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The impact of a first -year learning community on student persistence: Perceptions of community college students

David Gerkin
Walden University

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Education Faculty

Dr. Mary Dereshiwsy, Committee Member,
Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer

Denise DeZolt, Ph.D.

Walden University
2009

ABSTRACT

The Impact of a First-Year Learning Community on Student Persistence:
Perceptions of Community College Students

By

David Gerkin

M.A., Ottawa University, 1995

B.A., Ottawa University, 1994

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Education

Walden University
May 2009

ABSTRACT

This descriptive case study explored the perceptions of former community college first year learning community participants on aspects of their learning community experience that affected their persistence in college using Astin's student involvement theory and Tinto's student persistence model as a conceptual framework. Learning communities have been shown to increase student persistence, but little is known about how they do so. A better understanding of how learning communities contribute to increased student persistence would improve learning community practice and gain administrative support for learning communities. This study used a mixed methods research design utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data were collected from interviews with former participants and analyzed by identifying emergent themes within the responses. Quantitative data were collected by querying the studied institution's data warehouse and analyzed to determine if they matched the predicted pattern of increased persistence and confirmed the interview data themes. Three themes emerged from the qualitative data: connecting with others, acquiring and applying knowledge and skills, and making the transition to college. The quantitative data revealed higher rates of persistence for learning community students than for a comparison group. These findings confirmed the predicted pattern of student involvement leading to persistence. Further research is needed to explore other factors that may explain how learning communities impact persistence, especially in community colleges. The study contributes to positive social change by providing support for learning communities to help students persist in achieving a college education, attain their goals, and become more productive members of society.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Learning communities in higher education are usually considered to be an intentional grouping of a cohort of students through two or more linked courses that are often connected by a theme. This restructuring of the educational environment is designed “to build community, enhance learning, and foster connections among students, faculty, and disciplines” (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004, p. 20). According to Tinto (1999), learning communities consist of linked courses that are typically connected by a theme, which fosters collaborative learning and integrates knowledge among courses. Barefoot (2004) defined a learning community as a cohort with a maximum of 25 students who are coenrolled in two to five linked courses. Two of the major features of learning communities are interaction between students and faculty and integration of course content among the linked courses (Barefoot, 2004). Learning communities, as described in the literature, usually contain the common elements of student cohorts, linked courses, integration of knowledge among courses, and interaction between students and faculty as well as among students. Astin (1993) found that these two aspects of student involvement, interaction among students and between students and faculty, exerted the greatest positive influence on student development in college.

As described in the literature, learning communities are designed to foster student involvement through peer interaction, student interaction with faculty, and collaborative learning. Astin’s (1984) student involvement theory and Tinto’s (1997) student

persistence model both suggested that student involvement leads to increased persistence. It would logically follow then that learning communities would contribute to increased student persistence. Multiple studies have been conducted to investigate the effects of learning communities on student experiences and outcomes including persistence. Studies that find learning communities increase persistence include Baker and Pomerantz, 2000; Hotchkiss, Moore, and Pitts, 2006; Soldner, Lee, and Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1997; and Tinto and Love, 1995. There is less research, however, that sheds light on how learning communities increase persistence, and there are few formal studies of learning communities conducted at community colleges (Tinto, 1997; Tinto and Love, 1995). This study sought to address these two gaps in the literature.

The first gap, regarding how learning communities increase persistence, was addressed by Andrade (2007) in her review of published studies of learning communities. She analyzed 17 studies to determine which structural characteristics of learning communities resulted in improved student outcomes, including persistence. She found that there are several structural components of learning communities, including an academic skills seminar and peer and/or faculty mentoring, that were associated with increased persistence. However, she concluded that increased persistence might not be attributable to these structural characteristics; it may, in fact, be the result of the student involvement that occurs in learning communities. Tinto's (1997) study of the Coordinated Studies Program learning communities at Seattle Central Community College also sought to explain how learning communities impact persistence. The results suggested that student involvement led to increased persistence.

The second gap in the literature is that there are a limited number of formal studies on learning communities at community colleges. A search of the Learning Communities National Resource Center Directory found 64 learning communities at community colleges, and there are others not registered in the directory. While there are many such programs, most of what is written about them includes program descriptions, suggestions for best practices, and presentations of institutional assessment data, such as articles by Malnarich (2005), Raftery (2005), Cornell and Mosley (2006) and McPhail, McKusick, and Starr (2006). A review of the literature identified only two formal studies of community college learning communities: Tinto (1997), and Tinto and Love (1995).

This study helps to fill these two gaps in the literature by providing additional insight into how student participation in a 1st-year learning community contributed to persistence at a community college, using Astin's (1984) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1997) student persistence model as a conceptual framework. The results of the study may benefit learning community initiatives by informing practice and providing evidence of effectiveness to gain administrative support for learning communities. If learning communities are improved and supported, students will benefit by being given the opportunity to participate in learning communities that help them persist toward completion of a college education. Chapter 2 includes a more detailed discussion of the literature on learning communities, student involvement, and persistence.

Problem Statement

A better understanding of how learning communities contribute to increased student persistence is needed in order to improve learning community practice and garner

administrative support to initiate and sustain learning community initiatives. Since Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement and Tinto's (1997) student persistence model suggested that the more students are involved with the college environment, the more likely they will be to persist, and since student involvement is one of the major functions of learning communities, it follows that student participation in learning communities would increase student persistence. The literature bears out this assumption. Participation in learning communities has been found to increase student persistence as discussed above.

However, few formal studies sought to discover how learning communities increase student persistence. Therefore, the connection between the involvement that students experience in learning communities and persistence remains largely hypothetical. This study explored student perceptions of the aspects of student participation in a 1st-year learning community that contribute to persistence. Emergent themes or patterns of student perceptions were analyzed to confirm or contradict Astin's (1984) student involvement theory and/or Tinto's (1997) student persistence model. The themes were also examined for evidence of factors other than involvement that contribute to the persistence of those students who participate in learning communities. In this way, the findings contribute to a better understanding of how learning communities increase student persistence in college.

Nature of the Study

This qualitative study used a descriptive case study method. The justification for using this tradition is that the intent of the study was to better understand how learning

communities affect student persistence. In addition, the results of the study extend the findings in the literature on learning communities and their impact on persistence. Increased understanding and extension of the findings in the literature are two of the recognized outcomes of case study research (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). The grounded theory method (Creswell, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was considered because it would be helpful to develop a theory to help explain how learning communities affect student persistence. This theory could then be used to inform practice. This method was rejected in favor of a case study because of the case study's ability to extend the findings in the literature (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). This outcome would be considered more useful by the studied institution than the generation of a new theory. A phenomenological approach was also considered to explore the lived experience of learning community participants and discover the essence of this experience (Creswell, 1994; Merriam & Associates, 2002). However, the case study method best facilitates achievement of this study's goal of increasing understanding of learning communities and their relationship to student persistence.

The research question that guided this study was: What aspects of the learning community experience in a community college setting do former participants indicate as having contributed to their persistence in college? To explore this question, interviews were conducted with former learning community participants. The sampling strategy was homogeneous sample selection. All students who were still enrolled in the fall 2008 semester after having participated in the First Year Experience (FYE), an

interdisciplinary learning community for full-time, 1st-Year students, during the fall semesters of 2006 and 2007 were invited to participate in the study. In addition, descriptive data on academic performance, course completion, and persistence were collected for former learning community participants and a comparison group. A more detailed discussion of the nature of the study follows in chapter 3.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of former community college 1st-year learning community participants on aspects of their learning community experience that affected their persistence in college to better understand how learning community participation contributes to increased persistence. The study was conducted at a large, urban, public community college in the southwestern United States. The program studied, the FYE, is designed to help 1st-year, traditional age college students make the transition from high school to college and provide a solid foundation for success as college students. Data were collected from focus groups and individual follow-up interviews with former FYE participants. The data were analyzed by identifying emergent themes within the interview responses. Descriptive data on former learning community participant age, gender, ethnicity, academic performance, course completion, and persistence were used to describe the case. In addition, the descriptive data on academic performance, course completion, and persistence were compared to the interview data to determine if there were any matching patterns or themes.

Conceptual Framework

The study was informed by Astin's (1984) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1997) conceptual model of student persistence. Astin's theory proposed that the more involved students are in college and the higher the level of quality of such involvement, the more students will learn and develop. Astin also linked involvement to persistence. Tinto's student persistence model concluded that academic and social involvement "lead to enhanced quality of effort" by the student, which leads to learning and, ultimately, to persistence (p. 615). Since learning communities promote student involvement and increase student persistence, Astin's theory and Tinto's model provided a useful conceptual framework for this study of persistence in a 1st-year learning community. The descriptive data used in the study were not used, as they would have been in a quantitative study, to test Astin's and Tinto's models and infer that learning communities do or do not increase persistence. Rather, they were used to add to the description of the case and considered in light of the interview data.

Operational Definitions

Full-time, 1st-year students: are defined as students who are enrolled in 12 or more credit hours and are enrolled at the studied institution for the first time.

Learning community: Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004) defined this as an intentional grouping of a cohort of students through two or more linked courses, often connected by a theme, that is designed "to build community, enhance learning, and foster connections among students, faculty, and disciplines" (p. 20).

Student involvement: According to Astin (1984), this referred to “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 297).

Persistence: is defined as persisting at the studied institution for at least one semester after the student’s 1st semester.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

This study assumed that students in the FYE would be involved with peers and faculty in academic and social interaction and that participants would speak candidly about their range of experiences. The scope of the study was limited to one 1st-year learning community program, the FYE, at one community college in the southwestern United States. The study did not explore FYE faculty perceptions regarding aspects of the FYE program that may have contributed to student persistence.

Limitations of the study included the possibility of researcher bias since the researcher taught in the FYE learning community program that was studied. Care was taken to minimize the effect of researcher bias in the research design, data collection, and data analysis, including the use of data triangulation, an interview protocol, and research notes. A further limitation was that former FYE participants may not have responded truthfully in the interviews because they may have felt pressure to give a favorable impression of the program, knowing that the researcher who conducted the interviews was an FYE teacher. The consent form signed by the study participants disclosed that the researcher was a teacher in the FYE program, and, at the beginning of each interview, the students were encouraged to give honest responses. Finally, the results of the study are

not generalizable to other community colleges since the data were collected at only one institution.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to filling two gaps in the literature by providing further evidence on aspects of student experience in a 1st-year learning community that contribute to persistence in a community college. There are studies indicating that learning communities increase persistence (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Love, 1995) and descriptive articles promoting the benefits of learning communities (Malnarich, 2005; Raftery, 2005; Cornell & Mosley, 2006; McPhail, McKusick, & Starr, 2006). However, few studies demonstrate how learning communities impacted persistence and few have been conducted at community colleges. The results and recommendations of this study may be of use to learning community practitioners by helping them understand how their work benefits students and by informing practice in the strategies that promote persistence. In addition, the study may provide evidence of the effectiveness of 1st-year learning community programs to administrators who are considering whether to support initiation or continuation of such programs. The study contributes to positive social change by promoting the development of community college students who persist in achieving their education. If the findings and recommendations of this study contribute to the success of 1st-year learning communities by informing practitioners and administrators, both individual students and society at large stand to benefit. Learning communities can help students persist toward completion

of a college education designed to enable them to attain their goals and become more productive members of society.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of former 1st-year learning community participants regarding aspects of their learning community experience that affected their persistence in a community college to better understand how learning community participation contributes to increased persistence. An understanding of this issue may contribute to improvement of and support for learning community programs that can help students achieve a college education. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on learning communities, with a focus on the relationship of this educational innovation to student involvement and persistence, discusses the conceptual framework of the study, and considers the research method in the context of the pertinent research literature. Chapter 3 describes the research paradigm and method chosen for the study, the role of the researcher, the study context, selection of study participants, data collection and analysis, and the relationship of the pilot study to the larger study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, both qualitative interview data and descriptive data on student demographics and performance. Finally, chapter 5 interprets the study's findings, discusses implications for social change, and presents recommendations as well as researcher reflections on the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review first examines learning communities in higher education, emphasizing their relationship to student involvement and persistence. Next, the study's conceptual framework is constructed by analyzing student involvement theory and student persistence theory. Finally, the literature on the research method of this study is examined. The primary strategy used for searching the literature was running keyword and author searches on the following EBSCO databases: Academic Search Premier, Education Research Complete, Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, and SocINDEX. Additional strategies used were soliciting recommendations from instructors and colleagues, searching bibliographies, and following up on relevant in-text citations.

Learning Communities

A learning community is a curricular structure designed to create a community of learners that enriches and expands learning, promotes connections among students and between students and faculty, and integrates knowledge and skill among disciplines (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). Learning communities have their origin in Dewey's (1933) work on progressive education (Smith et al., 2004). Dewey (1933) conceived of learning as a social process, the teacher as a learning facilitator, and student development as a process that begins with the learning needs of each individual student. According to Smith et al., Meiklejohn's Experimental College, which operated at

the University of Wisconsin from 1927-1932, was the first educational endeavor to use the term learning communities. The Experimental College integrated the curriculum, built community among students, and broke traditional barriers between students and faculty (Meiklejohn, 1932/2000).

Another milestone in learning community development was Tussman's learning community program at Berkeley in the late 1960s. Tussman, a protégé of Meiklejohn, developed a program based on the Experimental College, which emphasized coherent educational programs, rather than fragmented, unconnected, traditional courses, and prepared students to effect positive social change (Tussman, 1969). In the 1970s, Evergreen State College in Washington State was created as an alternative college that would offer team-taught, integrated programs, that came to be called learning communities, based on the ideas and experiences of Meiklejohn and Tussman. From the mid 1970s through the 1990s, learning communities began to proliferate beginning on the East Coast, then in the state of Washington, and finally across the nation. By the year 2000, institutions with learning communities numbered over 500, ranging from 4-year to 2-year, from public to private, from large to small (Smith, et al., 2004).

MacGregor and Smith suggested in 2005 that "learning communities have arrived as a national movement" (p.2). These two nationally recognized leaders in the learning community movement have created, developed, taught, supported, studied, and written about learning communities for over 20 years. MacGregor and Smith codirected the National Learning Communities Project, which supported learning community initiatives and practitioners and added to existing learning community resources and literature. This

project, which empowered 56 leaders in the learning community movement, and the work of the MacGregor-led Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, which helps initiate and sustain learning communities nationwide, provide evidence that the learning community movement has indeed arrived (MacGregor & Smith, 2005).

Rationale for Learning Communities

Educational environment and student experiences. Research and scholarship in a variety of areas, including college outcomes, student attrition, collaborative learning, learning outcomes, and academic achievement provide a rationale for the practice of learning communities in higher education. Pace (1979) synthesized 50 years of research on the effects of college on student learning, growth, and development and proposed a model to measure these attributes. Pace's model proposed three factors that impact a student's learning and growth: experiences, environment, and effort. Two of these factors may serve as a justification for learning communities. According to Pace, the institutional environment includes expectations, reward systems, and interpersonal relationships, while the experiences students have in college include classroom events and involvement with faculty and other students. Learning communities purposefully restructure the educational environment and provide opportunities for students to interact with faculty and peers to enhance student learning and development.

Another work on the outcomes of college is Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) comprehensive, cumulative review of more than 20 years of research. Like Pace (1979), Pascarella and Terenzini concluded that the college environment has a crucial influence

on student persistence and academic achievement. The environment includes factors such as student friendships, college activities, concern for the individual student, student support services, and study skills courses. One key trend in this analysis of the research was the importance of student involvement. Pascarella and Terenzini suggested that an active, participatory classroom environment promotes student involvement and that such involvement leads to cognitive development and greater learning. These conclusions strengthen the case for learning communities made by the work of Pace in that they reiterate the importance of the educational environment and student involvement with faculty and peers, hallmarks of learning communities. Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini recommended learning communities as an instructional approach that fosters increased interaction between students and faculty.

In addition to Pace (1979) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991; 2005) other scholars and researchers have documented the importance of student involvement to student learning and development. This literature refers to the concept of student involvement itself as well as two critical aspects of involvement, collaborative learning and interaction with faculty and peers. The following discussion of this literature provides a further rationale for learning communities. The discussion begins with the underlying concept of student involvement.

Student involvement. Tinto (1987) referred to student involvement as academic and social integration and contended that building educational communities that integrate students academically and socially will lead to persistence, involvement in learning, and commitment to educational goals. One way that students may experience academic and

social integration is through participation in small-group learning. Hennessey and Evans (2006) suggested that such participation might help students negotiate the transition from outsider to member of the college community. Recent research has provided evidence linking student involvement with attainment of learning outcomes and academic achievement. Smith and Bath (2006) reported that both undergraduate and graduate students indicated that social integration had a positive effect on learning outcomes such as knowledge and skill acquisition, problem solving, and social sensitivity, while Utley (2006) found that social interaction, authentic learning activities, and formation of a learning community within a graduate course contributed to student learning. Ullah and Wilson (2007) concluded that involvement with classroom learning was a significant predictor of student academic achievement.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggested that an active, participatory classroom environment encourages student involvement, which promotes cognitive development and learning. Learning communities provide students with such an environment through the use of collaborative, small-group learning. The scholarship and research on small-group and collaborative learning demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach in promoting a variety of positive student outcomes, including academic achievement (Light, 1992), improved self-esteem, increased persistence, facility in critical thinking (Hennessey & Evans, 2006), preparation for the workplace (Cross, 1998; Hennessey & Evans, 2006), knowledge and skill acquisition, problem solving, and social sensitivity (Smith & Bath, 2006), and perception of a sense of community (Summers, Beretvas, Svinicki, & Gorin, 2005). The positive outcomes attributed to the collaborative, small-

group learning that is an integral part of learning community practice provide another reason for the use of learning communities.

