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**FAITH CAPITAL: A PERSISTENCE STUDY OF TWO STUDENT LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES AT A NORTHEASTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

by

David J. Edwards

A Dissertation

Submitted to the

Department of Educational Leadership

College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of

Doctor of Education

At Rowan University

April 2, 2015

Dissertation Chair: Monica Reid Kerrigan, Ed.D.

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## **Dedication**

*I dedicate this manuscript to Lorraine, Samuel, Quinn, Mom and Dad.*

## Acknowledgements

Dr. Monica Kerrigan arrived at Rowan University midway through my doctoral study and immediately raised the pedagogical bar of the CCLI program to the level of excellence it has since enjoyed. She has been thoughtful and empowering as my dissertation committee chairperson. Dr. Kerrigan challenged me to see myself as a research practitioner committed to equity and educational change, which has had an enormous impact on the writing of this dissertation and in my daily professional practice. I am truly grateful for her mentorship and support.

I thank Dr. Kathleen Sernak, who genuinely understands the magic and promise of student learning communities and who stuck with me while I all but disappeared on a research and writing pilgrimage for a couple of years. I also thank and acknowledge Dr. Steven Rose who, in addition to being quite expert on higher education governance, generously gave support to me and to our entire Rowan University doctoral cohort over time. I am likewise indebted to the committed educators who participated in this research study. They are the worker bees and eternal keepers of the social justice flame. My appreciation goes to Alice Picardo, who I watched almost singlehandedly champion transformative organizational learning for an entire college by demonstrating how to celebrate and advocate for underrepresented students. Mark Hanson coined the term faith capital and allowed me to breathe life into it as applies to this dissertation study. I am grateful for his insights and attention to my research intent.

For seven years, three people looked on with patience, humor, and bemusement while I wrestled with this dissertation. My wife Lorraine McRae is a mensch and god's

gift of grit and selflessness to an occasionally untethered life partner. Her love, wisdom and support transcend description, so I won't even try. My extraordinary boys Samuel Jordan and Nathaniel Quinn have essentially grown up viewing me studying and writing on evenings, weekends and at times even while on vacation. What began with them landing their action figures on my nascent bald spot now culminates with both soon to embark on their own higher education journeys. To my family, I will always treasure how fortunate I am to have had you nearby at all times. You are my faith capital.

## Abstract

David J. Edwards  
FAITH CAPITAL: A PERSISTENCE STUDY OF TWO STUDENT LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES AT A NORTHEASTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
2015  
Monica Kerrigan, Ed.D.  
Doctor of Education

The purpose of this embedded single-case study is to explore and better understand what social and institutional factors account for the success or lack of success in developing, delivering, and sustaining learning communities in support of at-risk, underprepared<sup>1</sup> students enrolled at the community college where the research was conducted. Towards that end, theories of social capital, social justice education, and emergent organizational strategies are aligned with practitioner perspectives in an examination of two student learning community initiatives at the college.

Faith capital (Hanson, 2001) is a secular notion aligned with the principles of social capital as an integrative locus for institutional effectiveness and as a means to socially-just educational practice. It is collectively engendered by members of social networks whose principles, espoused values, and associability interact without strict dependence on a prevailing organizational hierarchy at the college. In practicing faith capital, members of social networks lend their knowledge, expertise, and determination to the production of social capital and the provision of public good. The public good produced by these social networks are student learning communities providing enhanced pathways to postsecondary degrees for at-risk, underprepared students at the college.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms *at-risk* and *under prepared* appear frequently in this work. They refer to college students identified as needing one or more remedial English or English as a second language courses in order to persist in college-level studies (Hughey & Manco, 2012).

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## Chapter 1

### **Introduction: Access, Success and the College Completion Agenda**

In the new millennium, American institutions of higher education will enroll nearly twenty million students (Carnavale, 2000.) In his 2012 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama challenged colleges and universities to cultivate degree and certificate programs that will expand opportunities for work force employment. The President's college completion agenda calls for raising the percentage of 25-34 year-old students earning associate or higher degrees to 55% by 2025 (College Board, 2012). If successful, this ambitious higher education initiative could produce as many as eight million additional college graduates, five million of whom might be expected to begin their postsecondary study at a two-year community college (Mullin, 2010).

