was fun too just to be with other people from different cultures and different backgrounds.

Participants further affirmed the impact of experiences inside of class and their individual decisions to participate in the learning community's social events when reflecting as seniors on the learning community. That is, now that students could reflect on 3 years of college experience, the learning community's lasting impact became more clear. Tonisha summarized the reflections of most participants when describing the learning community's reaching impact on her college experience:

At that point in my life, as a brand new, scared, shy college freshman, I would have said no, that I wouldn't have opted to be a member of the learning community. But looking back on it now, I think it was a positive thing for me. [Looking back now], I definitely would have, and I think it was a great experience. I wish that everyone could do it, but obviously not everyone could do it. But yeah, hands down, I definitely would have done it.

Suggestions

While reflecting on their experiences as learning community members, participants shared three dominant suggestions for improving the program. First, students described experiencing confusion when first introduced to the learning community by the university. Both minority and White, non-Hispanic students reported the need for clarifying the purpose of the learning community. Additionally, participants seemingly perceived

the student body to be both unaware and uninformed concerning the learning community's purpose. Marcus, like most participants, emphasized the importance of learning community leaders educating the student body in this regard:

I don't think that the people outside the learning community really knew what it was either. Some of them might have just thought that it was an organization or something to corner all the minority students who happen to be here at [the university], which I don't think it was that either because there were a couple of Caucasian students there in the learning community as well. So, I'd say the learning community, it was very diverse in the people it gathered, but yet people outside the learning community I don't think really knew about it and I think that a lot still don't know about it.

Second, participants explained the perceived need to keep the learning community program flexible. Students suggested that, in future years, the program should be structured in a way that accommodations be made periodically throughout the year to best fit the needs of that year's particular first-year student. Leroy, for example, explained the crucial role adaptability should play in the success of the learning community:

I'd say keep it social, but yet open things up for maybe academic talk or just cultural talk. I remember my freshman year we didn't really go through the educational things and the book . . . and I think that they do need to adapt to different students and not be like, this is our structure, this is the format of every meeting that we're going to have, and this is what we're going to follow and this is the schedule, and we're not going to change it no matter what.

Finally, participants shared their perceptions that faculty interaction was a key component to the learning community's success. Students continually recounted specific instances when learning community faculty dedicated time to individually building relationships with learning community students. Whether through interactions in classes or other learning community activities, participants emphasized the meaningful impact these faculty members had on their overall educational experience. Charmaine summarized most participants in this regard:

I'd say it left for a good relationship with the faculty who were involved because you felt like you knew them outside of the classroom, especially when we had our little Christmas party. We would see the different side of the professors than what we would just see in classes or how they acted in classes, it was like "Oh" there's a rhyme and a reason for it when you see it outside of class. So I would say that the relationship with the professors improved because we knew that they were out there to help us. We knew that they were in support of this community and support for what we're doing. It shows that they care because they're a part of it and they're dedicated to it.

Discussion

As previously stated, the present findings were gathered from students who participated in the pilot year of a learning community program. The implementation of novel programs inevitably accompanies challenges that must be more fully developed over time in order to ensure the program's success. Qualitative studies, such as the present one, uniquely shed light on the perceptions of students involved. This yields greater insight regarding the dynamics of programs where students feel improvement is needed as well as those elements perceived as contributing to the program's success. Administrators seeking the diversity, pluralism, and racial reconciliation that Mio, Barker-Hackett, and Tumaming (2006) discuss are encouraged to track the outcome assessments of programs such as learning communities. Once such programs are in place, evaluation is required for continual improvement and to ensure that the needs of the students are being met.

One realm of the learning community where administrators should give due attention relates to communication. Because this dynamic is central to the premise of programs such as learning communities, the importance of effective communication exists on multiple fronts. First, leaders of learning community programs need to communicate effectively with the participating students. First impressions often prove to be lasting ones, and, when communicating the learning community's objectives, campus administrators should place a priority on conveying explicitly the purpose, aims, and goals of learning community programs to students. Conversely, ineffective communication between learning community administrators and participants may resultantly stifle the success of learning community programs or at least weaken students' motivation to participate. As Brower and Dettinger (1998) note, both the immediate success and the ultimate

longevity of learning community programs often hinge on the directors' abilities to articulate established goals. Goals such as cooperative learning, deep learning, and collaboration are essential to successful learning communities and should be clearly articulated by the faculty leadership. Similarly, communication also becomes important among the participants of the learning community. As noted by Tosey and Gregory (1998), the goal of learning communities is to enhance diversity through student group interactions. Necessarily, then, effective communication between learning community members plays a key role in the overall success or failure of a given learning community program. Program supervisors may consider facilitating, formally or informally, group communications for the purpose of averting potential detrimental conversation patterns, such as judgmental or critical attitudes, found within the context of group discussions. Participants in the present study described themselves as feeling that they experienced sanctuary—freedom to communicate openly and honestly—in a milieu of psychological safety.