Pace's (1979) model for measuring the outcomes of college proposed that student experiences in college have a major impact on student learning and growth. According to Pace, these experiences include classroom events and involvement with faculty and other students. Other researchers noted the importance of student interaction with faculty and peers. Chickering and Gamson (1987) concluded that students who interacted frequently with faculty were more likely to persist and were more satisfied with their college experience. Smith and Bath (2006) found that students who interacted with faculty and peers in a learning context indicated that this experience had a positive effect on learning outcomes such as knowledge and skill acquisition, problem solving, and social sensitivity. In yet another study, students reported that learning from and interacting with peers and faculty contributed to their learning. Themes that emerged from survey data indicated that students attributed gains in knowledge to "learning from peers" (Utley, 2006, p. 76). and "personal relationship and sharing" (p. 76).

Beyond involvement. The literature suggested that student involvement, including collaborative learning and faculty and peer interaction, promotes student learning and development. Because learning communities foster student involvement, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) recommended their use in higher education. Barefoot (2000) argued that learning communities are especially helpful for students in their 1st year and at commuter institutions because they enable students to engage with their peers academically and socially. Beyond encouraging student involvement, Cross (1998) provided a further

rationale for learning communities. Learning communities have the potential to better educate students for the modern workforce, which needs people who can work independently and are comfortable with ambiguity. In addition, Cross contended “that service learning is the ultimate learning community” (p. 10) and, as such, it engages students in the local community, involves them in Dewey’s experiential learning, and helps them develop social responsibility.

Wenger (1998) proposed that learners negotiate meaning in communities of practice by connecting current, past, and future situations within a social context. Tagg (2004) used the work of Wenger in discussing learning communities as a curricular restructuring initiative that effectively promotes student learning. Tagg suggested that learning communities, with their focus on collaboration and reflection, are communities of practice and recommends that such communities of practice be a part of a restructuring of higher education that would allow college to become “an enabling apprenticeship into lifelong learning” (p. 18). The literature reviewed to this point on college outcomes, collaborative learning, learning outcomes, and academic achievement provided a justification for the practice of learning communities in higher education. In addition, it suggested that learning communities may promote learning and development by involving students in college, preparing them for the workforce, fostering in them a sense of social responsibility, and helping them negotiate meaning in communities of practice.

Learning Community Structures

To understand how learning communities may contribute to positive student outcomes, it is helpful to consider the varying ways the curriculum is restructured to

create a learning community. Smith et al. (2004) described three common forms learning communities have taken in higher education. From least to most integrated and complex, these forms are unmodified-course, linked- and clustered-course, and team-taught learning communities. An unmodified-course learning community is one in which a cohort of students is enrolled in two or three courses that are not modified for the learning community (Smith et al., 2004). Students outside the learning community cohort are also enrolled in these courses. In addition to these unmodified courses, the learning community cohort also enrolls in another course, usually a seminar, in which students outside the cohort are not enrolled. In this course, learning community activities occur, such as building community and making interdisciplinary connections. Two prevalent examples of unmodified-course learning communities are integrative seminar learning communities and Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) (Smith et al., 2004). Because of the community and interdisciplinary aspects of FIGs, Brower and Dettinger (1998) contended that this type of learning community could help students to “enhance ethical and professional responsibility” (p. 19).

A more complex and integrated type of learning community is one in which two or more courses are linked or clustered. Cornell and Mosley (2006) described such a learning community. This community college learning community clusters four courses: 1st-year composition, introductory courses in sociology and computer usage, and a student success course that includes study skills, college resources, and career and educational planning. The subject matter of the courses is integrated with campus resources and activities as well as off-campus service learning to help students make the

connection between their college education and life in the real world. Goals of this learning community include increasing persistence, improving academic skills and engagement, helping students make connections between their goals and their college courses, developing a sense of community among students and faculty, and encouraging students to get involved in college life (Cornell & Mosley, 2006).

The most complex and tightly integrated kind of learning community is the team-taught learning community. In these learning communities, the faculty creates a common syllabus and develops joint assignments based on a unifying theme, project, or problem (Smith et al., 2004). An example of this type of learning community is the Coordinated Studies Programs at Seattle Central Community College theme (Tinto & Russo, 1994). They are interdisciplinary, team-taught learning communities with courses that are linked by a theme (Tinto & Russo, 1994). One of these learning communities integrated content from English, art, political science and sociology around the theme, “Our Ways of Knowing: The African-American Experience and Social Change” (Tinto & Russo, p. 16). This learning community met, as a block, 4 days each week for 4^{1/2} hours each day. The faculty often taught as a team and encouraged collaborative learning, using group projects, seminars, and discussion, in both small groups and with the whole class (Tinto & Russo, 1994).

One variation of the three major learning community structures described above is the residential learning community. Stassen (2003) defined “living-learning communities” as those in which students live on campus together and co-enroll in two or more classes (p. 588). Variations within different residential learning communities at the

same university are described by Stassen, including a faculty sponsor to provide guidance to students in one learning community, and in another, seminars for students in a particular major. The Russell Scholars Program at the University of Southern Maine provides another example of a residential learning community (Johnson & Romanoff, 1999). In this program, a cohort of students enrolls in three, small, team-taught classes and participates in voluntary cocurricular events. The students live and attend classes together in a residence hall designated for the program, which also contains faculty offices (Johnson & Romanoff, 1999).

The literature showed that learning communities are a growing movement in higher education, there is a rationale for implementing this educational practice, and learning communities take many different forms. Regardless of the shape they take, learning communities retain the core functions of building community and making connections among courses, disciplines, and the world outside of academia (Smith, et al., 2004). Research must still address whether learning communities are effective and if learning communities contribute to positive student outcomes.

Outcomes of Learning Communities

Research suggested that the outcomes of learning communities include student satisfaction (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2002; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), cognitive learning strategies and motivation (Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2002), and academic achievement (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2002; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Two other outcomes that have been the subject of

much of the research on learning communities, student involvement and persistence, are the focus of the following discussion. Persistence might be termed a secondary outcome because it is thought to be the result of other outcomes such as academic achievement and involvement (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1997). Since this study explored the relationship between the outcome of persistence and student experiences in learning communities, the other outcomes listed above and the outcome of involvement discussed below served as themes that were explored in the study.

Increased student involvement. The literature suggested that learning communities increase student involvement (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Tinto, 1997). However, many studies do not explicitly name involvement. Instead they report student outcomes that suggest involvement, including academic and social integration (Soldner, Lee, & DUBY, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004) social development (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2002) student interaction (Lebbin, 2006), and student engagement (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In a study of the relationship between learning community participation and student engagement conducted with over 80,000 students from 365 4-year institutions, Zhao and Kuh found that learning community participation was linked with increased student engagement with college. Learning community participation was positively linked with increased study time, collaborative learning, and interaction between students and faculty (Zhao & Kuh).

Like Zhao and Kuh (2004), Stassen (2003) found that learning community participation was linked with higher levels of student engagement. This study investigated three different types of residential learning communities offered at a large

research university. Learning community participants were more likely to engage with their peers on academic tasks, work on group projects, and spend more time studying. In addition to these findings that paralleled those of Zhao and Kuh, Stassen found that students who had participated in a learning community were more likely to “report positive academic behaviors” (p. 602) and “perceive a positive learning environment” (p. 602).

Increased student persistence. A body of research indicated that learning communities increase student persistence in college (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Love, 1995). One of these studies (Tinto, 1997) is relevant to this study because it was conducted at an urban, nonresidential community college, similar to the setting of this study. Tinto found increased student persistence in the Coordinated Studies Programs (CSPs) at Seattle Central Community College. These programs are interdisciplinary learning communities that integrate course content with a common theme. Students in the CSPs ($N=121$) persisted to the following spring and fall semesters at higher rates than did comparison class students ($N=166$). CSP students re-enrolled in the spring at a rate of 83.8% compared to 80.9% for students in the comparison classes. For the following fall semester, 66.7% of the CSP student’s re-enrolled, while only 52% of students in the comparison classes reenrolled.

Differing Perspectives. While the literature provided evidence that learning communities and the student involvement associated with them contribute to positive student outcomes, not all the research and scholarship on learning communities and

student involvement emphasizes the benefits of these instructional approaches. While noting the positive effects attributed to learning communities in the literature, Jaffee (2007) suggested that these positive effects are largely due to learning community structure: the intentional formation of a peer cohort of students coenrolled in a block of two or more linked classes. There are, however, Jaffee warned, some unintended consequences to this formation of a peer cohort, including maintenance of a high school environment, in which students hesitate to engage in learning, a lack of academic role models, an emphasis on social activities, groupthink, and resistance to the authority of faculty. Ullah and Wilson (2007) found that involvement with classroom learning and engagement with faculty, two of the major features of learning communities, were significant predictors of student academic achievement. However, when it came to student engagement with peers, another important aspect of learning communities, the results were mixed. Female student engagement with peers had a significant positive association with academic achievement, while male student engagement had a negative effect. Despite a few differing perspectives and research findings, the literature, as a whole, made a case for learning communities as a pedagogy that promotes a variety of positive student outcomes including academic achievement, student involvement, and persistence.

Relationship of the Study to the Literature

Tinto's (1997) study illustrated one of the gaps in the literature to be addressed by this study. Tinto's study is one of the few that explicitly addressed the question of *how* learning communities contribute to increased student persistence. This study not only

showed that learning communities had a positive impact on student persistence as described above, it also provided evidence of how learning communities exerted that positive influence. The results indicated that learning community students were more involved, academically and socially, than students in the comparison group. Tinto theorized that this academic and social involvement in the learning community led students to exert more effort and a higher quality effort resulting in enriched learning and increased persistence.

The second gap in the literature addressed in this study is the lack of research on learning communities at community colleges. While there are multiple articles describing learning community programs or best practices, only two formal studies of community college learning communities were found in the review of the literature: Tinto (1997), which was discussed above, and Tinto and Love (1995). Tinto and Love studied the learning community program at LaGuardia Community College. Their findings echoed those of Tinto (1997) in concluding that learning community students had higher rates of persistence. However, the results on student involvement were mixed. While learning community students reported more positive perceptions of their involvement in the life of the college than the comparison group, they did not report higher levels of interaction with faculty and peers or other indicators of involvement.

The research question for this study asked: What aspects of the learning community experience in a community college setting do former participants indicate as having contributed to their persistence in college? By answering this question, this study helps explain the outcome of persistence discussed above. All the other outcomes of

learning communities examined in the preceding discussion contribute to understanding the outcome of persistence. In other words, these other outcomes help answer the question: What is it about learning communities that helps student persist?

Do students who participate in learning communities persist because they: Are more satisfied with their college experience? Have improved their cognitive learning strategies? Have increased their motivation? Have reached high levels of academic achievement? Do they persist because they are more involved with, engaged in, or integrated into the life of the institution as suggested by Tinto (1997)? Or is it some combination of these outcomes that contribute to student persistence? Many of these outcomes of learning communities were explored in this study. Many surfaced as student perceptions when interviewing former participants about their learning community experience and its relationship to their persistence in college. Some of these outcomes emerged as themes in the data analysis phase of the study.

Student Involvement and Persistence Theories

Human development theorists have used a variety of perspectives to hypothesize change, growth, and behavior. Piaget (1950) proposed that cognitive development is a process of adapting to the environment. Skinner (1953) suggested a strict behavioral approach that emphasized external environmental stimuli in influencing behavior. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory proposed that a process of triadic reciprocity shapes human behavior. This is a mutually interactive process with three contributing causal elements: internal personal factors, behavior, and external, environmental stimuli.

One common factor in the work of these three theorists is the importance of the external environment on human development and behavior.

Theories that sought to explain change in college students fall into two major categories: developmental and college impact. Developmental theorists focused on the changes that occur within the student while college impact theorists emphasized the effect of the external environment on college student change (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The college impact theories align philosophically with the human development theories discussed above that emphasize the influence of the environment. The conceptual framework for this study consists of Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement and Tinto's (1997) student persistence theory. Pascarella and Terenzini classified both theories as college impact theories because they focus on environmental factors to explain why students change in terms of learning, development, and behavior, including the decision to withdraw from or persist in college.

Both Astin's (1984) and Tinto's (1997) theories build on the prior work of each researcher. The genesis of Astin's (1975) theory of student involvement was his earlier longitudinal study of student attrition. Based on the results of this study, Astin (1984) concluded that "the factors that contributed to the student's remaining in college suggested involvement, whereas those that contributed to the student's dropping out implied a lack of involvement" (p. 523). Astin (1984) defined student involvement as "the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 528). The concepts of quality and quantity are key components of the theory. A basic postulate of the theory is that the more involved

students are in college and the higher the level of quality of such involvement, the more students will learn and develop. In addition, the theory proposes that the effectiveness of educational practices may be judged by their ability to increase involvement (Astin, 1984).

Tinto's (1997) theory of student persistence is a modification of his prior theoretical models for college dropout and student departure (1975, 1987, 1993). Like the earlier models, the theory of student persistence is a process-oriented conceptual schema that begins with students' background and characteristics at entry to the institution. The next step in the model is student intentions and commitments, institutional and external, followed by engagement with the academic and social systems of the institution. A key addition to the model occurs at this point. The classroom is positioned as the nexus between the institution's academic and social systems, because the classroom experience has the capacity to involve students academically and socially, leading to the next step in the process, academic and social integration into the institution (Tinto, 1997). Completing the theoretical model, academic and social involvement "lead to enhanced quality of effort" (p. 615) by the student, which leads to learning and, ultimately, to persistence.

Berger and Milem (1999) utilized Astin's (1984) and Tinto's (1993) models to construct a model of student persistence. Berger and Milem made the point that in Astin's theory, involvement is behavioral. This observation echoes the human development theories discussed earlier, especially Skinner's (1953) behavioral perspective. The persistence model of Berger and Milem extended the models of Tinto and Astin and proposed that "student behaviors and perceptions interact" (p. 642) to integrate students,

socially and academically, into the institution. Berger and Milem tested their persistence model using data from a study of 1st-year student persistence and concluded that the theoretical models of Astin and Tinto were helpful in informing their persistence model. In addition, the study results provided a better understanding of the role of behaviors and perceptions in student academic and social integration. This insight was useful in this study as student perceptions of their learning community experience were explored in terms of their persistence behavior, and academic and social integration were implicit in the themes that emerged from the data as an explanation of student persistence.

Both Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement and Tinto's (1997) student persistence theory suggested that the more students are involved with the college environment, the more likely they will be to persist. Astin proposed that effective educational practices should increase student involvement, and Tinto suggested that the classroom environment could be a key to involving students academically and socially. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) submitted that theoretical models of college impact, like those of Tinto and Astin, attach critical importance to the influence of institutional structures, including educational programs. As an educational practice that reshapes the classroom experience and is designed to foster student involvement, it would seem that learning communities are uniquely positioned to increase student persistence.

Research Method Background

The overarching aim of this study was to better understand how participation in a learning community contributes to increased persistence in college. In order to facilitate accomplishment of this goal, a qualitative study seemed most appropriate since

qualitative research is “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem” (Creswell, 1994, p. 1). The implied problem in this study is the high rate of college student attrition. To gain insight into how a learning community experience helps students persist, a number of qualitative approaches could have been employed including phenomenology (Creswell, 1994; Merriam & Associates, 2002), grounded theory (Creswell, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and a case study (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

A phenomenological study describes the lived experience of a small number of study participants to make meaning of patterns in the data and discover the essence of the experience. The researcher uses bracketing to set aside his/her own experience from that of the participants in order to approach the phenomenon unencumbered by his/her own beliefs and biases (Creswell, 1994; Merriam & Associates, 2002). If a phenomenological method had been used for this study, the lived experience of the learning community participants could have been explored through surveys and interviews. Data analysis would have included searching for patterns, relationships, and themes in the data to uncover the essence of the learning community experience and its relationship, if any, to persistence.

Grounded theory was also considered as a possible methodology for this study. In a grounded theory study the goal is develop a theory from the data collected and analyzed in the study (Creswell, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Two primary strategies are used during data analysis: constant comparison of the data and theoretical sampling of participant groups (Creswell, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Both of these processes lead

to emergent categories from which theory is derived (Creswell, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A grounded theory method could have been used in this study to develop a theory to explain how learning community participation increases student persistence.

This study's goal of increasing *understanding* of how learning community participation contributes to increased persistence led to the consideration of the case study as the method for this study. Merriam (1988) suggested that case studies should increase *understanding* and allow for emergent relationships that may cause the phenomenon under study to be seen in a new light. They should also use inductive reasoning to arrive at generalizations and new understandings from the data analysis. Stake's (1995) description of the role of understanding in qualitative research in general, and case study research in particular, echoes that of Merriam. According to Stake, qualitative researchers strive to understand complex interrelationships without necessarily trying to determine cause and effect as in quantitative research. In case studies, the researcher seeks to better understand either the case for its own sake or something outside of the case, such as a proposition or theory (Stake).