Today's entry-level American worker is expected to possess sophisticated communication and technology skills, as well as an ability to reason and perform at increasingly complex levels in order to secure desirable employment (McCabe, 2003). By 2020, one half of all American jobs will at a minimum require an associate's degree from an accredited institution of higher education (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). As qualifications for gainful employment evolve nationally, the number of entry-level students seeking academic degrees at American colleges and universities has likewise expanded. Not all first-time or returning college enrollees arrive fully prepared for the academic requirements of college-level courses and degree programs. Lacking the basic skills (reading, writing, mathematics) proficiency necessary to fully matriculate and persist towards earning a college degree, a motivated but needy academic constituency has emerged and increasingly finds its way to the doors of American two-year or

community colleges. In 2010, 26% of full-time and 64% of part-time American college students were enrolled in community colleges (Lundberg, 2014).

### **The Research Problem and Study Purpose**

Entry-level developmental education and English-as-a-second-Language (ESL) learners comprise an academically under prepared, at-risk student population at the community college where the research study was conducted. Roughly two out of every three entering freshman students lack the fundamental academic skills needed for full matriculation towards earning a degree at the college. Moreover, less than one half of developmental and ESL program “completers” are certified as college ready following one or more semesters of pre-college study.

In response to this student success challenge, an alternative curricular and retention strategy -student learning communities- was envisioned, developed, and implemented by a guiding coalition of faculty and staff members at the college, beginning in 2007. Student learning communities demonstrated early instructional and enrollment retention promise, but have since persisted on only a small scale at the research site.

This dissertation explores and analyzes what social and institutional factors affect success or lack of success in sustaining learning communities in support of at-risk, underprepared students at the research study site. Towards that end, I align theories of social capital, social justice education, emergent organizational strategies, and stakeholder motivation with practitioner perspectives in an in-depth examination of two student learning community initiatives at the college. My foremost intent in undertaking

this research study is to better understand how these theoretical premises inform and enable social network stakeholders innovating on behalf of a traditionally underserved student body. I propose faith capital (Hanson, 2001) as the integrative locus that not only binds together extant theory with higher education practice, but also provides practitioners resiliency and a transformative purpose in providing learning community instruction to at-risk, underprepared students.

### **Who Is At Risk in Higher Education?**

Based on placement examination results, a significant number of entry-level American college students require some form of basic skills or second-language instruction prior to full degree matriculation. Conservative estimates place the ratio of incoming urban college students in need of basic academic skills instruction at more than 50% (Engstrom, 2008). At the community college where this case study was conducted, the actual number of students entering through the developmental education portal (defined as enrollment in one or more basic skills courses) approaches 70% of the total incoming student body at the beginning of each full academic semester. Moreover, students requiring basic skills remediation are at a high risk of never leaving those developmental courses whose purpose is to prepare them for certificate or degree study (Bailey, Jeong, & Chin, 2010).

Not unlike developmental education students, students with limited English language proficiency (LEP) enter higher education under prepared for full degree matriculation. LEP college learners pose unique instructional challenges requiring focused second-language instruction that differs from remedial instruction curricula (McCabe, 2003). Taken together, developmental education and LEP postsecondary



learners comprise an academically underserved student population in need of innovative instructional strategies and sustained institutional advocacy.

### **Enter Community Colleges**

Enrolling approximately 12 million students annually, open-admission community colleges have been characterized as “the Ellis Island of American higher education” (Scrivener et al, 2008, p. ix). Two-year colleges have traditionally represented a barrier-reduced and affordable entry point for nontraditional college students, among them those who wish to begin degree or certificate study despite lacking an adequate academic foundation for the undertaking (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Beyond the advantages of accessibility and affordability, and viewed alongside President Obama’s higher education completion mandate, American community colleges endeavor to provide student access and ensure measurable and timely student success in providing pathways to postsecondary degrees, certificates, and desirable employment opportunities (Mullin, 2010).