Campus leaders effectively communicating with the student body regarding the learning community also seems vital to the program's overall success. In the present case, students in our study conveyed perceptions that their peers were relatively unaware of the learning community and its intended role on campus. In sum, campus administrators responsible for learning communities should craft an explicit plan for how best to relate the goals, aims, and objectives of learning communities to the student body. Additionally, regular reminders and progress updates may be warranted in order to enhance the learning communities' ultimate and long-term success.

The learning community program in our sample was administered by a handful of university faculty members. Of particular note is the phenomenon that no student leaders emerged from within the group. Obviously, some students had leadership roles outside of the learning community. However, the learning community was not organized in a way that acknowledged formal leadership roles within itself. On the one hand, this result may have strengthened the learning community's group dynamic as each member likely felt equal to all the others. The egalitarian dynamic potentially could have been one of the secrets of the program's overall success. These findings also may help explain why participants emphasized the value of faculty interactions within the learning community. While participants in our sample seemingly were not dissatisfied with their learning community experiences, future program directors may wish to inculcate student leadership as a fundamental element of learning community meetings. Establishing student leadership within the learning

community potentially would help students to more fully identify with the program as well as better understand the learning community's goals and purposes. As Antonio (2001) noted, leadership skills are refined through multicultural interactions. Therefore, implementing student-based leadership may help generate a healthy environment in which students both increase their cultural awareness and develop the skills necessary for effective, future leadership.

As we examined the shifts in personal biases that participants reported, it soon became clear that these changes were reported almost exclusively by the White, non-Hispanic learning community members and not by the minority students in the study. That is not to suggest, of course, that minority students did not also experience shifts in their thinking. However, White, non-Hispanic students explicitly vocalized their "multicultural learning experiences" to a far greater extent than did the minority participants. While White, non-Hispanic students reported that various learning community experiences led to changing their own prejudices and stereotypes, minority students noted no resulting self-insight. In the reviewed literature, Roach (2004) notes that learning communities often significantly impact the views held by White, non-Hispanic participants. These students frequently emerge from their learning community experiences increasingly sensitive to diversity and with a heightened desire to better comprehend the vantage points of individuals different than themselves. It is reasonable to suspect that both minority and White, non-Hispanic students would show articulated shifts in their respective perceptions as a result of a yearlong learning community experience. Further research warrants follow-up on this dynamic and exploration of the potentially modified multicultural perceptions of minorities who undergo learning community involvement.

Thomas (1993) discussed learning communities in terms of providing a "foundation" upon which students build throughout their subsequent education. During the first year in particular, Thomas suggests that students set specific trajectories that they will continue to follow throughout the remainder of their college experiences. Therefore, involvement in the learning community during one's first year at college potentially would have a greater impact than if involvement took place, say, during the students' senior year. Similarly, our participants described the compatibility between the dynamics present during their first years of college with that of learning communities' structures and aims. Developmentally, first-year students are uniquely placed between teenage years and adulthood—a time during which most students examine their own belief systems (Feldman, 2008). As a result, involvement in the learning community during such an

impressionable time of life seemingly proved to be effective in the present student learning community population.

Finally, we note the untapped potential that existed in the present learning community. Since this was only the first year (and a pilot study), obviously much more could have been harnessed from the dynamics experienced by the learning community group. Regular meetings among those administrating the learning community, with plenary notes being taken during these sessions, can help to improve the quality of learning communities from one year to the next. Experienced university faculty are well aware that the first time a college course is taught is often not its best. Rather, each time the course is repeated, adept faculty hone various elements of the course, introducing new dynamics and eliminating others that were perceived as less successful for achieving the desired ends. In the same manner, as administrators repeat learning communities, there should be built-in mechanisms for formal and informal appraisal of the students' experiences. Establishing an annual, continuous improvement program seems foundational for a learning community's long-term success. In addition, conducting research studies—such as the present one—using learning community students as participants is a potential means of gaining extremely valuable data. Students, for example, may be willing to share perceptions with researchers who are independent of the learning community more than they are willing to share with administrators with whom they have developed relationships and whose feelings they might not want to hurt by being completely honest at times. Additionally, follow-up research, such as the present project, can provide data regarding residual effects experienced by learning community participants. Ultimately, it is the long-term changes that are desired in learning community programs.