Discussion with the dissertation chair and a review of general research literature (Creswell, 1994; Hatch, 2002; Merriam & Associates, 2002) led to the consideration of Yin's (2003) work on case study methodology as the most appropriate source to guide the research design. According to Yin, the case study method is appropriate for studies of contemporary events "over which the investigator has little or no control" (p. 9) with research questions that ask how or why. How and why questions suggest a search for understanding, which recalls the goal of case study research conveyed by Merriam (1988)

and Stake (1995). Yin argued that case studies are needed to “understand complex social phenomena” (p. 2). Where Yin differs from Merriam and Stake is in the place of the case study in the hierarchy of research traditions. While Merriam and Stake positioned case studies as a qualitative research method, Yin proposed that case study research transcends qualitative research because it may include qualitative evidence, quantitative evidence, or both.

Yin (2003) outlined five components of case study research design: (a) study question(s), (b) propositions, (c) “...unit(s) of analysis,” (p. 21) (d) logic linking data to propositions, and (e) “...criteria for interpreting the findings” (p. 21). According to Yin, the researcher should begin by determining if the research question to be pursued is appropriate for a case study, usually indicated by a question that asks how or why. The second step is to identify and clarify any propositions implied by the study question that will help to focus the study by theorizing a prospective answer to the how or why study question. Next, Yin suggested that the researcher bound the study by identifying the unit of analysis or the case to be studied, which may be an individual, event, process, or program. The fourth step of the research design lays the groundwork for the data analysis phase by delineating how the data to be collected will relate to the study’s propositions. Yin proposed that one strategy to accomplish this is to predict potential patterns that may emerge from the data, so that in the data analysis, it can be determined which pattern best matches the data. Finally, the case study research design should establish the criteria by which the data will be interpreted (Yin).

In addition to developing a sound research design, Yin (2003) recommended three strategies for the data analysis phase of the study, all of which improve the study's reliability. First, the researcher should develop a detailed protocol to guide data collection. The protocol should include an overview of the project, procedures for data collection, study questions, and the instrument to be used for data collection such as a survey or interview question outline. Second, Yin suggested that a study database should be maintained. This database contains the raw data of the study and may include research notes, data from interviews, quantitative data such as survey results, observation frequencies, documents, and archival data. Finally, the researcher should create a "chain of evidence," (p. 105) a record of the study from initial study questions to the final report. This procedure improves not only the study's reliability but also its construct validity by providing a trail of logical links between each step in the study (Yin, 2003).

In a case study, data analysis involves working with the data collected to address the study's propositions. As an overarching analytical strategy, the theoretical basis of the study may be used to guide the data analysis. A variety of analytical strategies are used including "pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis," (p. 109) and logic models (Yin, 2003). Pattern matching, a strategy in which a predicted pattern is compared to one found in the data analysis, is recommended by Yin as "a promising approach for case studies" (p. 26).

Chapter 3 is informed by the work of Creswell (1994), Merriam (1988), and Stake (1995), but it primarily utilizes the work of Yin (2003). Yin's approach guided the formulation of the overall research design as well as the data collection and data analysis

procedures. Chapter 3 also addresses the appropriateness of the case study method for this study and a rationale for why other methods were not chosen. In addition, the chapter includes a discussion of the role of the researcher, the setting of the study, the ethical issues to be considered, the participant selection criteria, and the pilot study previously conducted. In chapter 4, the findings of the study will be presented. Chapter 5 will provide interpretation of the findings, social change implications, recommendations, and researcher reflections.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students who participated in a 1st-year learning community at a community college regarding how this experience contributed to their persistence in college. The results of the study add to the body of knowledge on learning communities and persistence. More specifically, it addresses two gaps in the literature: a lack of formal studies seeking to understand how learning communities increase persistence, and the existence of very few empirical studies of learning communities at community colleges. Since the literature reviewed in chapter 2 indicated the case study method is appropriate for studies that seek to understand a phenomenon (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), a case study method was chosen to achieve this study's goal of increasing understanding of the phenomenon of the community college learning community.

At the suggestion of the dissertation committee chair, this study used a combined research design utilizing both qualitative and descriptive, quantitative data. However, the study remains primarily qualitative in its orientation. This approach was informed by Creswell's (1994) "dominant-less dominant design" (p. 177) in which a study is guided by one tradition, qualitative or quantitative, but also utilizes some data from the other tradition. According to Stake (1995), qualitative researchers strive to understand complex interrelationships without necessarily trying to determine cause and effect as in quantitative research. In case studies, the researcher seeks to better understand either the

case for its own sake or something outside of the case, such as a proposition or theory. Following Stake's description above, this qualitative case study did not use the descriptive data to attempt to determine if learning communities cause persistence. Instead, the study used the descriptive data, along with the qualitative data, to increase understanding of the complex interrelationships between the phenomena of learning communities and persistence and the theories of student involvement and persistence that form the study's conceptual framework.

The qualitative method used for this study was the descriptive case study. Merriam (1988) situated case studies in the philosophical frame of postpositivist, qualitative research that assumes a subjective view of reality. According to Merriam's typology, this study was both descriptive and interpretive because the phenomenon, the learning community program, was described, and the data were interpreted in light of their support for existing theory. Following Yin's (2003) description, this case study was descriptive because it dealt with events over time: student experiences in the learning community over a semester and their reflections on how these experiences affected them 1 year, or in some cases, 2 years later. In addition, the study described a phenomenon, a learning community in a community college, that has not been the subject of much previous study, and the researcher was open to discovering important aspects of the learning community that contributed to student persistence.

Yin (2003) recommended that choice of research design be guided by the type of question the study is attempting to answer. Questions that ask *what* tend to be exploratory in nature while questions that ask *who* and *where* indicate prevalence or prediction of

outcomes. Research designs such as surveys and archival data analysis are appropriate for these kinds of questions. Questions that ask how or why, seeking to explain a phenomenon, suggest a case study research design (Yin, 2003). The research question for this study was: What aspects of the learning community experience in a community college setting do former participants indicate as having contributed to their persistence in college? A descriptive case study approach best addresses this question, which is, essentially, a *how* question. The question could be restated as follows: *How* does the learning community experience contribute to persistence? This study sought to explain how participation in a learning community helps students persist.

A phenomenological method was considered for this study in which the researcher would look for patterns, relationships, and themes in the lived experience of participants to discover the essence of the learning community experience and its relationship to persistence. A grounded theory study was also considered to develop a theory of how learning communities contribute to persistence that could be used to inform practitioners. However, it was not a description of the lived experience or essence of the learning community experience or the development of a learning community persistence theory that best served this study's goal of increasing understanding of how a learning community contributes to student persistence. Based on the literature discussed above (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), the case study method best addressed the goal of increasing understanding and was most appropriate for the research question that asked *how* a learning community contributes to persistence in college.

Role of the Researcher

Merriam (1988) viewed the researcher in a case study as the “primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 19). For Stake (1995), the case study researcher acts as “an interpreter in the field” (p. 8) who examines the data as they are being collected and seeks to make meaning of them in an ongoing process of interpretation. Yin (2003) suggested that, when conducting a case study, the researcher be flexible, open to new directions the data suggest, and willing to entertain evidence that contradicts pre-conceived notions or guiding theories. In this study, the researcher incorporated all these roles including serving as the main instrument for collecting and analyzing the data, engaging in continuous data interpretation, being open to unexpected opportunities presented by the data, and considering contradictory evidence. Specifically, the researcher engaged in ongoing interpretation of the qualitative interview data and their relationship to the descriptive student data, being alert for new leads to follow and evidence that contradicted his preconceptions and the study’s conceptual framework, both of which suggested that the learning community would foster student involvement leading to persistence.

Context for the Study

Yin (2003) suggested that the researcher bound the study by identifying the unit of analysis or the case to be studied including time parameters to set the limits for data collection. The case for this study was defined as the FYE, an interdisciplinary learning community for first-time, full-time students, which is located at a large, urban, public community college in the southwestern United States. The case was further bounded by

the following time parameters: The fall semester of 2006 through the fall semester of 2007. The FYE program was designed to help 1st-year, full-time, traditional age college students make the transition from high school to college and provide a solid foundation for success as college students.

When the FYE program began, it consisted of one cohort of students in a learning community with three linked courses. By fall 2006, the 1st semester of this study, the FYE had expanded to five cohorts of 20 to 25 students in three linked courses. Students enrolled in one of two learning communities based on student writing scores on the ASSET placement test. Students testing into 1st-Year Composition, enrolled in Block I, a learning community consisting of this writing course along with Introduction to Psychology, and Strategies for College Success, a course which focuses on academic skills, career planning, and personal development. Students testing into Writing Improvement enrolled in Block II, a learning community that linked this writing course with Introduction to Human Communication and Strategies for College Success. In the fall 2006 semester, there were four Block I cohorts and one Block II cohort with 20-25 students in each cohort. Most FYE students also enrolled in a fourth course of their choice to complete a full-time load.

In the fall of 2007, there were three Block I cohorts, one Block II cohort, and a new Block III cohort for students testing into Basic Writing Skills. This course was linked with an introductory computer course and Strategies for College Success. In both semesters, the students in each cohort attended the FYE classes together on Monday,

Wednesday, and Friday mornings. The classes were scheduled as a block, so that students went together from one class to the next.

FYE faculty worked together to integrate assignments among the courses in each cohort, encourage student success strategies, engage students in collaborative learning activities both within and outside the classroom, and involve them in campus life. For example, some papers were written on a psychology topic using a format given in the composition class. These papers were then graded by both the psychology and English instructors. In addition, an event was held each month of the semester for all five cohorts combined. One reason for holding these events was that they gave students the opportunity to get to know students and faculty outside of their own cohort. Each event typically included a lecture or presentation, a collaborative learning activity, and time for students to get to know each other socially, often over food.

The FYE is a 1st-year learning community that has many of the characteristics of learning communities as defined by Barefoot (2004): Two to five linked courses, a cohort of 25 students or less, interaction between students and faculty, and integration of course content. The FYE was designed to achieve many of the student outcomes suggested in the literature: Increased student involvement to promote learning and personal growth (Astin, 1984), the development of supportive groups of peers (Tinto, 1997), and higher levels of persistence (Barefoot, 2000).

Participant Selection

The sampling strategy consisted of a homogeneous sample selection. All students who were still enrolled in the fall 2008 semester after having participated in the FYE 1st-

year learning community during the fall 2006 or fall 2007 semesters were invited to participate in the study. The number of students who met these criteria was 117, excluding the students who participated in the pilot for this study. Potential participants were sent an email invitation to participate in the study. This invitation included the purpose of the study and the incentive for participation, a \$5.00 gift certificate to the campus coffee bar. The email invitation is found in Appendix A.

Seven students agreed to participate in the study as a result of the email invitation. Five of these students were able to attend scheduled focus group sessions. The other 2 were scheduled to interview at times that were conducive to their school and work time commitments. Since participation in the focus groups was deemed inadequate, all the students who participated in the focus groups were invited to participate in individual follow-up interviews to allow for collection of sufficient amounts of data.

The students were verbally invited to participate in follow-up interviews at the end of each focus group session. Four students agreed to participate in follow-up interviews to respond in greater depth and clarify or expand on their previous responses. In consultation with the dissertation committee chair, it was determined that the data collected from the four students who participated in the pilot study focus group and two follow-up interviews would be added to the study. The resulting total of 11 participants and 12 interview sessions, including six in-depth, follow-up individual interviews, provided adequate amounts of data for meaningful analysis and emergence of patterns and themes.

Ethical Issues

Several measures were taken to ensure the ethical protection of the study participants. First, Institutional Review Board processes were completed and approvals received from both the studied institution and Walden University (Walden IRB Approval Number 09-18-08-0266867). Each participant completed an informed consent form upon arrival at the focus group sessions. This form outlined the purpose and procedures of the study and specified that participation is voluntary.

As a further ethical protection of participants, steps were taken to safeguard the confidentiality of the participant data. The digital audio recorder with audio files and paper transcripts of the interviews were stored in a locked cabinet. The electronic transcripts and digital audio files were stored on the researcher's password protected computer and backed up to his storage device and his space on the password protected employee file server at the college where he is employed. Only the researcher, dissertation committee chair, and transcribers had access to these data. The study also used archival data on age, ethnicity, gender, persistence, course completion, and GPA for FYE students and a comparison group of other new, full-time students at the studied institution. These archival data were compiled by the research department at the studied institution and recorded by the researcher in such a manner that subjects could not be identified.

Data Collection

Merriam (1988), Stake (1995), and Yin (2003) recommended the use of multiple sources of data in a case study, such as interviews, observations, and archival data.

According to Yin, this enables the researcher to triangulate the data in order to corroborate the phenomenon. In addition, data triangulation increases the construct validity of the study “because the multiple sources of evidence essentially provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon” (p.99). Yin called this practice data triangulation, while Merriam and Stake referred to it as methodological triangulation. This study utilized two sources of data: Interview data from focus groups and individual interviews as well as archival, descriptive data in the form of college records of age, ethnicity, gender, persistence, course completion, and GPA. The descriptive data were collected for all students enrolled in the FYE during the fall 2006 and fall 2007 semesters. For each of these two semesters, descriptive data were also collected for a comparison group of all new, full-time students enrolled at the studied institution who were not in the FYE.

The interview data were collected from a series of nine interview sessions, including focus groups and follow-up individual interviews with former participants in the FYE learning community who had persisted at the college for more than one year after participating in the learning community. Each 1-hour focus group was held early in the fall 2008 semester, and each was audio-recorded. The follow-up interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length and were also audio-recorded. As suggested by Yin (2003), a protocol was used to guide data collection and increase the reliability of the study by documenting how the study was conducted to reduce error and bias. The focus group protocol was based on one previously developed and used by the researcher for focus groups conducted in the dissertation pilot study and an earlier study. This protocol

was created with the assistance of the research department at the studied institution and was informed by the work of Krueger and Casey (2000). A similar protocol was developed for each individual follow-up interview as well. During each interview, the researcher took notes, recording impressions, questions, and key points.

The following interview questions were designed to encourage an open discussion among the former FYE participants on the general topic of their learning community experience and the aspects of this experience, if any, which contributed to their persistence in college:

1. Please tell us your first name and a little bit about yourself.
2. Think back to when you were in the FYE program. What do you remember about the experience?
3. Do you think the FYE program helped you to complete your 1st semester in college? If so, what was it about the FYE that was most helpful? Not helpful?
4. Did participating in the FYE your 1st semester help you to complete your 2nd semester? If so, what experiences, skills, or knowledge did you take with you from the FYE that were helpful? Not helpful?
5. Did you connect with other students in the FYE? If so, have you stayed in touch with these students? If you have stayed in touch, tell me about how you have done so (for example, taking classes together, texting each other, hanging out, studying together)?
6. Did you connect with any of your teachers in the FYE? If so, have you stayed in touch with these teachers? If you have stayed in touch, tell me about how you have

done so (for example, taking other classes from an FYE teacher, sending an email, stopping by her/his office, chatting when you see him/her on campus)?

7. Have these connections with students and/or teachers helped you to stay in college? If so, how have they helped?

8. If you believe that your experience in the FYE is partly responsible for the fact that you are still in college today, what part or parts of your FYE experience do you think are the *most* responsible?

9. What have we not covered today that you would like to tell us about your FYE experience and its impact on your staying in college?

Yin (2003) recommended that case study researchers create what he terms a study database, an organized collection of the raw data of the study from which the results and conclusions are derived. This practice increases the study's reliability by providing a trail of evidence linking the conclusions to the data. For this study, the study database consisted of digital audio files, electronic interview transcripts, and Excel spreadsheets of archival student records.

Data Analysis

Yin (2003) recommended that a case study use the theoretical basis of the study as an overarching analytical strategy to guide the data analysis. Such a theoretical grounding helps to focus the data analysis on the proposition(s) of the theory and suggest alternative explanations. The data analysis of this study used a conceptual framework consisting of the theories of Astin (1984) and Tinto (1997). The proposition inherent in these theories,

that student involvement leads to persistence, served as the study's guiding analytical strategy and suggested patterns and themes in the data.

The data analysis technique of pattern matching, suggested by Yin (2003) as one of the most effective for case studies, was used in this study. According to Yin, for a descriptive case study, the predicted patterns must be identified before data collection. Based on the conceptual framework of this study, the researcher predicted a pattern of involvement leading to persistence. This predicted pattern was compared to the patterns found through the data analysis of the study.

Merriam (1988) suggested that case studies use inductive reasoning to arrive at generalizations and new understandings from the data analysis and allow for emergent relationships that may cause the phenomenon under study to be seen in a new light. Such an inductive approach was taken to analyze the qualitative interview data. The interview transcripts were read and reread during and after the transcription process, and notes were written in the margins to indicate potential patterns, trends, and themes. Tentative codes were assigned to data segments and emerging themes identified.

After extended immersion in the data, the codes and themes were modified and finalized. Finally, an Excel spreadsheet was used to sort the coded data, identify patterns and relationships within the codes, and group the codes by theme. The codes used in the study did not come solely from the inductive process described above. They had their genesis in the literature on learning communities, student involvement, and persistence. This literature, and the inductive process described above, influenced the development of

the codes used in the pilot for this study. The pilot study codes were used and modified, as appropriate, in this study.