In light of rapidly-changing institutional goals and objectives, community colleges today have begun to maintain indices of enrollment, performance, retention, and workforce placement in the form of measurable student learning and degree program outcomes assessment (Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes, Schneider & Collado, 2010). It is no longer adequate for the nation’s community colleges to represent a merely welcoming and flexible springboard to higher education; they must likewise be prepared to expand, modernize, and measurably demonstrate successful student course and program outcomes, as well as job placement in an increasingly sophisticated workplace. Notably, this evolution in the mission of community colleges intersects an era of

enduring economic uncertainty and diminishing levels of local, state, and federal education funding. While such fiscal challenges are by no means new, America's community colleges are expected to achieve the dual mandate of access and success in the absence of sustained budgetary support (Zeidenberg, 2008; Mullin, 2010). In response to a growing national exigency for timely degree completion, many community colleges are assertively redesigning their enrollment management strategies to provide more reliable degree pathways for all student enrollees (Jenkins, 2015).

### **Student Learning Communities**

Student learning communities (Cox, 2004; Malnarich, 2005; Engstrom, 2008; Weiss, Visher, Weissman & Wathington, 2015) represent a unique and contextualized instructional pathway, whereby two or more courses are purposefully aligned with a common interdisciplinary theme. Nationally, urban and suburban colleges report placement of as many as two-thirds of their entering students into such specialized, pre-college courses of study (Raftery, 2005). In addition to their non-degree courses, intermediate- or advanced-level developmental education and second language students may qualify for concurrent enrollment in one or more degree-credit courses --most commonly those designated as "gatekeeper" or general education courses required of all college degree seekers. Tinto characterized learning communities as "a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses --or actually restructure the material entirely- so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning" (Price, 2005, p. 9; Tinto, 2000a, 2000b).

There are three generally-recognized categories of student learning communities in higher education (Malnarich, 2005). For unmodified learning communities, students are enrolled in a standard college-level course, augmented by an additional course open only to them. Linked learning communities feature a student cohort registered in two or more specialized courses explicitly connected in content or theme. Team-taught learning communities reflect a directed program of courses exclusive to a defined student cohort.

The practice of designing and implementing student learning communities is not new. They have been offered as an alternative instructional modality for college students in higher education for many decades. College courses that feature interdisciplinary instruction have their roots in teaching theory and practice founded in response to “fragmented” liberal arts curricula and dating as far back as the early twentieth century (MacGregor, 2000). Smith and Hunter (1988) characterized learning communities as a means to optimizing teaching and learning relationships between students and their instructors. Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo (1994) researched the efficacy of learning communities, concluding that collaborative curricula and programs were demonstrably superior to traditional programs of study.

Student learning communities can be said to promote a shift from learner-passive to collaboratively-active classroom instruction, with the goal of enhanced course, program, and retention outcomes (Tinto et al., 1994). Shapiro and Levine (1999) found that learning communities not only foster positive faculty peer collaborations, they also provide students a higher level of personal engagement and sense of belongingness (Astin, 1993; Pike, Kuh & McCormick, 2010) at the postsecondary institutions in which they are enrolled. Unique interdisciplinary linkages, among them pre-college course

pairings with student success and general education courses, have energized community college classrooms that might have otherwise never benefitted from collaborative purpose and instructional best practice (Ebert, 1990; Minkler, 2000; Bandyopadhyay, 2009).

At many community colleges, developmental education and English-as-a-second-language programs have adopted innovative curricular strategies meant to avail a growing number of nontraditional students lacking the basic skills and language proficiency necessary to successfully earn a college degree and to enter an increasingly sophisticated and competitive workplace (Boylan, 2002). Students enrolled in aligned non-credit and credit-bearing learning community courses are known to socially integrate, academically perform, and persist toward degree completion at higher rates of success than those for whom such programmatic enhancements are unavailable (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Today, community colleges serving so-called transient or commuter student populations represent an ideal proving ground for learning communities as a high-impact instructional practice to accelerate college ready-status and degree completion. (Smith & Hunter, 1988; Boylan, 2011)

In a presentation to New Jersey higher education academic officers entitled, *Developmental Education: Evidence to Inform Change*, Katherine Hughes (2011) cited research suggesting that isolated, single-term learning community courses at community colleges might not correlate positively with college completion goals and desired student learning outcomes. Students and faculty members involved in or completing learning communities variously report the benefits of “block” course scheduling and scaffolded learning community course offerings for enhanced student learning outcomes and persistence towards degree completion. Recent studies on high-impact instructional

modalities suggest that developmental students who enroll in a learning community are more likely to succeed in their first gatekeeper course than those who do not participate in a learning community during their first college semester (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; Weiss et al., 2015).