Limitations and Future Research

All good research recognizes the potential limitations of a study and reports them (Price & Murnan, 2004). Replication of the present research study—across multiple regions of the country and various types of universities—is needed. Particularly, the effects of a learning community experience for students attending institutions with a sizably larger student body may be even more pronounced or show different results altogether. In addition, it would be helpful to interview participants of learning communities while they are actively and concurrently functioning members of the group. Obviously, retrospective feedback of the experience may be distorted in that negative experiences may be glossed over or the benefits may have been downplayed or mentally enhanced with the passage of time.

In addition, these pilot-year students may have been influenced by talking to learning community students of subsequent years. With the commencement of each academic year since 2004, a new learning community is created for the incoming first-year students. Students in the 2004 cohort may have been influenced by talking to current members or members not in their respective year, allowing those students' experiences to alter how they reported their own. Of interest for further research, replicating this study with students beyond the 2004 cohort would offer insight into improvements, if any, in communicative flaws or structuring of the learning community and expectations for group members.

Finally, the results related in the present article reflect mostly the sentiments of those who actively participated in the learning community. As noted, there was a relatively substantial number of individuals who chose not to become involved with the learning community activities outside of class, even though they were placed into the program and technically were members of the group. Future research should single out these individuals for a targeted study, assessing what might be done better in order to increase the overall yield of participation in the group. Such findings can be integrated into the planning and implementation loops as campus learning communities undergo the continuous improvement cycle. Future research should also investigate comparisons of the learning communities of years following this pilot year with particular attention to assessment of intercultural abilities that might have been gained by participation in this particular type of learning community.

References

- Anfara, V. A., & Mertz, N. T. (2006). Introduction. In V. Anfara & N. Mertz (Eds.), *Theoretical frameworks in qualitative research* (pp. xiii–xxxii). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Antonio, A. L. (2001). The role of interracial interaction in the development of leadership skills and cultural knowledge and understanding. *Research in Higher Education, 42*, 593–617.
- Arminio, J. L., & Hultgren, F. H. (2002). Breaking out of the shadow: The question of criteria in qualitative research. *Journal of College Student Development, 43*, 447–460.
- Bereska, T. M. (2003). How will I know a code when I see it? *Qualitative Research Journal, 3*, 60–74.
- Berg, B. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (5th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.
- Brower, A. M., & Dettinger, K. M. (1998, November). What is a learning community? *About Campus, 3*(5), 15–21.
- Challenger, D. F. (2003, April 24). Effectively addressing issues of race on campus. *Black Issues in Higher Education, 20*(5), 35.
- Chavez, A. F. (2007). Islands of empowerment: Facilitating multicultural learning communities in college. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 19*, 274–288.
- Chung, Y., & Sedlacek, W. (1999, Spring). Ethnic differences in career, academic, and social self-appraisals among incoming freshmen. *Journal of College Counseling, 2*(1), 14–24.
- Cope, C. (2004). Ensuring validity and reliability in phenomenographic research using the analytic framework of a structure of awareness. *Qualitative Research Journal, 4*, 5–18.
- Cox, M. D. (2004). Introduction to faculty learning communities. In M. D. Cox & L. Richlin (Eds.), *Building faculty learning communities* (pp. 5–23). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Cross, P. (1998, July). Why learning communities? Why now? *About Campus, 3*(3), 4–11.
- Dabney, D. A., Green, L., & Topalli, V. (2006). Freshman learning communities in criminology and criminal justice: An effective tool for enhancing student recruitment and learning outcomes. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 17*, 44–68.