According to Stake (1995), searching for patterns and meanings may occur during data collection, coding, and document review. As discussed above, patterns, meanings, and themes were sought during the data collection and coding of the qualitative interview data. The descriptive data, the archival student records, were analyzed in a similar way. These records were searched for patterns that either supported or disconfirmed the patterns and meanings found in the interview data. Discrepant data that contradicts the researcher's preconceptions and the study's conceptual framework, both of which suggest that the learning community will foster student involvement leading to persistence, were included in the data analysis and discussion of the study's findings.

Pilot Study

In the spring of 2007, the researcher conducted a pilot study at the studied institution with four former FYE students from the fall 2006 semester. These four students participated in a focus group, and two of them took part in follow-up individual interviews. The pilot study provided the opportunity to develop and test participant recruitment materials and procedures, focus group and individual interview questions and protocols, and data analysis techniques to be used in the larger dissertation study. In consultation with the dissertation committee, revisions were made to the interview questions and data analysis techniques before implementing them in the larger study. Data from the pilot study were added to the data set analyzed in this study, with the approval of the dissertation committee.

The development and testing of the interview questions bears some explanation. Many of the interview questions were worded in such a way that yes or no responses were invited, which would seem to inhibit robust responses. However, this approach was purposely taken in order to avoid leading students to answer in a way that might confirm the study's predicted pattern of student persistence. For example, one question was worded, "Do you think the FYE helped you complete your 1st semester in college?" instead of, "How did the FYE help you complete your 1st semester in college?" Probing follow-up questions were used to facilitate discussion and ensure adequate data collection. Because using this question wording with probing questions in the pilot study resulted in adequate amounts of data and did not lead the students to answer in a particular way, question wording that parallels the pilot study questions were used in the larger study.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students who participated in a 1st-year learning community at a community college regarding how this experience contributed to their persistence in college to add to the body of knowledge on learning communities and persistence. A case study method was used to increase understanding of the phenomenon of the community college learning community and its relationship to persistence. Qualitative interview data and descriptive archival data were collected and analyzed using a conceptual framework of student involvement and persistence theories. Pattern matching was used to compare patterns that emerged from the study data to the predicted pattern of involvement leading to persistence. The

researcher, however, maintained an attitude of openness to findings that contradicted the predicted pattern or conceptual framework and was willing to pursue new directions the data suggested. Chapter 4 will present the findings of the study, qualitative interview data and descriptive student demographic and performance data. Chapter 5 will include interpretation of the findings, implications for social change, recommendations, and researcher reflections on the study.

CHAPTER 4:

FINDINGS

Introduction

Chapter 4 begins with a discussion of the processes and systems used to gather, record, and organize the data. This introduction also addresses the evidence of quality, describing the measures taken to verify the accuracy of the data. The findings, qualitative and descriptive data, are then presented as a response to the research question guiding the study. A discussion of the discrepant data concludes the chapter.

As outlined in chapter 3, interview protocols were developed to gather the qualitative interview data from the focus groups and individual follow-up interviews. The focus group protocol included the research question, instructions for conducting the focus group, and the interview questions. Instructions for conducting the group included directions on collecting signed consent forms, explaining the purpose of the study, facilitating the discussion, recording the data, and inviting participants for individual follow-up interviews. The focus group protocol can be found in Appendix B.

The protocols for the individual follow-up interviews were purposefully less formal than those of the focus groups in order to create an environment in which the participants would be more likely to respond freely without feeling restricted by the interview questions. These protocols were developed after reviewing the research log and beginning to analyze the focus group transcripts. Through this process, follow-up questions were developed that sought to elicit more detailed, in-depth responses than those given in the focus groups. Participants were asked to expand on and clarify

previous answers and encouraged to take the conversation in new directions. Appendix C is a sample individual follow-up interview protocol.

The interview data were recorded on two digital voice recorders, the primary recorder and a back-up machine to increase the likelihood that at least one intact audio file would be available for transcription. The digital audio files were uploaded from the recorder to a computer for transcription. The transcribed word processing documents were then printed for data analysis. The interview data were organized for analysis by using a research log, coding the transcripts, and developing a coding frequency matrix.

The research log was used during the interviews to record key points, researcher impressions and questions, and possible topics for follow-up interviews. A sample research log is located in Appendix D. As discussed in chapter 3, the initial codes were assigned to the transcripts during the first reading and finalized in subsequent readings. After coding the transcripts, the frequency with which each code occurred in the pilot study and study transcripts was calculated, and a code frequency matrix developed. In the matrix, a rank was assigned to each code to reflect the relative frequency with which each code occurred. Appendix E is the Code Frequency Matrix. Next, two major themes and one minor theme were developed from analysis of the codes. Finally, a list of codes and a list of codes organized by theme were developed to reflect the combined findings from the pilot study and the dissertation study.

The descriptive data were collected in conjunction with the research office at the studied institution. These data were compiled by running a query on the college district's data warehouse to return data on all students enrolled in the FYE program in the fall

semesters of 2006 and 2007, the time boundaries of the case study. The query was designed to collect specific student demographic and performance data. Demographic data returned from the query were student age range, gender, and ethnicity. The student performance data were persistence rate, course completion rate, and GPA. A query was run on the same parameters for a comparison group of all new, full-time students enrolled at the studied institution who were not in the FYE. These data were organized by importing them into an Excel spreadsheet and creating data tables to display the data in formats that facilitated ease of analysis.

As outlined in chapter 3, three procedures were used to ensure data accuracy: Data triangulation, interview protocols, and a study database (Yin, 2003). Two sources of evidence were used in the study: (a) qualitative interview data, and (b) descriptive data on student demographics and student performance. Appendix F contains a sample of an interview transcript. The researcher used these multiple sources of data to corroborate the phenomenon of the FYE learning community by triangulating the data. This data triangulation also increased the construct validity of the study by providing “multiple measures of the same phenomenon” (Yin, 2003, p.99).

Interview protocols were used to guide data collection in the focus groups and follow-up interviews. Appendixes B, Focus Group Protocol, and C, Sample Follow-up Interview Protocol provide examples of the protocols used in the study. The use of these protocols reduced error and bias by guiding the researcher to follow consistent data collection procedures and increased the reliability of the study by documenting how the study was conducted. A third procedure was followed to verify data accuracy: A study

database was compiled. This organized collection of the study's raw data increased the study's reliability by providing a link between the study's conclusions and the data from which its results and conclusions were derived. The study database is made up of digital audio files of the interviews, electronic interview transcripts, and Excel tables of the descriptive data.

Findings

The research question for this study was: What aspects of the learning community experience in a community college setting do former participants indicate as having contributed to their persistence in college? In response to this question, qualitative and descriptive data were collected and analyzed. Yin's (2003) suggested data analysis technique for case studies, pattern matching, was used in this study. Following this technique, the researcher predicted a pattern that would be found in the data before data collection began. Guided by the work of Yin, the researcher conducted data analysis using a conceptual framework consisting of the student involvement theories of Astin (1984) and Tinto (1997). These theories propose that student involvement leads to persistence in college. Based on this conceptual framework, the researcher predicted a pattern of involvement leading to persistence. This predicted pattern was compared to the patterns found in the analysis of the qualitative and descriptive data as described below.

Qualitative Data

As the transcripts were read and coded, most of the codes that had been used in the pilot study were found to be appropriate for the data and were used in the dissertation study. Three new codes were created during the reading of the interview transcripts,

however, that were not used in the pilot study: CONNECT-OTE, Connected with other teachers (nonFYE), INTEGRATE, integrated assignments enhanced learning, and INSIGHT, gained personal insight and learned about self. Table 1 provides a list of all codes used in the study with a description of each code.

Table 1

Codes and Descriptions

Code	Description
CONNECT-ST	Connected with other FYE students
XCONTACT-ST	Extended contact, after FYE, with FYE students
CONNECT-TE	Connected with FYE teachers
XCONTACT-TE	Extended contact, after FYE, with FYE teachers
CONNECT-OT	Connected with other students (nonFYE)
CONNECT-OTE	Connected with other teachers (nonFYE)
ACCOUNT	Being accountable to FYE teachers and students
LATERAPP	Applied knowledge/skill from FYE after FYE
EDU/CA-PLAN	Educational/career planning in FYE was helpful
STUDYSKILL	Study skills learned in FYE were helpful
LIFESKILL	Life skills learned in FYE were helpful
RESOURCE	Learned about campus resources
INTEGRATE	Integrated assignments enhanced learning
TRANSITION	FYE helped student to make transition to college
MOTIVATE	FYE motivated student to complete college/achieve goals
CONFIDENCE	FYE helped student build confidence
INSIGHT	Gained personal insight/learned about self
SHARE	Want to/did share benefits of FYE with other students

After determining the codes, a code frequency matrix was developed by calculating the frequency with which each code occurred in the transcripts and assigning a rank to each code to reflect the relative frequency of occurrence. The code frequency matrix is located in Appendix E. From the iterative data analysis process of interviewing, compiling research logs, reading and rereading transcripts, coding, calculating and ranking code frequency, and grouping like codes, three themes emerged from the data: (a) connecting with others, (b) acquiring and applying knowledge and skills, and (c) making the transition to college. Related codes were grouped together by theme, and the themes were designated major or minor based on frequency rankings of the related codes for each theme. Connecting with others was identified as a major theme because of the high frequency rankings of its related codes. A list of related codes for the major theme connecting with others is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Related Codes for Major Theme: Connecting With Others

Code	Description
CONNECT-ST	Connected with other FYE students
XCONTACT-ST	Extended contact, after FYE, with FYE students
CONNECT-TE	Connected with FYE teachers
XCONTACT-TE	Extended contact, after FYE, with FYE teachers
XCONTACT-ST	Connected with other students (nonFYE)
CONNECT-OTE	Connected with other teachers (nonFYE)
ACCOUNT	Being accountable to FYE teachers and students

Acquiring and applying knowledge and skills was identified as a major theme because of the high frequency rankings of its related codes. Table 3 provides a list of related codes for the major theme acquiring and applying knowledge and skills.

Table 3

Related Codes for Major Theme: Acquiring and Applying Knowledge and Skills

Code	Description
LATERAPP	Applied knowledge/skill from FYE after FYE
EDU/CA-PLAN	Educational/career planning in FYE was helpful
STUDYSKILL	Study skills learned in FYE were helpful
LIFESKILL	Life skills learned in FYE were helpful
RESOURCE	Learned about campus resources
INTEGRATE	Integrated assignments enhanced learning

Making the transition to college was designated a minor theme due to the lower frequency rankings of its related codes. Codes for the minor theme making the transition to college are listed in Table 4.

Table 4

Related Codes for Minor Theme: Making the Transition to College

Code	Description
TRANSITION	FYE helped student to make transition to college
MOTIVATE	FYE motivated student to complete college/achieve goals
CONFIDENCE	FYE helped student build confidence
INSIGHT	Gained personal insight/learned about self
SHARE	Want to/did share benefits of FYE with other students

Following is a discussion of the three themes that emerged from the participants' responses about their FYE learning community experiences and the effect of these experiences on their persistence in college.

Connecting with others. The first major theme that emerged from analysis of the interview data was that students who had participated in the FYE learning community experienced frequent contact with and made connections with faculty and other students in the FYE. The connections with faculty, however, were most frequently mentioned in the interviews. Every FYE student interviewed reported that she or he had developed relationships with the faculty who taught in the program and expressed a sense of connection with or closeness to the FYE faculty. The FYE students described this sense of connection in terms of how the FYE faculty got to know them individually, cared about them, were willing to help them, and expressed a strong desire for their success.

It was important to the students that the learning community teachers knew them as individuals. One student expressed it this way, "Basically, all my teachers know my name...I like that. That's more of a personal thing for me...it's safe." For another student, "It just felt like...I go to school, and it's not some stranger teaching me. It's someone I know." This same student illustrated the contrast between his feelings about the FYE teachers and his perception of some of the college teachers he has encountered outside of the learning community experience, "But with these other teachers, it's just different...I feel like I'm just another student in a class."

Another student put it this way:

The best thing was that the teachers seemed very interested in what they did. Like, in retrospect, you know, you see some professors now, and it's kind of like, "This

is my paycheck.” They (the FYE teachers) seemed genuinely, you know interested in teaching, you know, interested in you, interested in the subject material.

Of the 11 FYE students interviewed, 10 discussed this sense of being known and recognized as an individual by one or more of their FYE teachers. These students described FYE teachers who put them at ease by making them feel welcome and expressing interest in their success. One student discussed the feeling of comfort he experienced from relating to one of his FYE instructors on a first name basis:

Of course, walking into class, being 17 or 18 years old, to call someone by their first name is like...it makes you seem more on the same level, even though they're still the teacher. It kind of closed that gap a little bit.

The students felt that the FYE faculty truly cared about them and were willing to help them. One student was pleasantly surprised to discover that the FYE teachers were accessible and willing to interact with students:

Coming in I didn't know that they encouraged you to even talk to your instructors. I thought, you know, instructors were kind of off limits. So, that really helped me. I was really excited to know that, and since then, I don't have a problem talking to my instructors. It's like they're, you know, they're human just like me, instead of this, you know, icon way up here, and I'm way down here.

Eight students spoke of an FYE teacher who talked with them about personal issues, advised them on managing their college schedules, and referred them to campus resources. Three students also mentioned an FYE English teacher who continued to help them with their writing after the FYE classes ended. In fact, students spoke often of staying in contact with their FYE teachers after the learning community experience. Most felt comfortable dropping by their former teachers' offices, calling, or sending an email message to ask for scholarship recommendations or seek advice on academic concerns,

personal issues, or educational planning. One student summed up this shared belief in the supportive nature of the FYE faculty, “I thought it made it great that we could actually talk to them, and they were interested, and that they’re willing to help you.”

This feeling that the FYE faculty cared for them was often expressed by the students as a sense that the faculty had a strong desire for student success. One student put it this way, “I got the feeling that they were really, really, really, wanting to keep you motivated and give you every resource available.” She also reported that:

The FYE teachers that 1st year just seemed like they all were pulling for you, and pulling for, and pulling for you, you know, and they wanted to see you succeed...It’s almost like, you know, having somebody in your corner.

Another student suggested that the FYE faculty “put off this sort of feeling or idea that they want you here to excel.” A third FYE student reported that all three of her FYE teachers expressed a fervent desire for her success and demonstrated their commitment to her academic progress by continually exhorting her to keep up with her assignments and to get help when needed. In addition, her FYE teachers sought to increase her confidence, and that of her classmates, in their ability to successfully complete academic tasks, “They just kept encouraging us during class, you know, ‘You can do this.’”

Eight students related how their FYE faculty maintained an interest in them and their academic progress in the semesters following the FYE. One student described typical exchanges with her former FYE faculty as follows, “one of them will say, ‘How are you doing? What are you taking this year?’ ‘How’s it going?’ you know, ‘How do you think you’re doing?’” Another student was somewhat incredulous that his former FYE instructors recalled so much about him, “Everybody’s asking me how I’m doing

with my education and if I'm still wanting to choose my career choice and stuff like that. So they did remember a lot of details about me, which I was surprised about.”

The relationships between FYE students and faculty developed because the students felt the faculty knew them, cared about them, were willing to help them, and strongly desired their success. Every FYE student interviewed described a positive relationship one or more of his or her FYE teachers, and 10 students stayed in touch with them after the FYE learning community experience. Six students conveyed that a relationship with the FYE faculty was a contributing factor to their persistence in college. The fact that their teachers were interested in them as individuals, as well as in their success in college, and that they encouraged them to persevere in their studies, increased their desire to persist.

Students also spoke of getting to know and interacting with other students in the FYE learning community. The FYE structure itself, a cohort of students participating in a block of three consecutively scheduled classes, facilitated the connections among students. Students related how in traditional college classes they had taken outside of the FYE, they sometimes found it difficult to connect with other students. One student, for example, found that in classes outside of the FYE he felt anonymous, “like, you know, the guy, third column, second row, fifth seat.”

Another student said that in classes he took after the FYE he missed the opportunity to discuss course content with other students in the classroom that he had experienced in the FYE learning community. Being part of a student cohort in the FYE program gave yet another student a taste of what it would be like to take classes with a

group of students in the field of his college major. Finally, a student remarked on how the cohort structure helped her to make friends, “Well, it also helped in the way if you’re with that same group for so long to get some friends through the process”

The interactive, collaborative learning activities that were part of the intentional structure of the FYE helped students to connect with one another. For example, one of the learning community classes included a group project for which students researched a topic and gave a group presentation to the class. One student observed that this experience helped the students develop a sense of camaraderie, “But when we did this group project, when we were working together, we just got really close. We became really... good friends.”

Students developed supportive peer relationships in the FYE during their 1st semester in college. Students spoke of giving and receiving support by helping each other with class assignments and sending emails to students who missed a class to share lecture notes and let them know what information and handouts they had missed. One student related that the relationships developed among students in the FYE made it easier to form study groups. As he put it, “I’m not just asking random student B because I know that student’s Aaron. I’m going to go ask Aaron, if, you know, we could go study together or something like that.”