### **Community College Faculty and Student Learning Communities**

Curriculum is at once the purview of faculty members and a critical institutional mandate for academic administrators in higher education. In *The Impact of Culture on Organizational Decision Making*, Tierney (2008) suggests that

Curriculum is an ideological statement that derives from the organizational participants' understanding of the curricula. The point is less that each institution is different –or, 'to each his own,' and rather that knowledge is constantly redefined. One place where these definitions get worked out is at the curricular level in a postsecondary institution (p. 4).

For student learning communities to evolve and effectively persist, the primacy of faculty participation is important from the inception of course and program design. Shapiro and Levine (1999) found that equally engaged students and faculty represent the anchor to a viable learning community:

Whatever infrastructure is put in place to shape a learning community – linked courses, residential or thematic communities, architecturally coherent shared spaces, extra- or co-curricular activities, and service-learning- none of these is sufficient to support a learning community without the active involvement and participation of faculty (p. 91).

When faculty members are informed about and central to the course planning process, they recognize the instructional value of learning communities as critical pedagogical enhancements (Price, 2005).

In team-taught or linked learning community courses, participating faculty members integrate their individual disciplinary approaches to learning (Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes, Schneider, 2008). Engstrom (2008) suggests that faculty members participating in learning community programs provide safe, engaging learning environments in a number of ways: By providing active learning pedagogies, faculty members create a comfortable medium in which students are better able to know and trust other students who participate in learning communities; faculty members work together to develop the contextualized curricula that personify learning communities; they provide an environment in which students can acquire the “skills, habits, and competencies critical to navigating college and ongoing academic success” (p. 10). Moreover, learning community faculty members “validate” students’ perception of themselves as bona fide college students.

The professional commitment inherent in taking on the collaborative role of a learning community course developer or instructor extends beyond the comingling of academic disciplines. Instead, learning community faculty members take the opportunity to reach students both in and beyond the confines of the classroom setting. They perceive themselves as a guiding coalition, as pioneers (Kotter, 1996; Klein, 2000) who model best instructional practice and a comprehensive commitment to student success. The personal and professional impact of participation in student learning communities on

faculty members is a subject that has only recently begun to receive greater attention (Jackson, Stebleton & Santos Laanan, 2013).

### **How I Got Here**

My introduction to and advocacy for student learning communities came about as a result of serving as an academic administrator at an urban community college, beginning in 2005. In my first year at the school, I was struck by the instructional viability of more than thirty student learning community course pairings in continuous operation at the college. I was drawn to better understand how this alternative instructional approach had evolved, and I eventually undertook pilot research studies on the learning community program in 2009 and again in 2010. I did this in partial fulfillment of course work related to my doctoral study at Rowan University. At the time, I was unaware of the value these pilot studies would provide as a framework for this dissertation research study (Seidman, 2006).

My pilot study research methodology consisted of interviews and less structured focus group discussions with faculty and staff members who delivered or in some way supported the various learning community course pairings. I brought with me an expectation of identifying a single person or group managing that loose network of college teachers and administrators. Instead, I learned that, other than a part-time learning community program coordinator –so called because she facilitated course scheduling and group meetings on a semester-to-semester basis- no such authority existed in the group. This did not align well with my assumption that all good educational initiatives crave a prevailing hierarchy.

Interviews with key players revealed that budgetary support and administrative recognition of the program were perceived by nearly all participants as operationally adequate, when in fact direct support of student learning communities at the college was almost non-existent. Moreover, those who actively embraced student learning communities appeared to do so by contributing their own time, energy, and, not infrequently, limited fiscal resources.

In the fall of 2010, my professional setting changed. I became an academic dean at the two-year community college where this research study was conducted, an institution differing in key respects from the two-year school where my original pilot research studies had taken place. The latter institution is a resource-stable, suburban community college in its sixth decade of operation, enrolling approximately twelve thousand credit and ten thousand non-credit students annually. The physical plant and available educational resources are modern and adequately-supported budgetarily. Academic leadership at the college principally embraces instructional best practices and has to some extent materially addressed the unique and pressing challenges facing a sizeable population of under prepared student enrollees.