- Daytner, K. (2006). *Validity in qualitative research: Application of safeguards*. Paper presented at the 18th Annual Ethnographic and Qualitative Research in Education Conference, Cedarville, OH.
- De Wet, J., & Erasmus, Z. (2005). Towards rigour in qualitative analysis. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 5(1), 27–40.
- Dixon-Woods, M., Shaw, R. L., Agarwal, S., & Smith, J. A. (2004, June). The problem of appraising qualitative research. *Quality and Safety in Health Care*, 13(3), 223–225.
- Eimers, M. T., & Pike, G. R. (1997). Minority and nonminority adjustment to college: Differences or similarities? *Research in Higher Education*, 38, 77–93.
- Flick, U. (2006). *An introduction to qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Firmin, M. (2006). External validity in qualitative research. In M. Firmin & P. Brewer (Eds.), *Ethnographic and qualitative research in education* (Vol. 2, pp. 17–29). New Castle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Firmin, M., Warner, S., Johnson, C., Firebaugh, S., & Firmin, R. (2008, April). *Learning community's potential social impact: A qualitative analysis*. Paper presented at the 5th Annual Black Atlantic Community Conference, Wilberforce, OH.
- Feldman, R. L. (2008). *Development across the lifespan* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. (2008). *Educational research* (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2004). Competing paradigms in qualitative research: Theories and issues. In S. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Approaches to qualitative research* (pp. 17–38). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18, 59–82.
- Hegler, K. L. (2004). Assessing learning communities. *Assessment Update: Progress, Trends, and Practices in Higher Education*, 16, 1–8.
- Heuser, L. (2007). Collaborating together: Linked intercultural learning activities for undergraduate Japanese and American students. *Asian EFL Journal*, 9, 39–64.
- Jalomo, R. E., & Rendón, L. I. (2004). Moving to a new culture: The upside and downside of the transition to college. In L. I. Rendón, M. Garcia, & D. Person (Eds.), *Transforming the first year of college*

- 24 *Journal of Learning Communities Research* 4(3), December 2009
for students of color (pp. 37–52). Columbia, SC: Center for the
First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.
- Johnson, B., & Christensen, L. (2004). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- King, P. (1999). Improving access and educational success for diverse students: Steady progress but enduring problems. In C. S. Johnson & H. E. Cheaham (Eds.), *Higher education trends for the next century* (pp. 5–11). Washington, DC: American College Personnel Association.
- Lardner, E. D. (2003, Winter). *Approaching diversity through learning communities*. Olympia, WA: Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.
- Lewins, A., & Silver, C. (2007). *Using software in qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- MacGregor, J. (1991). What differences do learning communities make? *Washington Center News*, 6, 4–9.
- MacGregor, J., & Smith, B. (2005, May-June). Where are learning communities now? *About Campus*, 10(2), 2–8.
- Marshall, H. (2002). What do we do when we code? *Qualitative Research Journal*, 2, 56–70.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Meacham, J., McClellan, M., Pearse, T., & Greene, R. (2003). Student diversity in classes and educational outcomes: Student perceptions. *College Student Journal*, 37, 627–643.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). Assessing and evaluating qualitative research. In S. B. Merriam (Ed.), *Qualitative research in practice* (pp. 18–33). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mio, J. S., Barker-Hackett, L., & Tumambang, J. (2006). *Multicultural psychology*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(2). Retrieved from <http://www.ualberta.ca/~ijqm>.
- Neuman, W. L. (2006). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (6th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Padgett, D. K., Mathew, R., & Conte, S. (2004). Peer debriefing and support groups. In D. K. Padgett (Ed.), *The qualitative research experience* (pp. 229–239). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Price, J. H., & Murnan, J. (2004). Research limitations and the necessity of reporting them. *American Journal of Health Education*, 35, 66–67.

- Raffanti, M. (2006). Grounded theory in educational research: Exploring the concept of “groundedness.” In M. Firmin & P. Brewer (Eds.), *Ethnographic and qualitative research in education* (Vol. 2, pp. 61–74). New Castle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Roach, R. (2004). The great divide. *Black Issues in Higher Education, 21*, 22–26.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research* (3rd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Shiraeve, E., & Levy, D. (2004). *Cross-cultural psychology* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Silverman, D. (2005). *Doing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (2006). *Interpreting qualitative data* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Smith, B., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R., Gabelnick, F. (2004). *Learning communities: Reforming undergraduate education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tatum, B. D. (2004, July 1). The road to racial equality. *Black Issues in Higher Education, 21*(10), 34.
- Thomas, C. D. (1993). Making the most of your college experience. *Black Collegian, 24*(1), 98–102.
- Tinto, V. (1998). Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously. *Review of Higher Education, 21*(2), 167–177.
- Tosey, P., & Gregory, J. (1998). The peer learning community in higher education: Reflections on practice. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 35*, 74–81.
- Zhao, C., & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education, 45*, 115–138.