The cohort structure, the collaborative learning activities, and the supportive peer relationships all contributed to the development of a community of learners among the students in the FYE program. The students expressed this as feeling like “part of a team,” being “part of this group,” “a collective kind of feeling,” “togetherness,” feeling “like

family,” and a “sense of...community.” One student described this idea of community as “a ring of socialization.” He expressed a feeling of community that started with the students in his cohort and extended to include all of the students in all the FYE cohorts and, eventually, the entire college. For some students, this feeling of community was juxtaposed with a sense of anonymity sometimes experienced in other college classes. One student put it this way, “No one likes to go to college and not know anyone. And there are some classes out here that do make you feel anonymous, yeah, where you’re just kind of like a number.”

The beneficial effects of forming this community extended beyond the 1st-semester FYE program. One student spoke of the friendships made in the FYE as a contributing factor to his persistence in college. One of his reasons for continuing in college after the FYE was that he hoped to see his friends from the learning community again, and he revealed that he had reconnected with some of them in subsequent semesters. Another student related how, although she was very shy, the FYE helped her make friends, and, in her 2nd year of college, she still had contact with most of them. While most students spoke of staying in touch with other FYE students by means of face-to-face interaction such as chatting between classes, studying together, or taking classes together, one student reported keeping in contact with former FYE students by using MySpace. She created an FYE People category under the friends section of her page on the social networking web site.

Some students reported reconnecting with FYE students in their 2nd, 3rd, and 4th semesters. One FYE student expressed how comforting it was to encounter other former

FYE students on campus, “Even the 2nd semester, I still was feeling a little, you know, rocky, but then I would see people and ‘I know you! Your face is so familiar in the sea of faces out here.’” For this student, getting to know other students in the FYE and seeing them on campus in later semesters helped her to feel more comfortable on a campus that, to her, seemed “so huge.”

Another student observed that she and another former FYE student had found themselves together again in a class 1 year after the FYE. In this class, they supported one another by sharing notes when the other missed a class. Yet another student reported that she and a friend had purposely taken classes together and supported one another 3 semesters after getting to know one another in the FYE during their 1st semester. Finally, one student related that he had stayed in touch with three students he’d connected with in the FYE for 2 years.

Connecting with other students in the FYE during the 1st semester was reported by five students as having a positive impact on their persistence in college. This impact was expressed by one student as the ability to make connections, whether online or in-person with friends who are, “going through the exact same thing that I am or they have gone through the same thing that I have, so its kind of, you know, it’s kind of like a support system” Another student related that getting to know other students in the FYE made him, “feel comfortable and, obviously, the more comfortable you are, the better chance of you remaining in college.”

Acquiring and applying knowledge and skills. The second major theme that emerged from the interview data analysis was that students acquired knowledge and skills

in the FYE that they applied in subsequent semesters. Students spoke most frequently about applying educational and career planning knowledge and skills. This subject was taught in the Strategies for College Success course within the FYE. In this class, students explored careers of interest and associated college majors. They also learned about the educational and career planning processes. As part of the class, students applied what they learned by developing an educational plan, receiving academic advisement, and putting the plan into action by registering for their next semester's courses. Up to 2 years after the program, students indicated that they continued to use and benefit from the educational and career planning knowledge and skills as well as the educational plans developed in the FYE.

One student related how, in a later semester, she had used the educational planning knowledge and skill learned in the FYE during her 1st semester. When she decided to change her major, she reviewed the educational plan that she had developed in the FYE and used her knowledge of the educational planning process to revise her plan. She explained why changing her major was much easier than it would have been had she not learned about educational planning in the FYE:

Because I knew how to go about organizing a plan for it, where the resources were to figure out which classes to take through the manual or getting help through the enrollment center and whatnot. So, I knew the steps to get there.

Another FYE student spoke of using career planning materials after the FYE that he had obtained from one of his FYE instructors in the Strategies for College Success class:

For me, trying to figure out a major, sometimes I want to study a lot of the handouts that he gave us, notes he gave us about, you know, finding your interests and stuff. That's stuff that I still pull quite often.

Students also reported that they learned study and life skills in the FYE that they applied in the semesters following the program. Study skills students indicated they learned and applied were notetaking, using campus resources such as academic advising, managing time, understanding learning and teaching styles, studying with other students, and asking teachers for help. One student discussed what she had learned about learning styles in the FYE and how she had applied this knowledge. She explained how she had discovered that she was an auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learner in varying degrees, depending on the subject matter being learned. She reported that she had found this knowledge invaluable and that she had learned to adjust her learning to teachers with learning styles different than her own and to use learning strategies that capitalized on her preferred learning style for a particular subject. For example, in a geography class, she found that she was primarily a visual learner. So, she learned that she needed to copy, in great detail, maps the teacher had drawn on the board and study these drawings to understand the concepts being taught.

Eight FYE students reported that learning about and using campus resources in the FYE was useful in later semesters. Campus resources and services mentioned by FYE students included, academic advising, the enrollment center, the library, the math tutoring center, career services, the writing center, and the computer labs. Four students commented that they would not have known these resources existed if they had not learned about them in the FYE. One student emphasized the importance of learning about the people and the processes involved with effectively utilizing the resources, “It is stuff

you can use over and over and over again, the processes, the...you know, the resources, where to go, who to talk to, you know, you learned all that.”

Another student said that knowing about and learning to use campus resources was “a very close second” to connecting with faculty and other students as an element of the FYE program that helped him to persist in college. This student reported that he had used many of the campus resources, including the library that he would not have used if he had not learned about them in the FYE. In fact, he expressed a “sense of comfort” in knowing the resources and services were available, even if he did not use some of them, “So having those resources in my mind, it helped me feel more confident to know, like if I needed them, this is where they are.”

One of the study skills or strategies for academic success taught in the FYE was communicating with instructors, including asking for clarification of concepts or assignment instructions and requesting help with assignments when needed. Several students reported that they had learned this skill in the FYE and applied it in later semesters. For example, one student spoke of her shyness and hesitancy in asking questions when she started her 1st semester of college in the FYE program, “I was always afraid to ask questions until they kept encouraging that and encouraging that.” This encouragement eventually led to her gaining the courage to ask questions in class when she needed clarification, “Yeah, so it finally got to the point where I got bolder in class, where I would just out and out ask a question.” After being continually assured that it was appropriate to ask questions in class and being told that other students most likely would have the same questions she had, her desire to learn overcame her fear:

I would also kind of look around and see if anybody else looked confused like I felt, you know, and I'm thinking, okay, never mind, I've got to ask this question because I can't go further until I know how to do this.

For this study, life skills are defined as aspects of personal development that may help students succeed in college and beyond. Students spoke of personal responsibility, goal setting, self-confidence, and interacting with others as life skills learned and applied. One student expressed his application of personal responsibility and self-confidence this way: "I had to stop giving the blame to other things. I was like, 'you know that you can do this; you're a smart kid.'" Another student mentioned that she had learned how to more confidently interact with others, "That's what helped through the next semester, yeah, is being able to have confidence and know that you can approach almost anybody now, including instructors and students."

The comments of a third student emphasized the importance of the life skill of interacting with others to his success in college and life. He said that he had learned how to make friends and interact effectively with others while in the FYE, which included improving his listening skills. He then related how he had applied this skill in his other classes each semester since he was in the FYE by reaching out to meet and talk to other people. He went on to explain how learning and applying this skill was helpful. By making friends, he had other students to support him, which helped him to maintain his motivation. In addition, he saw the benefits of learning to interact with others as extending beyond the confines of the college:

It sort of prepares you for the real world...so many jobs are done in groups now or you have to work with people and, you know, you sort of learn how to, you know, work with a group and basically learn the importance of that because you're going to have to use that later on in life.

Making the transition to college. The minor theme that emerged from the interview data was that the FYE learning community helped the participants make the transition from high school to the 1st year of college. One student spoke of this challenging phase as “a really crazy transition from high school to college,” and expressed his apprehension this way, “I thought it was going to be pretty scary just being by myself.” Students indicated that the FYE learning community experience assisted them in making a successful transition to college by helping them to become familiar with the college environment, increase self-confidence and the motivation to continue the 1st semester, establish realistic expectations of college, and develop supportive relationships with peers and teachers. As one student put it, “It was a good head start.”

The FYE began helping students make the transition immediately, before classes even began. One student related that the new students, he included, were apprehensive about beginning college when they arrived at the FYE orientation, which took place the week before the semester began. After the orientation, during the campus tour, the student noticed that he and his peers were much less anxious about the 1st day of classes. The student attributed this reduced level of anxiety to the personal connections with the FYE faculty that began at the orientation. The informal, interpersonal communication between students and faculty and among students that occurred at the orientation helped to facilitate the transition to college.

For some students, the transition to college began with the realization that the college environment would be much different than high school. One student put it this way, “The things I’ve been doing in elementary and high school, that won’t work for

college. You know, you totally have to change the way you act, the way you manage things.” This same student learned that the expectations of college faculty were different than those of his high school teachers. He learned in the FYE that he wouldn’t be told to write down assignment due dates and study for tests or given several reminders of upcoming due dates, “They’re not going to baby you...it’s up to you to manage your time.”

The FYE students spoke of the transition to college as a process of overcoming a fear of the unknown and of college as an intimidating place. They related that the FYE helped them to conquer their fears and ease the transition. One student described the threatening aspect of starting college, “At first, it was very scary because I had no idea what to expect, because you hear things all the time.” She went on to say, “If I hadn’t gone through the FYE, then it would have been a lot more intimidating because it really helps you ease into the whole process.”

Students reported that there were several specific aspects of the FYE that helped them overcome their fears and make the transition to college. As discussed above, forging personal connections with the FYE faculty helped students feel less apprehensive and more comfortable in college. One student described her personal connections with her FYE teachers and attributed her persistence in college to these relationships, saying that without them “I don’t think I’d be back because I would just be so intimidated, because college is scary to begin with.” Other aspects of the FYE that helped students overcome the fear of beginning college were learning about college resources and processes and becoming familiar with the structure and expectations of college courses.

These and other FYE experiences helped students gain personal insight and foster a growing sense of confidence in their ability to succeed in college.

Two students spoke of acquiring insight into their own identities and how they interacted with others. These personal insights, their growing familiarity with the college environment, and the development of relationships with FYE faculty and students led to increased self-confidence. In a discussion of how learning about campus resources and processes had helped them make the transition to college, these two students spoke of how this had increased their confidence. As a result of becoming more aware of college services and processes, one student expressed her confidence this way “I can do this. I know what to do now.” The other added, “Yes. I can do this, and I know where to go.”

As a result of the benefits they obtained from participating in the FYE their 1st semester in college, eight students expressed a desire to recommend the program to other new students and share with their peers what they had learned. Speaking of the college success course, one student said, “Oh, I think every single person that ever thinks about going to college should go through one of them.” Another student, in his 2nd year of college at the time of the interview, related that he had reached out to 1st-year students to connect with them socially and to help them learn study techniques he had learned in the FYE. He indicated that his experience in the FYE had kindled in him the desire to help 1st-year students, “Because of the FYE, because of having that, you know, first foot in the door, being a very social, very open environment, helped encourage me to be more social and accommodating to more students.”

Descriptive Data

In addition to the qualitative interview data, descriptive data on student demographics and performance were collected and analyzed. Descriptive data were analyzed and compared for two groups: All students who participated in the FYE during the 2 semesters bounding the case study, the fall semesters of 2006 and 2007, and a comparison group of all new, full-time students enrolled at the studied institution in the same 2 semesters who were not in the FYE. Demographic data collected and analyzed were student age range, gender, and ethnicity. The student performance data were persistence rate, course completion rate, and GPA. The purpose of the demographic data analysis was to provide a better understanding of the FYE program by describing the characteristics of the FYE student population from which the study participants were recruited and comparing this group to other new, full-time students who were not in the program. Increasing understanding of the phenomenon studied as a function of the case study method is supported by Yin (2003) who argued that case studies are needed to “understand complex social phenomena” (p. 2).

The purpose of the descriptive student performance data analysis was not to attempt to demonstrate a causal relationship between the FYE learning community experience and course completion, persistence in college, or academic achievement. Rather, the descriptive data were analyzed to discover if any patterns could be found in the data that matched the predicted pattern of student involvement leading to persistence. In addition, the data were analyzed to discover possible connections to or relationships

between the themes that emerged from the qualitative data and the patterns found in the descriptive data.

Demographics. For both semesters bounding the case study, the fall semesters of 2006 and 2007, the FYE cohort was younger and had a higher percentage of female students than the nonFYE comparison group of new, full-time students enrolled at the studied institution in the same 2 semesters who were not in the FYE. Table 5 contains age range, ethnicity, and gender data for both groups. In the fall of 2006, 95% of the FYE students were between 15 and 19 years age, compared to 77% for the nonFYE comparison group. The percentage of students from each group in this age range was similar for the fall 2007 semester. In the fall of 2006, 61% of the FYE students were female compared to 48% for the nonFYE group. The percentage of female students in the FYE group was again higher for the fall 2007 semester.

Table 5
Student Demographics

	Fall 2007		Fall 2006	
	FYE ^a	NonFYE ^b	FYE ^c	NonFYE ^d
Age Range				
15-19	92%	74%	95%	77%
20-24	4%	15%	3%	13%
25-29	1%	5%	0%	5%
30-39	0%	3%	0%	3%
40-49	1%	2%	0%	2%
50-59	1%	1%	0%	0%
60+	0%	0%	0%	0%
Undeclared	0%	1%	2%	0%
Ethnicity				
American Indian/Alaskan Native	3%	2%	0%	2%
Asian or Pacific Islander	10%	3%	3%	4%
Black, not of Hispanic origin	4%	8%	3%	7%
Hispanic	27%	23%	21%	23%
Not Specified	3%	6%	2%	4%
Other	4%	3%	3%	4%
White, not of Hispanic origin	48%	55%	68%	55%
Gender				
Female	58%	48%	61%	49%
Male	41%	50%	39%	50%
Other	0%	0%	0%	0%
Unknown	1%	2%	0%	1%

^aN = 110. ^bN = 6,694. ^cN = 67. ^dN = 7,110.

When it comes to ethnicity, the data differs between the 2 semesters. In the fall of 2006, the FYE cohort was 68% white compared to 55% for the nonFYE group. While the nonFYE group remained at 55% white for the fall 2007 semester, the FYE group fell 20 percentage points to 48% white. In addition, for the FYE group, the percentage of students of all other ethnicities reported increased, with the largest increases in Asian or Pacific Islander and Hispanic students.

It was no surprise that the FYE students were younger than the nonFYE students, since prospective FYE students were recruited from high schools, while some of the other

new, full-time students were adult reentry students. The fact that higher percentages of women enrolled in the FYE during the two semesters studied was a surprise, on the other hand, and there was no immediately apparent explanation. The increase in ethnic diversity within the FYE cohort for the fall 2007 semester may have been at least partly due to the addition of another developmental English class to the program that year. At the studied institution, these classes usually contain many English language learners of different ethnicities.

The FYE program was designed for and recruited new, full-time students. However, part-time students were not prohibited from enrolling, so small numbers of part-time students did enroll, 1.5% in fall 2006, and 16.3% in fall 2007. All other new, full-time students were chosen as the comparison group since this group was more similar to the FYE group than all new students, including part-time students, despite the differences in age, gender, and ethnicity noted above.

Persistence. FYE students persisted in college at higher rates than the nonFYE comparison group of new, full-time students. The studied institution defines persistence as completion of the 1st semester and enrollment in succeeding semesters. Persistence rates were measured for the fall 2006 FYE cohort for 4 semesters after the initial semester at the college. For each of these 4 semesters, FYE students had higher rates of persistence than the nonFYE group. For the 1st 3 of these 4 semesters, the FYE students persisted at rates 5 to 10% higher than the nonFYE group. For the 4th semester after the students' 1st semester in college, fall 2008, the FYE students' persistence rate was 19% higher than the nonFYE group. Student persistence rates are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Student Persistence Rates

	Spring 2007	Fall 2007	Spring 2008	Fall 2008
FYE				
Fall 2006 Cohort	82%	63%	49%	49%
Fall 2007 Cohort			81%	58%
NonFYE				
Fall 2006 Cohort	75%	53%	44%	30%
Fall 2007 Cohort			74%	51%

Persistence rates were measured for the fall 2007 FYE student cohort for 2 semesters after the initial semester at the college. For each of these 2 semesters, the FYE students' persistence rate was 7% higher than the nonFYE group, as noted in Table 6.

Course completion. For this study, course completion was defined as completing all classes attempted in a semester. For the fall 2006 FYE cohort, course completion was measured for 4 semesters beginning with the 1st semester of college. In the 1st semester of college, students in the fall 2006 FYE cohort had a higher rate of course completion than the nonFYE group. In the 2nd and 3rd semesters, however, the FYE cohort's rate of course completion was lower than the nonFYE group. In the 4th semester, the FYE cohort again had a higher course completion rate than the nonFYE group. For the fall 2007 FYE cohort, course completion was measured for the 1st and 2nd semesters of college. Students in the fall 2007 FYE cohort had a higher rate of course completion in their 1st semester of college than the nonFYE group, but in their 2nd semester, the FYE students had a lower course completion rate. Table 7 shows the course completion rates.