Commitment to serving the myriad needs of at-risk students is equally valued by a number (but not majority) of faculty members at the college, albeit often from a different perspective than that of their administrative counterparts. Despite otherwise stable operational and academic resources, sustained instructional innovation has not proven to be an institutional norm at the college: Student learning communities have only marginally prospered since their initiation in 2007.



## **Dissertation Research Questions**

Research studies that examine educator perceptions of alternative instructional modalities and depictions of faculty and administrator collaboration in support of nontraditional learners are limited (Grevatt, 2003; Boylan, 2011). While there is general field consensus on the value of innovative teaching strategies in improving at-risk student learning outcomes in higher education, this research study examined instructional best practice from the perspectives of social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Hanson, 2001; Putnam, 2001; Ortega, 2011), social justice education theory (Hyttén, 2006; Zajda, Majhanovich & Rush, 2006; Theoharis, 2007; Dantley & Tillman, 2010), and organizational structure design (Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Smart & Hamm, 1993; Smart, 1993, 2003). My primary research question for this case study is:

1. What evidence if any exists for faith capital as an integrative locus in the development and persistence of student learning communities at the college?

Corollary research questions are:

2. What are defining characteristics of social networks engaged in developing and sustaining student learning communities at the college?
3. How do current and formerly engaged stakeholders perceive student learning communities as an instructional practice at the college?
4. How do current and formerly engaged stakeholders account for the persistence of or decline in student learning communities at the college?

## **Scope of the Study**

I approached my research questions qualitatively using strategies of inquiry involving multiple sources of data derived from an embedded single-case study

methodology (Yin, 2009 & 2014) and by engaging in outsider collaborative research (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Creswell, 2007 & 2009; Stringer, 2007; Yin, 2009). The research study began with analysis of an internal organizational scan (authored by a founding member of the social network) whose purpose was establishing a student learning community initiative at the community college where the research study was conducted. The contents of that scan provided me with the underlying principles and institutional climate that guided early learning community adopters to organize and innovate in the first place. Content analysis of this document was cross-coded with my research data.

Thereafter, I invited study participants to respond to questions posed in individual interviews, in informal focus groups, and in follow-up researcher queries. While my research study considers the phenomenon of a single alternative instructional modality at a mid-sized suburban community college, my intention is that higher education practitioners, academic administrators, and researchers may in some measure benefit from study findings and analysis.

### **Significance of the Study**

Faith capital is a secular notion (Hanson, 2001) I have expanded and aligned with theories of social capital as an integrative locus for institutional effectiveness and as a means to socially-just educational practice. It is collectively engendered by variously motivated members of social networks whose principles, values, and associability (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999) interact without strict dependence on a prevailing organizational hierarchy. By way of faith capital, research study participants collectively

personified a determined and sustained professional disposition, enabling the partial realization of reform goals and transformative organizational learning at the college.

### **Key Definitions**

This research study explored unique networks of college faculty and staff members situated in a resource-adequate, but challenging collective bargaining milieu (Ehrenberg, Klaff, Kezsbom & Nagowski, 2004). *Faith capital*, as originally defined by Hanson (2001), is a secular notion I apply as an integrative locus to theories of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001), institutional effectiveness (March, 1999; Hanson, 2001; Smart, 2003), and as a means to socially-just educational practice (Hyttén, 2006; Zajda, Majhanovich & Rush, 2006; Theoharis, 2007; Dantley & Tillman, 2010).

I first encountered the concept of faith capital in Hanson's 2001 article, *Institutional Theory and Educational Change*. The term intrigued me greatly, as I had been searching for a means to align my nascent conceptual framework with the social networks that assembled and embraced student learning communities at the research site. Following this discovery, I corresponded with the author, who clarified his use of faith capital to denote an "energizing attitude that drives a group toward its goal" and that nurtures the realization of reform goals and transformative organizational learning (Hanson, 2001 & 2012). Finding no additional citations in the literature, I concluded that faith capital as Hanson envisioned it remains uninterrogated and has not since been associated with new theory or in practice. My dissertation furthers the examination and application of faith capital as collectively engendered by variously motivated (Spector,

1988; Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, Brière, Senécal, & Vallières, 1992) members of social networks whose values, goals, and associability (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999) flourish without strict dependence on a prevailing organizational hierarchy (Spector, 1982; Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Smart, Kuh & Tierney, 1997; Smart & Hamm, 1992; Smart, 2003; Birnbaum, 2008).

For the purposes of this research study, I define faith capital as an energizing, unwavering attitude espoused by members of social networks who lend their knowledge, expertise, and determination to the production of social capital and provision of public good. The public good produced by these social networks are student learning communities providing enhanced pathways to postsecondary degrees for at-risk, underprepared students at the college.

Learning communities and communities of practice are frequently presented adjacent to each other in this dissertation research study. Student learning communities (Cox, 2004 Price, 2005; Engstrom, 2008; Weiss et al., 2015) are offered as an alternative instructional modality in many American postsecondary institutions and are the subject, or phenomena, under consideration in this embedded single-case study. Communities of practice (Wegner, 2000; Kezar, 2014) describe the networks of practitioners who came together in response to an institutional charge, professional interest, and a shared commitment to enhanced instructional outcomes for underperforming students at the college.

In this dissertation, adhocracy depicts a spontaneous and flexible alignment of faculty and staff members who embrace and sustain innovative teaching and learning as

part of an organizational culture type (Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Smart, 1993, 2003; Smart & Hamm, 1993; Bennis & Slater, 1998). Vertical adhocracies refer to institutional subgroups that serve an identified institutional purpose and are actively recognized and supported by a prevailing organizational bureaucracy (Mintzberg, 1979; Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 2008). This is in contrast to lateral adhocracies (evidenced by my pilot studies), which represent self-perpetuating networks less dependent on and potentially unknown to authority-bound hierarchies (Gailbraith, 1973; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Schein, 2010; Dolan, 2010).

In the chapter that follows, I develop a detailed conceptual framework for my research study, framing the above theoretical concepts alongside the case study under examination and from within an integrative locus of faith capital.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Conceptual Framework**

This embedded single-case study (Yin, 2009 & 2014) is situated around student learning communities as an alternative instructional modality addressing the academic needs of under prepared students at a midsized, open-admissions northeastern community college. The purpose of the dissertation was to explore and understand what social and institutional factors account for the success or lack of success in developing, delivering, and sustaining learning communities in support of enrolled at-risk students. My intent is to apply research findings to instructional practice in order to provide pathways to change reform and institutional learning at the community college where the research was conducted.

Throughout this dissertation, I examine how learning organizations, working purposefully and collaboratively, are capable of producing unique strategies for tackling complex teaching and learning challenges in order to facilitate greater student success. My conceptual framework for this dissertation draws together theories of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001; Ortega, 2011), organizational structure design (Toffler, 1970; Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Smart & Hamm, 1993; Bennis & Slater, 1998; Dolan, 2010), organizational effectiveness (March, 1999; Hanson, 2001; Smart, 2003), and social justice education theory (Hyttén, 2006; Zajda, Majhanovich & Rush, 2006; Theoharis, 2007; Dantley & Tillman, 2010) to account for social networks engaged in higher education reform.

## **Institutional Effectiveness**

For Dewey (1916), society connoted numerous social variables. He wrote:

Men associate together in all kinds of ways and for all kinds of purposes. One man is concerned in a multitude of diverse groups, in which his associates may be quite different... the quality and value of the socialization depends upon the habits and aims of the group” (p. 94).

Others have since suggested that, viewed as a whole, institutions are neither cognitive nor affective, as might be ascribed to their individual human contributors (Cook & Yanow, 1996). Institutions instead are knowledge incubators that derive capital from “the collective interactions of [a] group and not in the isolated knowledge of people who happen to be members” (Hanson, 2001, p. 641).

Describing facets of organizational memory in American higher education, Birnbaum (1998) observed that colleges have historically employed a nuanced “rationale and precedent” for what occurs inside their institutions. He writes, “Since the meanings of what has happened in the past are subjective, different reporters writing at different times may present the same event in different ways” (p. 172). No two observations of what came before, what applies now, and what might be in the best future interest of an institution of higher education might ever be alike.