Table 7

Course Completion Rates

	Fall 2006	Spring 2007	Fall 2007	Spring 2008
FYE				
Fall 2006 Cohort	76%	42%	52%	85%
Fall 2007 Cohort			71%	76%
NonFYE				
Fall 2006 Cohort	59%	57%	58%	50%
Fall 2007 Cohort			58%	81%

For both FYE cohorts, fall 2006 and fall 2007, more students completed all courses they attempted in their 1st semester of college than did students in the nonFYE group. This may be due in part to the learning community structure of the FYE in which groups of 20-25 students are enrolled in same three courses in their 1st semester. These three classes are scheduled consecutively, and the instructors work together to integrate shared assignments among the courses and encourage students to commit to completing all three courses as a block. In addition, the FYE includes a student success course in which students are taught attitudes, behaviors, and skills designed to help them succeed in all their courses, including those courses outside of the FYE that complete their full-time course load.

GPA. For the fall 2006 FYE cohort, mean semester GPA was computed for 4 semesters beginning with the 1st semester of college. For all 4 semesters, students in the fall 2006 FYE cohort had a higher mean semester GPA than the nonFYE group. For the fall 2007 FYE cohort, mean semester GPA was computed for the 1st and 2nd semesters of college. Students in the fall 2007 FYE cohort had a higher mean semester GPA in their

1st semester of college than the nonFYE group, but in their 2nd semester, the FYE students had a slightly lower mean semester GPA. Table 8 contains mean semester GPAs for both groups.

Table 8

Mean Semester GPA

	Fall 2006	Spring 2007	Fall 2007	Spring 2008
FYE				
Fall 2006 Cohort	2.53	2.33	2.31	2.57
Fall 2007 Cohort			2.47	2.00
NonFYE				
Fall 2006 Cohort	2.28	2.09	2.12	2.31
Fall 2007 Cohort			2.29	2.10

Discrepant Findings

There were four discrepancies found in the data analysis, two in the qualitative interview data and two in the descriptive data. One of the discrepant findings in the interview data concerns the structure of the FYE itself while the other pertains to student perceptions of the effect of the FYE on their persistence in college. The first discrepancy found in the descriptive data analysis was in the comparison of course completion rates between the FYE cohort and a comparison group. The second discrepancy was found in the mean term GPAs of the two groups.

Qualitative data. Many positive aspects of the FYE learning community structure were expressed by the students interviewed. One of the major beneficial aspects of the FYE structure was the development of personal connections with FYE faculty and students that facilitated persistence in college as well as academic and personal

development. However, two discrepancies were found in the analysis of the interview data.

In the first instance of discrepant data, three students commented that the FYE, in some respects, was similar to high school, and found this to be a negative aspect of the FYE structure. All three students said that the FYE was like high school because they were with the same students every day, and they became familiar and comfortable with the group. Two of these students spoke of a negative effect of this familiarity, that it disrupted the learning environment and undermined the authority of the teacher when students became too noisy in the classroom. This situation supports Jaffee's (2007) proposition that the structure of a 1st-year learning community can produce some negative unintended consequences such as maintenance of a high school environment in which students hesitate to engage in learning, an emphasis on social activities, and resistance to the authority of faculty.

The second discrepant finding was that while most of the students interviewed spoke of how the FYE helped them persist in college, two students did not attribute their persistence to the FYE. One student said that the FYE did not, for the most part, help her persist in her 2nd semester, but admits that she "skipped out" on some of the "basic skills necessary to get by" that she could have learned in the Strategies for College Success class in the FYE. Another student related that she would have persisted in college regardless of the FYE because she was determined to do so and would never have considered dropping out. She also did not report connecting with other students in the FYE other than existing friends who enrolled in the program with her. She did relate that

the career and educational planning information she learned was useful and that she did stay in touch with two of her FYE teachers. Both of these teachers wrote scholarship recommendation letters for her, and she took another class with one of them.

Descriptive data. The first discrepancy in the descriptive data was found in the analysis of course completion rates. As discussed above, students in the fall 2006 FYE cohort had a higher rate of course completion in their 1st and 4th semesters of college, than the nonFYE group. The FYE cohort's rate of course completion was lower, however, than the nonFYE group in the 2nd and 3rd semesters. Students in the fall 2007 FYE cohort had a higher rate of course completion in their 1st semester of college than the nonFYE group, but in their 2nd semester, the FYE students had a lower course completion rate. The faculty who developed and implemented the FYE program had hoped that the relationships developed with FYE faculty and students and the college success strategies learned in the program would help students complete their courses in every semester. The data suggest, however, that if the FYE has any effect on course completion, it is mostly in the 1st semester while students are in the FYE program.

The second discrepant finding in the descriptive data analysis concerns the comparison of student GPAs between FYE students and the comparison group of other new, full-time students. The fall 2006 FYE cohort had higher mean semester GPAs for their 1st four semesters in college than the comparison group. In addition, the fall 2007 FYE students had a higher mean GPA than the comparison group in their 1st semester. However, the mean semester GPA for the fall 2007 FYE students was 0.1 lower than that of the comparison group for their 2nd semester.

While the descriptive data analysis was not intended to provide evidence that the FYE caused students to persist, complete their courses, or get better grades, the researcher had hoped to find a pattern in the data that corresponded with the qualitative findings from the student interviews. In the interviews, the students spoke of how the FYE had helped them complete their 1st semester and persist in college, how the relationships with faculty and other students had carried forward into succeeding semesters, and how they had applied, after the 1st semester, much of the knowledge and many of the skills acquired in the FYE. The discrepant findings in the descriptive data discussed above suggest that, while there is some correspondence between the descriptive and qualitative findings, there is not consistent agreement.

Summary

The research question for this study was: What aspects of the learning community experience in a community college setting do former participants indicate as having contributed to their persistence in college? In response to this question, three themes emerged from the FYE student interview data: (a) connecting with others, (b) acquiring and applying knowledge and skills, and (c) making the transition to college. Based on the frequency rankings of their related codes, connecting with others and acquiring and applying knowledge and skills were identified as major themes, while making the transition to college was designated a minor theme. Three patterns were found in the analysis of the descriptive student performance data. When compared to the nonFYE group of new, full-time students at the studied institution, FYE students had higher rates of persistence and 1st-semester course completion as well as higher mean semester GPAs

for all but one semester. Chapter 5 will include interpretation of these findings, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, and researcher reflections on the study.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter begins with a review of the study purpose, method, research question, and findings. Second, the findings are interpreted in light of the conceptual framework of student involvement and persistence (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1997) and the literature on learning communities. Implications for social change and recommendations for action and further research follow. The chapter closes with researcher reflections and a concluding statement.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students who participated in a 1st-year learning community at a community college regarding how this experience contributed to their persistence in college. The results of the study add to the body of knowledge on learning communities and persistence by addressing two gaps in the literature: a lack of formal studies seeking to understand how learning communities increase persistence, and the existence of very few empirical studies of learning communities at community colleges. The study was informed by Astin's (1984) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1997) conceptual model of student persistence, both of which suggest that student involvement increases persistence. Since the case study method is appropriate for studies that seek to understand a phenomenon (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), a case study method was used in this study to increase understanding of the phenomenon of the community college learning community.

This study sought to add to the existing body of knowledge on learning communities in the community college and to increase understanding of their relationship to student persistence by exploring the following research question: What aspects of the learning community experience in a community college setting do former participants indicate as having contributed to their persistence in college? Three themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data: (a) connecting with others, (b) acquiring and applying knowledge and skills, and (c) making the transition to college. The analysis of the descriptive data on student performance yielded three patterns. FYE students had higher rates of persistence every semester, higher 1st-semester course completion rates, and higher mean semester GPAs for every semester but one, when compared to the new, full-time students enrolled at the studied institution who were not in the FYE program.

Interpretation

Both Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement and Tinto's (1997) conceptual model of student persistence suggested that the greater the level of student involvement in college, the greater the likelihood that students will persist. According to Astin, effective educational practices should increase student involvement, while Tinto proposed that the classroom environment is a key to involving students academically and socially. Theoretical models of college impact, like those of Tinto and Astin, attached critical importance to the influence of institutional structures, including educational programs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The program studied, the FYE, is an educational practice, namely, a learning community, in which the classroom experience has been redesigned to promote student

involvement with the goal of increasing student academic performance and persistence. The literature suggests that learning communities do increase student involvement (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Tinto, 1997). Other studies found that learning communities promote student outcomes that suggest involvement, including academic and social integration (Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004) social development (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2002) student interaction (Lebbin, 2006), and student engagement (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Based on the conceptual framework and studies discussed above and using pattern matching (Yin, 2003), the researcher predicted that analysis and interpretation of the data would show a pattern of involvement leading to persistence. This predicted pattern was compared to the themes and patterns that were discovered in the analysis of the qualitative and descriptive data. All three themes that emerged from the qualitative interview data provided evidence of a match with the predicted pattern of involvement leading to persistence.

In addition, the descriptive student performance data demonstrated that FYE students did persist at higher rates than nonFYE students. These data did not show a causal link between the FYE and persistence. That was not the intent of including them in this case study. The descriptive data were included in the study in order to search for patterns that would either confirm or disconfirm the themes found in the interview data. Several patterns were found in the descriptive data that supported the themes found in the interview data as well as two instances of discrepant data that did not support the interview data patterns. Before interpreting the patterns discovered in the descriptive

data, a discussion will follow on the interpretation of the three themes drawn from the interview data: (a) connecting with others, (b) acquiring and applying knowledge and skills, and (c) making the transition to college.

Connecting with Others

The first major theme that emerged from the qualitative interview data, connecting with others, matched the predicted pattern of involvement leading to persistence. Many of the FYE students spoke of involvement with FYE faculty and students that helped them to persist in college. Astin defines student involvement as "...the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (1984, p. 528). The FYE student responses indicated a large quantity and high quality investment of energy in college. Involvement in college began early and continued throughout the 1st 2 years of college for the FYE students.

Some spoke of beginning to engage with faculty and other students at the FYE orientation before their 1st semester of college began. Most related a number of experiences of academic and social involvement during their 1st semester, including collaborative learning activities and interacting with FYE faculty and students in and outside of the classroom. Several FYE students spoke of continued engagement with FYE faculty and students in the semesters following their 1st semester of college, after their participation in the FYE program had ended.

In addition to this large quantity of energy investment by the FYE students as evidenced by their frequent contact with faculty and students, a high quality of investment was indicated by the development of supportive peer networks. Students

spoke of giving and receiving support by helping each other with class assignments, sharing lecture notes, and communicating with one another about what information and handouts were missed by students who had been absent. FYE students reported that this connection to and support from peers contributed to their persistence in college. This finding of the development of a supportive network of peers that positively impacted student persistence was consistent with the literature. Tinto (1997) also found that students in a 1st-year learning community at a community college formed supportive peer networks that facilitated their persistence in college.

A related aspect of the theme of connecting with others is social and academic integration. The FYE students involvement with and integration into the college was facilitated by experiences that were both academic and social. FYE students worked together in the classroom on collaborative learning activities, teamed up outside the classroom to complete group projects, and helped each other with homework assignments. This parallels the findings of Stassen (2003) and Zhao and Kuh (2004) who reported that learning community participants were more likely to engage with their peers on academic tasks, work on group projects, and spend more time studying.

While the collaborative activities engaged in by the FYE students had an academic focus, there was a social aspect to them as the students came to know each other and became friends in the process. As one student expressed it, “But when we did this group project, when we were working together, we just got really close. We became really... good friends.” FYE students reported that this aspect of their involvement was another contributing factor to their persistence in college. This finding of academic and

social integration and its positive impact on persistence is also consistent with the literature (Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

While involvement with other students in the FYE program, with its parallels in the literature (Tinto, 1997; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), is an important component of the theme of connecting with others, engagement with faculty was more frequently reported by FYE students as having an impact on their persistence. The FYE students expressed a sense of feeling closely connected to the faculty in the program. Relationships developed between FYE students and faculty, some extending for several semesters after the FYE program concluded at the end of the 1st semester. Reasons for these close bonds between the FYE students and faculty were described by the students in the following terms: The FYE faculty got to know them individually, cared about them, were willing to help them, and expressed a strong desire for their success.

In addition, FYE faculty provided ongoing encouragement and support, both emotional and academic, that often continued for semesters after the FYE program ended. Several students attributed their persistence in college to a relationship with one or more of the FYE faculty. The encouragement and support given by the FYE faculty and that their teachers were interested in them as individuals increased the students' desire to persist. The literature provides evidence to support this finding that involvement between students and faculty occurs in a learning community (Zhao & Kuh, 2004), and that it is associated with increased persistence (Astin, 1993; Berger and Milem, 1999).

Connecting with others, the first major theme that emerged from the interview data, matched the pattern of involvement leading to persistence predicted by the researcher. As suggested by Astin's (1984) definition of involvement, FYE students reported investing a large quantity and high quality of energy in college. Their involvement included interacting with other students socially and academically to form a peer support network that they suggested helped them persist in college. In addition, they spoke of connections with faculty who encouraged and supported them, which also positively impacted their persistence.

Acquiring and Applying Knowledge and Skills

The second major theme drawn from the analysis of the interview data was that FYE students acquired knowledge and skills in the 1st semester of college that they applied in the semesters that followed. Most frequently mentioned was application of educational and career planning knowledge and skills. Students also reported that they learned specific study skills in the FYE that they applied in semesters after completion of the 1st-semester FYE program. These study skills were notetaking, using campus resources such as academic advising, managing time, understanding learning and teaching styles, studying with other students, and asking teachers for help. In addition, the FYE students spoke of acquiring life skills such as accepting personal responsibility, goal setting, self-confidence, and interacting with others. Many of the FYE students attributed a positive impact on their persistence in college to the acquisition and application of this body of knowledge and skills.

The literature provides examples of similar findings. In a study of learning communities and student involvement in college, Zhao and Kuh (2004) found that “learning communities are associated with...gains in multiple areas of skill, competence, and knowledge”. Included in these multiple areas are career-related knowledge and skills and the ability to interact effectively with others. These areas parallel the FYE student reported gains in career-planning skills, interacting with others, and studying with other students.

The results of Soldner, Lee, and Duby’s (1999) study of 1st-year learning communities showed that learning communities can encourage new students to use a wide variety of on-campus student resources and services. Likewise, the FYE students reported learning about and utilizing a broad array of campus resources in the FYE and continuing to access them in later semesters. These campus services included, academic advising, the enrollment center, the library, the math-tutoring center, career services, the writing center, and the computer labs. One student said that the knowledge of campus resources gained in the FYE was one of the most important factors in his persistence.

One of the study skills spoken of by the FYE students was the ability to ask for help when needed. This skill was found useful whether it was necessary to ask a teacher for help or whether help was needed from support services such as tutoring or advising. The comments of one student emphasized the importance of knowing how, where, and who to ask for assistance, “It is stuff you can use over and over and over again, the processes, the...you know, the resources, where to go, who to talk to.” In another parallel finding from the learning community literature, Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon (2002),

found that students in learning communities improved the ability to recognize when they needed help and to know how to obtain it.

As with the first theme, the second theme that emerged from the analysis of the interview data, acquiring and applying knowledge and skills, matched the predicted pattern of involvement leading to persistence. Knowledge and skills learned and applied by the FYE students included educational and career planning, study skills, and life skills. The application of this knowledge and skill facilitated student involvement in the form of interacting with others, including studying with other students, asking teachers for help when needed, and interacting with student services staff to access college resources. Many of the FYE students reported that this form of student involvement helped them persist in college. These findings were supported by similar findings in the learning community literature.

Making the Transition to College

The minor theme that emerged from the interview data, making the transition to college, also matched the pattern of involvement leading to persistence predicted for this study. FYE students indicated that the FYE learning community experience assisted them in making a successful transition to college by helping them to become familiar with the college environment, increase self-confidence and the motivation to continue the 1st semester, establish realistic expectations of college, and develop supportive relationships with peers and teachers. The FYE, with its focus on student involvement, helped the students learn about college procedures and resources and connect with the FYE students and faculty, as well as other faculty, students, and staff, to ease the transition to college.

Some of the FYE students indicated that this assistance in transitioning from high school to college had a positive impact on their persistence in college.

According to Tinto's (1997) conceptual model of student persistence, students engage with the institution, primarily in the classroom, which leads to academic and social integration into or involvement with the institution. Based on the FYE students' interview responses, this is what seems to be occurring in the FYE. Students engage with the college in the FYE classrooms by connecting with faculty and their peers, often in collaborative learning activities. In this way, students are helped to make a successful transition to college and begin the process of social and academic integration.

One FYE student, in particular, embodied the concept of social and academic integration. In his 2nd year of college at the time of the interview, he related that he had reached out to 1st-year students to connect with them socially and to help them learn study techniques that he had learned in the FYE. This student had become so integrated into the institution that he had begun to help the next generation of new students make the same successful transition to college that he had made the previous year.

Baker and Pomerantz (2000) found that 1st-year learning communities helped students make friends, ease the transition to college, and feel more comfortable in class. This mirrors the findings of the minor theme discussed above with its emphasis on connecting with peers in the classroom and facilitating the transition to college. In addition, the findings are supported by Astin's (1984) proposition that student involvement leads to learning and personal development. The FYE student responses

indicated that they had learned and applied course content and experienced growth in aspects of personal development, including self-confidence and motivation.