Institutional theory holds that some organizations function more effectively than others. They do so by employing an array of legacy, belief systems, and operative strategies in order to implement and sustain change over time (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; March, 1999). Institutional memory derives from accumulated intellectual and human

capital gained from a corpus of historical knowledge and expertise on which an institution bases its decisions and provides resources (Hanson, 2001). How well an institution learns is embodied in the adaptive strategies that its members employ in response to the needs and constraints they encounter in the workplace. Institutional intelligence reflects those actions (or inactions) that ultimately define an institution's legacy (Cook & Yanow, 1996), as measured by how fully and consistently knowledge and learning are applied over time. In short, some institutions simply adapt, and learn, better than others (Hanson, 2001).

### **Social Capital Theory**

Bourdieu (1986) viewed the social world as accumulated human history. Much of what people create is produced in socially collaborative undertakings. For Bourdieu and others, social capital represents material and symbolic resources exchanged between people who collaborate from within "durable networks of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance" (p. 9). The value of a social network might best be measured by combining the "tangible resources" (Coleman, 1988, S103) that members make available to each other along with "purposive actions" (Ortega, 2011, p. 45) that allow them to collaboratively address a need or desired outcome. Whether similar or diverse in their individual origins, participants in social networks enact reciprocal norms (Putnam, 2001) and generate social capital by lending to each enterprise their unique education, skills, experience, and motivation (Hanson, 2001).

Social capital is not always deliberately produced. There are myriad intents, purposes, and prevailing conditions that attract individuals collectively persisting in "an



unceasing effort of sociability” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 11). More recent theoretical interpretations (Lin, 2001; Locker, 2010) have characterized social capital as either a product of integrative, reform-minded networks or reflecting a more deliberate, instrumental vehicle for investment and return. Because I am concerned with social capital as one of several determiners influencing how instructional innovation is manifest and persists in higher education, my conceptual framework posits value-driven, public gain versus output based on economism (Bourdieu, 1986) as an organizing principle for the social networks to be studied. Coleman (1988) provides a key distinction for social capital in this respect:

The public goods quality of most social capital means that it is in a fundamentally different position with respect to purposive action than are most other forms of capital. It is an important resource for individuals and may affect greatly their ability to act and their perceived quality of life. They have the capability of bringing it into being (p. S 118).

Benefit derived from social capital “directly accrues to the social unit as a whole” (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999, p.540), and only secondarily to the individual:

A property shared by most forms of social capital that differentiates it from other forms of capital is its public good aspect: the actor or actors who generate social capital ordinarily capture only a small part of its benefits, a fact that leads to underinvestment in social capital (Coleman, 1988, S119).

Activism espoused and practiced by those who “subordinate individual goals and associated actions to collective goals and actions” is referred to as associability (Leanna

& Van Buren, 1999, p.541). Faith capital, for the purposes of my study, depends on both the public goods and associability perspectives of social capital theory. Social networks embody strategies (deliberate or otherwise) that tend to modify existing conditions; they are by nature transformational (Kotter, 1996) and enact social capital to facilitate change. While change initiatives at a community college may, for example, appear on the surface transactional (Burns, 2003) with defined stages of initiation and implementation, resolving collective problems and learning (Putnam, 2001; Kezar, 2014) can also render the organization changed in deeper, more lasting ways (Hanson, 2001). The first of three components in my conceptual framework establishes social capital as an underlying theoretical principle for social networks attempting to bring about educational reform (Figure 1).