As discussed throughout the findings and interpretation, three themes emerged: (a) connecting with others, (b) acquiring and applying knowledge and skills, and (c) making the transition to college. All three of these themes matched the pattern predicted pattern of involvement leading to persistence. FYE students were involved with FYE faculty and students throughout the 1st semester, primarily with collaborative learning activities in the classroom. This involvement facilitated a successful transition to college, fostered learning and personal growth, and had a positive impact on persistence. The discussion of the findings now turns to the interpretation of the descriptive data.

Descriptive Student Performance Data

Descriptive data on FYE student persistence, mean semester GPA, and course completion were collected and analyzed as discussed in chapter 4. These descriptive data on student performance were not analyzed and interpreted in an attempt to show a casual connection between student involvement in the FYE and persistence in college. These data were analyzed to discover if any patterns could be found in the data that matched the predicted pattern of student involvement leading to persistence. Further, the data were searched to discover possible connections to or relationships between the themes that emerged from the qualitative data and the patterns found in the descriptive student performance data.

The pattern found in the data on FYE student persistence matched the predicted pattern of involvement leading to persistence. FYE students persisted in college at higher

rates than the nonFYE comparison group of new, full-time students. Persistence was defined as completion of the 1st semester and enrollment in succeeding semesters. After the 1st semester at the college, persistence rates were measured for 4 semesters for the fall 2006 FYE cohort and 2 semesters for the fall 2007 FYE cohort. For every semester measured, both cohorts of FYE students had higher rates of persistence than the nonFYE comparison groups.

All three of the themes that were drawn from the FYE student interview data, connecting with others, acquiring and applying knowledge and skills, and making the transition to college, suggest student involvement leading to persistence. These three themes, coupled with the descriptive data showing high levels of persistence for FYE students, are supported by the literature on learning communities. A sizable body of research suggests that learning communities increase student involvement (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Lebbin, 2006; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2002; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1997; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The literature also indicates that learning communities increase student persistence in college (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Love, 1995). The predicted pattern of involvement leading to persistence is supported by the qualitative interview data, the descriptive persistence data, and the literature.

Another pattern found in the descriptive student performance data was a pattern of higher mean semester GPAs for FYE students compared to the nonFYE group of other new, full-time students. Beginning with the 1st semester of college, mean semester GPA

was computed for 4 semesters for the fall 2006 FYE cohort, and 2 semesters for the fall 2007 FYE cohort. For all 4 semesters, students in the fall 2006 FYE cohort had a higher mean semester GPA than the nonFYE group. Students in the fall 2007 FYE cohort had a higher mean semester GPA in their 1st semester than the nonFYE group but a slightly lower mean semester GPA in their 2nd semester. The literature supports this finding of higher GPAs for students in the FYE, a 1st-year learning community. Many studies have found increases in GPA or other measures of academic achievement for students in learning communities (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2002; Tinto & Russo, 1994; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

A connection was found between this pattern of higher GPAs for FYE students and the theme that emerged from the qualitative data: acquiring and applying knowledge and skills. FYE students reported that they learning and applied content from the college success strategies course that was part of the FYE learning community. One of the strategies for academic success taught in this course was communicating with instructors, including asking for clarification of concepts or assignment instructions and requesting help with assignments when needed. Seven students reported learning this skill in the FYE and applying it in subsequent semesters. Acquiring and applying academic skills such as this may have contributed to the higher GPAs for FYE students. There is some support for this proposition in the literature. Ullah and Wilson (2007) found that active involvement in the learning process, including asking questions, was positively associated with academic achievement.

The third pattern found in the descriptive student performance data was a higher rate of 1st semester course completion for FYE students than for the nonFYE comparison group. Course completion was defined as completing all classes attempted in a semester. Beginning with the 1st semester of college, course completion was measured for 4 semesters for the fall 2006 FYE cohort and 2 semesters for the fall 2007 cohort. Both cohorts had a higher rate of course completion than the nonFYE group in the 1st semester of college. However, after the 1st semester, there was no clear pattern. The FYE cohorts' rate of course completion was sometimes lower and sometimes higher than the nonFYE group.

The FYE students' higher rate of 1st semester course completion may be due in part to the FYE learning community structure which is designed to build community among students and between students and faculty. The FYE structure also includes a strategies for college success course in which students are taught attitudes, behaviors, and skills designed to help them succeed in all their courses, including those outside of the FYE learning community. This supportive structure, however, is not there for students after the 1st semester, which may help to explain the unclear pattern in course completion for FYE students in semesters following the FYE program.

Another possible explanation is that the beneficial effects of the FYE program may last longer for some students than for others. These differential effects may be based on individual student characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, or learning style. The discussion of the demographic data below provides an example of a possible effect of gender on GPA. In addition, this pattern of a higher rate of course completion relates to

the theme of making the transition to college discovered in the interview data. The supportive nature of the FYE program may ease the transition to college in the 1st semester as suggested by the student interview comments, which may help the FYE students complete their 1st-semester courses.

Discrepant Data

The interpretation of the findings has to this point dealt with three themes that emerged from the FYE student interview data, connecting with others, acquiring and applying knowledge and skills, and making the transition to college, and three patterns found in the descriptive data, higher rates of persistence and 1st semester course completion and higher mean semester GPAs for FYE students than for the comparison groups. These findings confirm the predicted pattern of student involvement leading to persistence. Two instances of discrepant data in the descriptive findings have been identified previously, an unclear pattern of course completion after the 1st semester and 1st semester with a slightly lower mean GPA for FYE students. Two other discrepancies, these two found in the interview data, were identified in chapter 4.

The first of these discrepancies concerns three FYE students who reported that the FYE seemed like a continuation of the high school environment because they were with the same students every day and became very familiar with them. For these students, this familiarity disrupted the learning environment and undermined faculty authority. This situation is consistent with Jaffee's (2007) finding that the structure of a 1st-year learning community can produce some negative unintended consequences, including maintenance of a high school environment in which students may hesitate to engage in

learning due to peer pressure and resist the authority of faculty. The second discrepant finding from the interview data was that two FYE students did not attribute their persistence to any aspect of the FYE. While the findings do not, in every case, conform to the predicted pattern of student involvement leading to persistence, most of the data, qualitative and descriptive, do confirm the pattern predicted by the researcher based on the study's conceptual framework and supporting literature.

Demographic Data

For both semesters bounding the case study, the fall semesters of 2006 and 2007, the FYE cohort had a higher percentage of female students than the nonFYE comparison group of new, full-time students. This higher percentage of female students could have had an effect on the finding of higher mean semester GPAs for FYE students. Ullah and Wilson (2007) found that female students' peer connections positively impacted their cumulative GPA, while male students' peer connections negatively impacted their cumulative GPA. An important aspect of the finding, connecting with others, was the development of supportive peer networks. These peer networks, however, may be beneficial only, or to a greater extent, to female students. If so, the greater number of female students in the FYE cohort may have positively influenced the mean semester GPA of the cohort.

Implications for Social Change

The study contributes to positive social change by promoting the development of community college students while helping them persist in achieving their college education. The findings and recommendations of this study may contribute to the success

of 1st-year learning communities by informing practitioners and administrators. If this occurs, both individual students and society at large stand to benefit. Learning communities will be better able to help students persist toward completion of a college education which will assist them to attain their goals and become more productive members of society. The Learning Communities National Resource Center Directory lists 64 learning communities at community colleges, and there are others not registered in the directory as well as numerous learning communities at four-year institutions of higher education. The findings and recommendations of this study could potentially benefit the learning community initiatives and, ultimately, the students at all of these colleges and universities.

The results of this study confirm its guiding conceptual framework, which proposes that learning communities increase student involvement leading to higher rates of persistence (Astin, 1984; Tinto; 1997). The findings also add to the body of knowledge linking learning communities with increased student persistence (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Love, 1995). While this is useful information for practitioners and administrators, the value in these findings to institutions with learning communities is not limited to its additional support for the impact of learning communities on persistence. The results of this study also indicate that learning communities facilitate student academic and personal development, helping them to become lifelong learners and prepare for entry into the workplace.

The subject of this study, the FYE learning community program, was designed not only to increase student persistence, but also to achieve many of the student outcomes of learning communities suggested in the literature, including increased student involvement to promote learning and personal growth (Astin, 1984) and the development of supportive groups of peers (Tinto, 1997). Persistence was considered to be a by-product of these other student outcomes. Wenger (1998) proposed that learners negotiate meaning in communities of practice by connecting current, past, and future situations within a social context. Using the work of Wenger, Tagg (2004) suggested that learning communities, with their focus on collaboration and reflection, are communities of practice. Tagg recommended that learning communities, as communities of practice, be a part of a restructuring of higher education that would allow college to become “an enabling apprenticeship into lifelong learning” (p. 18).

One of the major themes that emerged from the interview data was that FYE students acquired knowledge and skills in the 1st semester of college that they applied in the semesters that followed, especially educational and career planning knowledge and skills. Included in the skills acquired were life skills such as accepting personal responsibility, goal setting, self-confidence, and interacting with others. This theme illustrates how learning communities can help students become lifelong learners by providing an environment in which they learn to apply knowledge and skills in real-life situations outside of the classroom and beyond the time frame of the 1-semester course.

The literature on learning communities and its hallmark instructional approach, collaborative learning, suggested that this approach helps to prepare students for the

workplace (Cross, 1998; Hennessy & Evans, 2006). Likewise, the findings of this study provide evidence of this benefit of learning communities. As discussed above, FYE students applied educational and career planning knowledge and skills in the semesters following the FYE program. This applied knowledge of career planning may help prepare students for the workplace by helping them select a career that matches their interests, abilities, values, and skills. It may also prove useful when students find the need to change careers, which, if current trends continue, may occur at several points in their lives.

In addition to career planning knowledge and skills, the life skill of interacting with others may help prepare students for the workplace. One FYE student emphasized the importance of this life skill to his success in college and in life. He saw the benefits of this skill as extending beyond college into the “real world” of the workplace:

It sort of prepares you for the real world...so many jobs are done in groups now or you have to work with people and, you know, you sort of learn how to, you know, work with a group and basically learn the importance of that because you're going to have to use that later on in life.

Recommendations

Recommendations For Action

The findings of this study suggest the following recommendations for action:

1. Learning community practitioners should design and implement learning communities to promote the development of relationships among students and between students and faculty. The findings indicated that students developed supportive peer relationships in the FYE and close connections with their faculty during their 1st semester in college. These supportive connections with students and faculty often continued in

semesters following the FYE program. Most of the FYE students interviewed reported that these relationships had a positive impact on their persistence.

2. Learning community practitioners should make collaborative learning strategies a staple of learning community practice. The scholarship and research on small-group and collaborative learning suggest that this instructional approach fosters a variety of positive student outcomes, including academic achievement (Light, 1992), improved self-esteem, increased persistence, facility in critical thinking (Hennessy & Evans, 2006), preparation for the workplace (Cross, 1998; Hennessy & Evans, 2006), knowledge and skill acquisition, problem solving, and social sensitivity (Smith & Bath, 2006), and perception of a sense of community (Summers, Beretvas, Svinicki, & Gorin, 2005). In addition, the findings of this study suggest that the interactive, collaborative learning activities that were part of the intentional structure of the FYE helped students to connect with one another and develop a community of learners.

3. Learning community practitioners should utilize a student success strategies course or seminar as part of a learning community to help students learn to acquire and apply knowledge and skills such as educational and career planning, study strategies, and life skills. The acquisition and application of such a body of knowledge and skill can facilitate student academic and personal development, help them to become lifelong learners, and prepare them for the workplace.

4. First-year learning community practitioners should structure the learning community program to assist students in making a successful transition to college. The program should facilitate the transition from high school to college by helping students

become familiar with the college environment, increase self-confidence and the motivation to continue the 1st semester, establish realistic expectations of college, and develop supportive relationships with peers and teachers. These transition strategies should begin with an orientation to the college and learning community program before classes begin and should continue through at least the 1st semester, or the 1st year, if possible.

5. Those responsible for learning community initiatives should utilize the findings of this study and the related literature on learning communities, student involvement, and persistence to gain support for their learning community programs from college administrators. Decisions on whether to initiate, continue to fund, or terminate learning communities may be influenced by the finding in the interview data of a pattern of involvement leading to persistence and the pattern in the descriptive data of higher rates of persistence, 1st semester course completion, and higher mean semester GPAs for FYE students along with the support of similar findings in related studies.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study raises several issues warranting further research. In seeking to more fully understand how learning communities positively impact persistence in college, three themes were discovered that add to this understanding: connecting with others, acquiring and applying knowledge and skills, and making the transition to college. These themes, especially, connecting with others, align with the conceptual framework of the study, the related literature, and the pattern proposed by the researcher, all of which indicate a pattern of student involvement leading to persistence. More research is needed, however,

to explore other factors that may further explain how learning communities impact student persistence.

The following questions could be explored. Do students who participate in learning communities persist because they: Are more satisfied with their college experience? Have improved their cognitive learning strategies? Have increased their motivation? Have reached high levels of academic achievement? Or is it some combination of these and other outcomes, including involvement, that contribute to student persistence?

Further study is also needed on learning communities in community college settings. Only two formal studies of community college learning communities were found in a review of the literature: Tinto (1997), and Tinto and Love (1995). Additional studies could explore the impact of learning communities not only on student persistence, but also on a variety of student outcomes including academic achievement, involvement with peers and faculty, the development of community, and making the transition to college.

Finally, further research should investigate the differential effects of learning communities by gender. An important aspect of the finding, connecting with others, was the development of supportive peer networks. It may be, however, that these peer networks benefit only, or to a greater extent, female students. Ullah and Wilson (2007) found that female students' peer connections positively impacted their cumulative GPA, while male students' peer connections negatively impacted their cumulative GPA. Further research could explore this and other possible differential effects of learning

communities by gender, or other factors, such as ethnicity or learning style, which were not addressed in this study.

Researcher Reflections

The impetus for this study was the researcher's work, coordinating, assessing and teaching in a 1st-year learning community program at a community college as well as his professional reading on learning communities and student involvement. Because of this personal experience, the researcher was compelled, throughout the research process, to guard against a preconception of learning communities as a highly valued instructional innovation that increases student involvement and persistence. In addition, every precaution was taken to attempt to eliminate any possible effects the researcher might have had on the participants from the development and testing of the research questions to the use of an interview protocol to the informed consent procedures, to the conducting of the interviews.

Two of the study's findings were somewhat surprising and changed the thinking of the researcher. First, the FYE students more frequently spoke of involvement with faculty than of involvement with peers. The students also emphasized the positive impact this contact with faculty had on them. The researcher's work experience with learning communities and his review of the literature led him to expect that students would more frequently report involvement with other students and stress the benefits of these peer connections. As a result, the researcher will increase his efforts to become more involved with his students as an instructor in the FYE learning community program.

The second finding that was a surprise was the emergence of the theme: acquiring and applying knowledge and skills. This finding too was unexpected based on the researcher's experience and the literature review. The researcher was somewhat surprised and extremely gratified to find that students had applied knowledge and skills from the FYE course on college success strategies in semesters following their participation in the program and that they expressed how much the success strategies had helped them. Armed with this knowledge, the researcher will increase his emphasis on these strategies as an integral part of the FYE program.

The literature on learning communities suggests that learning communities promote student involvement (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Lebbin, 2006; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2002; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1997; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In addition, the literature indicates that learning communities increase student persistence (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Love, 1995). This study adds to the literature by suggesting that in addition to fostering student involvement and increasing persistence, learning communities may help students apply what they learn. This application of knowledge and skill may extend from students' time in learning communities into the following semesters and beyond the college years to the workplace.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of former community college 1st-year learning community participants on aspects of their 1st-year learning community experience that affected their persistence in college to better understand how

learning community participation contributes to increased persistence. Three themes emerged from the FYE student interview data: Connecting with others, acquiring and applying knowledge and skills, and making the transition to college. The descriptive data revealed three patterns: Higher rates of persistence and 1st semester course completion and higher mean semester GPAs for FYE students than for the comparison groups. These findings confirmed the predicted pattern of student involvement leading to persistence. The theme of applying knowledge and skills, however, was not typical of other studies.

The results of this study also suggest that learning communities promote students' academic and personal development, which may help them to become lifelong learners and prepare for entry into the workplace. It is hoped that this study will be useful to learning community practitioners, including those who create, develop, coordinate, assess, and teach in learning community programs, by increasing their understanding of how their work benefits students and informing practice in strategies that promote persistence. If this study informs the work of practitioners and helps learning community initiatives gain administrative support, learning communities will be better able to help students persist toward completion of a college education, which may assist them to attain their goals and become more productive members of society.

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APPENDIX A:

EMAIL INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Subject line of email message: You are Invited to Participate in a Study of the FYE

Dear (Student Name)

You are invited to participate in a study of the First Year Experience (FYE) at XXXX Community College. As a currently enrolled student who participated in the FYE within the last two years, you are invited to participate in a focus group discussion about the FYE. Your input is needed to help us improve the FYE program and make the first-year student experience at XXXX a more successful one.

Three focus groups will be held. Please choose **one** of the following three dates:

Monday, September 29, 2:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Wednesday, October 1, 1:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Thursday, October 2, 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

All the focus groups will be held in Room CCS 108 in the Counseling and Career Services (CCS) Building (Click on this link to see a campus map). At the focus group, you will be asked to discuss how your participation in the FYE may have influenced your decision to stay in school. All information will be kept confidential. Refreshments will be provided, and you will receive a \$5.00 gift certificate to XXXX, the coffee bar located in the Student Union, for taking time out of your busy day and sharing your FYE experiences. After the focus group, you may be invited to participate in a 30-minute individual interview at a later date to talk a bit more about the FYE.

Please call me at 623.845.4762 or send an email to david.gerkin@XXXX.edu by Friday, September 26 to let me know whether or not you will be able to attend one of the focus groups and, if you are able to attend, which focus group date you have chosen.

Sincerely,

David Gerkin

Walden University Doctoral Student

XXXX Community College Faculty/Counselor

APPENDIX B:

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Former FYE Student Focus Group, Dissertation Study, Fall 2008 Site: XXXX Community College Protocol

Pre-Session

- Set out refreshments
- Set up and test recorders (have extra batteries)
- Check materials: protocol sheet, consent forms, interview questions, notepad for research log, and coffee certificates

Greeting/Consent Forms – 5 min.

- Greet participants, offer refreshments and ask them to be seated
- Ask participants to sign consent forms and collect
- **Copy consent forms and give a copy to each student** (now or at end)

Welcome/Overview/Ground Rules: 5 min.

- **Welcome**/Introduce myself
- **Purpose** of group: The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of students who participated in the FYE program on aspects of their experience that may have contributed to their remaining in college – (From Consent Form)
- **Your were invited here because** you are former FYE students ...
- There are **no right or wrong answers**...
- I'm **recording because** we want to capture all your comments...
- **I'll be taking notes** to capture my impressions as well
- Feel free to have a **conversation with one another**...
- I want to **hear from each of you**...
- Feel free to **get more refreshments**...

Questions/Discussion: 45 min.

- Ask interview questions
- Record brief field notes (impressions and questions)
- Keep discussion on track/within scope
- Pause and probe as needed to get more info
- Make sure everyone has a chance to talk
- Avoid nodding in agreement or verbally agreeing

Conclusion – 5 min.

- Brief summary/check for accuracy (If possible from my notes)

- Give coffee certificates; thank students
- Invite/schedule 30 min. individual follow-up interviews
- **Copy consent forms and give a copy to each student** (if not done at beginning)

Post-session

- Check to see if digital recorders captured comments
- Type brief summary of key points/field notes for research log immediately

APPENDIX C:

SAMPLE FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Individual Follow-up Interview Protocol/Questions for Dissertation Study Participant: XXXX Date: 10-3-08 Time: 1:15 p.m. Duration: 30 minutes

Participants: Former participants in XXXX Community College's First Year Experience (FYE) learning community who are enrolled at the college at least one year after participating in the FYE program

Research question: What aspects of the learning community experience in a community college setting do former participants indicate as having contributed to their retention in college?

Interview Questions

1. Please tell us your first name and a little bit about yourself.
2. Think back to when you were in the FYE program last fall. What do you remember about the experience?

Follow-up: You remembered that the FYE was "accepting, social, welcoming." Can you say a little bit more about how the FYE created this environment?

3. Do you think the FYE program helped you to complete your first semester in college? If so, what was it about the FYE that was most helpful? Not helpful?

Follow-up: You said that the FYE instructors were not intimidating. How would you describe them?

4. Did participating in the FYE your first semester help you to complete your second semester? If so, what experiences, skills, or knowledge did you take with you from the FYE that were helpful? Not helpful?

Follow-up: You mentioned that in the FYE you connected with the material, that the instructors related it to you. Can you tell me more about that?

5. Did you connect with other students in the FYE? If so, have you stayed in touch with these students? If you have stayed in touch, tell me about how you have done so (for example, taking classes together, texting each other, hanging out, studying together)

6. Did you connect with any of your teachers in the FYE? If so, have you stayed in touch with these teachers? If you have stayed in touch, tell me about how you have done so (for example, taking other classes from an FYE teacher, sending an email, stopping by her/his office, chatting when you see him/her on campus)?

7. Have these connections with students and/or teachers helped you to stay in college? If so, how have they helped?

Follow-up: I believe you said that your connections with FYE students and teachers helped you develop a sense of identity. Tell me more about that.

8. If you believe that your experience in the FYE is partly responsible for the fact that you are still in college today, what part or parts of your FYE experience do you think are the *most* responsible?

Follow-up: You mentioned several parts of the FYE that you thought helped you stay in college: the social aspect, career planning guest speakers, college resources, and learning about your Myers-Briggs personality type. If you had to pick one as the most helpful, which would it be and why?

9. What have we not covered today that you would like to tell us about your FYE experience and its impact on your staying in college?

Follow-up: You said that through mingling with other students at the FYE events you learned team-building and teamwork skills and that this helped you in college. Tell me more about how this helped you in college.

APPENDIX D:

SAMPLE RESEARCH LOG

The following is a research log used for one of the focus groups. A similar log was used for each focus group and individual follow-up interview. To maintain confidentiality, the student names have been blacked out.

Impressions: both students were talkative, engaged, positive and remembered a lot, especially for the one for whom it had been 2 years! - I asked probing questions to both with good result.

FTE Focus Group ^{Research Log} 9-29 2008
 2:00 p.m.

#1 Intro: [redacted] - re-entry student, undecided major
 [redacted] - AA general studies - transfer to ASU - leadership

Questions:

#2 ^{- cohort} togetherness, learning styles, getting to know instructors, back to back classes - rushing
 (liked papers counting in two classes
 wanting to help - resources, ed planning
 writing center, Math Solutions
 big campus - intimidating

#3 Connecting to campus resources, assignments counting for two classes.

#4 Yes - helped to understand college
 learned to balance hard & easy classes
 " study
 made friends in FTE

#5 [redacted] 1-3 semesters after FTE
 [redacted] 7 semester - chatted

Focus Group 9-29
2:00pm p. 2

#6 Yes - same, chat; sought counsel on classes to take

#7 Yes, you could go to teachers for help
They wanted you to succeed - both, willing to help
teach you how to approach your instructor -
Fm comfortable

learning style - adjust to teacher


priority registration

prioritizing; time management
set goals

CPD Class

Good Foundation

Educational Plan

#8 CPD Class - ^{everyone should have to take} Foundation
Career exploration, Ed planning - 
Instructors; being able to connect w/ them
and others - both

Confidence builder - "I can do this": I know
where to go.

#9 Nothing Cohort; knowing others

For future groups/interviews: don't be afraid to
go in new directions, get unexpected results - e.g.,
Follow-up on comment about 3 FTE courses, connections?

APPENDIX E:
CODE FREQUENCY MATRIX

Group/Int	CONNECT-9T	XCONTACT18T	CONNECT7E	XCONTACT7E	CONNECT0T	CONNECT0TE	ACCOUNT	LATPAPP	EDUCA-PLAN	STUDYSKILL	FESKILL	RESOURCE	INTEGRATE	TRANSITION	MOTIVATE	CONFIDENCE	INSIGHT-SHARE
Diem Study																	
Focus Group 1	6	7	8	7		4		4	8	7	9	15	4	8	2	4	2
Focus Group 2	4		4	1				3	2	3	5	2	1	3	1	2	4
Focus Group 3	1		2					2	2					2		1	2
Focus Group 4	3	4	4	2	1			1	4	2	2	1		2		5	2
Focus Group 5	5	4	2	3				1	1	1	4	2	2	2		1	1
Follow-up Int 1	3	1	4	2				4	2	5	3	2	2	5		3	3
Follow-up Int 2	3	3	4	1				1	2	2	3	3	2	4	1	3	3
Follow-up Int 3	1		6		1			7	1	1	2	3	2	4	1	3	1
Follow-up Int 4	7		5					1	1	1	3	3	2	3		1	1
Total	30	19	39	16	2	4		21	16	21	17	29	11	24	4	20	9
Pilot Study																	
Focus Group	11	3	7	7	9	N/A	4	21	10	9	9	2	N/A	8	2	4	N/A
P1 Follow-up Int	1	2	3	1	7	N/A		11	4	5		3	N/A	3			N/A
P4 Follow-up Int	8	1	8	5	6	N/A	3	3	4	3	3	1	N/A	7	5	1	N/A
Total	19	6	18	13	16	N/A	7	35	18	14	11	6	N/A	18	7	5	N/A
Grand Total	49	25	65	29	18	4	7	60	37	35	29	30	11	40	11	25	3
Part 4	3	T10	T1	T7	T2	17	10	T1	8	8	9	T7	T14	4	T14	T10	18

Notes:
 Code Frequency = The number of times each code was recorded on each transcript
 N/A = Code was not used in pilot study (it emerged from diem study)
 Part = Parting of total frequency with 1 = most frequent & 1 = the

APPENDIX F

SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Researcher: David Gerkin
Follow-up Interview Transcript

Date: 10-3-08

Time: 1:15 p.m.

Location: XXXX Community College, Counseling and Career Services Building,
Researcher's Office

R = Researcher P = Participant

R: Okay, when I asked you at the beginning of the interview the other day what you remembered about the FYE you said, some of the words you used were accepting, social, welcoming, and I wanted you to say a little bit more about how the FYE create this environment that seemed welcoming and inviting or accepting?

P: Well, you know, besides the obvious, you know, of course having a smile, you know, being generally friendly, they...

R: The teachers you're referring to.

P: Yeah, the teachers. They did a lot of activities, like I went to the, I think it was like a dinner or something like that beforehand.

R: Orientation?

P: The orientation.

R: FYE orientation?

P: Yup.

R: Was there pizza or something?

P: It was something like that, I can't remember we ate I only remember being there with the group and stuff like that, so it was good, that was a good experience because it was my first, you know, it was my first introduction to college and its like, oh, this is really neat and, you know, its not like high school, you know, carton of milk, it seemed more professional, you know, I'm wasn't in a suit and tie or anything like that but, I don't know, and the best thing was that the teachers seemed very interested in what they did,

like in retrospect, you know, you see some professors now and its kinda like this is my paycheck. They seemed genuinely, you know, interested in teaching, you know, interested in you, interested in the subject material.

R: Okay, interested in the subject, and teaching, and then you as a student. Okay. What else do you remember about the orientation besides the dinner that helped create that nice environment?

P: Um.

R: I know I'm talking two years ago.

P: I know, I'm trying to think back then, like I can remember bits and pieces, its, they had I believe it was someone from the student government speaking...

R: Yeah, that's right, yeah.

P: Um, they had the instructors talking. There's of course when you're sitting down to eat and you don't really know many people there unless you came in with people so you got a chance to meet the students from your class and from different classes. You didn't know who you were going to get paired up with. They did some ice breaker activities if I remember correctly.

R: Yeah, that sounds right, we usually do that.

P: And they did a big photo shoot, which was, it was interesting but it kinda seemed like I don't know it was a weird time to do it because they wasn't a whole lot of people there, like out of all the people there I think three of them ended up in my class out of 20.

R: Really.

P: So it was kinda like, hmm, maybe this would have been like a middle of the semester thing.

R: Yeah. Did they, did you go on a campus tour?

P: Um.

R: To see where your classrooms were?

- P: I don't think we did that during the orientation. Oh, well wait, during the orientation we did go get our student IDs.
- R: Oh, okay.
- P: I know that much and I think we were introduced to some things along the way.
- R: Okay.
- P: I know that the way that we got introduced to the campus was through the scavenger hunt.
- R: Oh, right, later during the class right. Okay. So that welcoming environment started at that orientation before classes...
- P: Exactly.
- R: even started and did it continue into the first day or first week of classes.
- P: Yup. It continued all the way throughout the course.
- R: Oh, okay. Another thing that you said that I remembered was that the FYE instructors were not intimidating. How would you describe the FYE instructors?
- P: Like I said in the prior question they are very, you know, welcoming.
- R: Oh, yeah, right.
- P: Ah, they were just all around friendly.
- R: Welcoming, friendly, and then you did say also they were interested in their subjects, genuinely interested in you as a student?
- P: Yeah, well you could see it when they're, subject-wise you could see it when they're teaching that they, you know, it wasn't like, I'm, you know, its not like this in college but I know like when you go to other schools, high schools, its kinda like I wanted to be the physics teacher but I'm teaching the freshman, you know, science class...
- R: Yeah.

- P: they seem to be genuinely interested like XXXX, she was genuinely interested in psychology, you could see it when she got fired up when she was talking. XXXX was very helpful with the strategies to college success class and they kinda had you on a like, if I saw, you know, XXXX, I would call her Dr. XXXX in front of her colleagues, but during the class time it was, you know, XXXX.
- R: Yeah, so it was nice to have that familiarity.
- P: Exactly.
- R: Informality.
- P: Yeah. Of course walking into class, being 17 ½ or 18 years old, to call someone by their first name is like, it makes you seem more on the same level, even though they're still the teacher, it kind of closed that gap a little bit.
- R: Okay, thank you. What else did I have? Oh yeah, you mentioned in the FYE that you connected with the material, that the instructors related it to you. Can you tell me more about that?
- P: Hmm, one more time.
- R: You said in the FYE you connected with the material that was being taught and that the instructors related to you.
- P: Like for a big tip of that was CPD, the strategies to college success because, of course, everyone wants to be successful in college and so they introduced you to such a, you know, a variety of study materials, things like that where you can actually like when you got to it and you looked at each one you could figure out at that time, which ones going to be the one for you. Like for example I didn't, you know, connect well with Cornell as it was a little too analytical for me and a little tedious for me and so when we learned some other strategies later on I figured out that I'm more of a connect the dots kind of person, that wasn't the lesson of course, but, you know, if I took something and related it more towards me I was more apt to learn and it was easier to remember just by simple word association. I used mnemonics a lot with my studies.
- R: So you could choose from a variety of different kinds of study strategies or success strategies?
- P: Yup.

- R: So you were presented with a lot and you were able to take what fit you...
- P: Exactly.
- R: your personality, your learning style, and so forth.
- P: It wasn't, you know, as structured as high school was. Like this is the way we take notes, this is the way I accept notes. It was here's, you know, your options, kinda pick one, and then having CPD being the very first class you kind of took what you've learned there, you know, applied it to your psychology and English classes afterwards.
- R: So first hour of the day or the first of the three FYE classes was CPD for you and then so immediately after you could apply it in the next class.
- P: Exactly, which was psychology and then, you know, of course psychology later related on to the English course, because we wrote a lot of psychology papers in there so it flowed together very well.
- R: Did the instructor, XXXX, your success instructor, did she ask you or encourage you to go and use this right at the very next class or is that something that you just did on your own?
- P: She didn't have to encourage it every time, like of course she said, you know, this is to use in your classes, she didn't say use this in psychology if I remember correctly but she encouraged the use of it in classes, you know, some people picked up, some people didn't.
- R: Okay. It wasn't an assignment to go do it in the next class but something you thought...
- P: Not if I remember correctly but I could be wrong.
- R: Okay. You've got a pretty good memory for two years ago. You're remembering a lot.
- P: Some of my other classes were a blur but that little section, you know, was my first introduction to it so the first impression made a good one.
- R: Okay. I believe that you said that connections with FYE students and teachers helped you develop a sense of identity. I remember that term, I wrote down sense of identity, and I wanted you to tell me more about that

CURRICULUM VITAE

DAVID M. GERKIN

EDUCATION

Ph.D. Education, Walden University, 2009
M.A. Counseling, Ottawa University, 1995
B.A. Adult Education, Ottawa University, 1994

WORK EXPERIENCE

Faculty, Counseling (2005 - present)
 Glendale Community College, Glendale Arizona
Director Career and Educational Planning Service, (2004 - 2005)
 Paradise Valley Community College (PVCC), Phoenix, Arizona
Adjunct Faculty, Child and Family Studies (2004 - 2005)
Adjunct Faculty, Counseling (January 2004 - May 2004)
 Glendale Community College, Glendale, Arizona
Director, Learning Support Center (January 1997 - 2004)
 Paradise Valley Community College, Phoenix, Arizona
Faculty, Counseling: 1-semester assignment (August 1996 - January 1997)
 Paradise Valley Community College, Phoenix, Arizona
Adjunct Faculty, Counseling (Fall 1995, Spring 1996, Fall 1998, and Fall 2003)
 Paradise Valley Community College, Phoenix, Arizona
Coordinator, Learning Support Center (August 1995 - August 1996)
 Paradise Valley Community College, Phoenix, Arizona

COURSES TAUGHT

Strategies for College Success
Career and Personal Development
Study Skills Development
Success Orientation Seminar
Men and Children: Strengthening the Bond
Introduction to Multiculturalism

AWARDS, CERTIFICATIONS, AND PUBLICATIONS

PVCC Innovation of the Year Award for 2001-2002: First Year Experience
PVCC Employee Recognition Award for 1993-1994: Outstanding Service
Arizona Community College Teaching Certificate: Valid for Life
 Psychology/Counseling - A.1.a
 Computer Information Systems - A.1.c

Chair Academy Institutional Leadership Development Program Certificate
Starting a Learning Assistance Center, College Reading and Learning Association
Monograph
*Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Selected Non-Traditional Student Programs at
Paradise Valley Community College*, Master's Thesis
*The Impact of a 1st-Year Learning Community on Student Persistence:
Perceptions of Community College Students*, Doctoral Dissertation