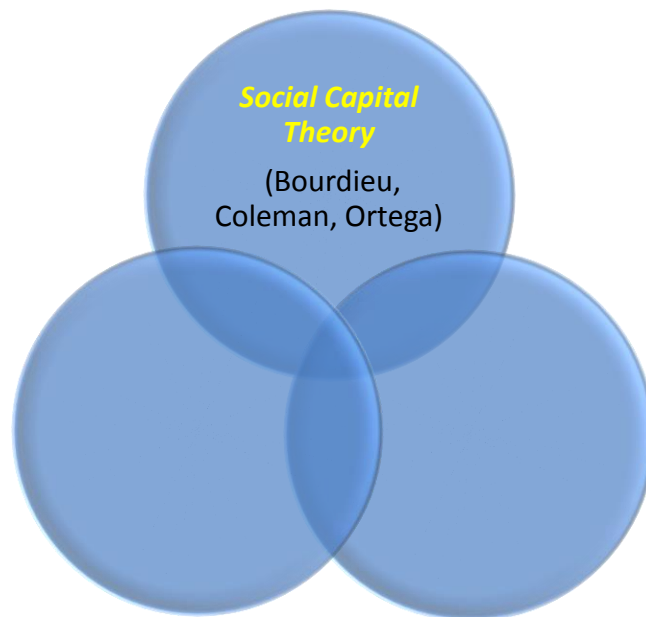


Figure 1. Social capital as a theoretical principle for social networks engaged in education reform.

## **Adhocracy in Higher Education Organizations**

How does learning occur within organizations whose overarching focus is seamless governance and operational utility? Where do innovation and sustained organizational learning come from? A partial answer might lie in organizational structure design and strategy formation. Mintzberg and McHugh (1985) define an adhocracy as a dynamic organizational strategy operating in place of established bureaucracies or “formalized systems of control” (p. 160). An adhocracy, a term which Alvin Toffler (1970) coined to refer to *project structure*, reflects “any organizational form [that] cuts across conventional lines and boundaries” and that “challenges bureaucracy in order to embrace the new” (Waterman, 1990, p. 17-20).

Adhocracies may be either organizationally sanctioned, organic, or combinations of both, but in all cases represent an integrated alignment of stakeholders working in temporary, multi-disciplinary networks (Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Smart, Kuh, & Tierney, 1997; Dolan, 2010). The body of research on adhocracies is both descriptive and analytical, but organizationally nonjudgmental: None of the research I encountered casts prevailing hierarchies in a critical light. Rather, adhocracies are described in terms of the shared values, need, and intellectual thirst that drive their shared vocation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Grevatt, 2003; Cox 2004).

Lateral adhocracies are distinguishable from vertical hierarchies in that “they are typically less formal and more flexible than authority-bound systems and rules” (Bolman and Deal, 2008, p. 59). They thrive in institutional settings wherein the principal leadership may be otherwise engaged or even unaware of an emerging change effort.

Deliberate or constructed organizational strategies are, in contrast, vertical in nature. That is, they are sanctioned and directly or even contingently managed by a prevailing hierarchy (Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002; Dolan, 2010). As I will suggest as part of my research study findings, the two student learning communities under examination for this study reflect the output of a vertical adhocracy.

As an organizational strategy, adhocracy aligns well with community colleges, schools for which “less autocracy, more flexibility, and greater creativity” (Smart, Kuh, & Tierney, 1997, p. 257) represent something of an operational necessity. Fieldwork on institutional culture and the presence of adhocracies at two-year colleges fosters an understanding of educational reform in those settings. In one research study involving faculty and administrators at thirty public two-year colleges, Smart, Kuh and Tierney found that community colleges at which adhocracies operate are more organizationally adept at overcoming “difficult enrollment and financial conditions, perhaps by enabling the institution to adapt to changing external conditions and internal pressure” (1997, p. 270). My pilot studies of learning communities were situated around independent, purposeful social networks of practitioners intent on curricular innovation and adaptive instructional problem solving. In those pilot studies and this research study, these communities of practice (Wenger, 2000) came together in response to a common goal: increasing student success rates. Their shared objective was to comingle interdisciplinary expertise and ideas in support of at-risk, under prepared students.

Smart and Hamm (1992) researched organizational culture in two-year colleges and found that those reflecting an “adhocracy structure were perceived to be the most effective,” especially when exhibiting an ability to adapt to external environments and a

willingness to undertake “prospector-type” and “boundary-spanning” initiatives (p. 3-5). Smart (2003) found two-year colleges to be operationally “younger” than baccalaureate institutions, inasmuch as they are engaged in a stridently evolving process of institutional maturation comprising unique “organizational culture” (p. 679). Smart also determined that organizational effectiveness in two-year colleges likely reflects an interplay between four possible culture types (hierarchy, adhocracy, clan, market) and a concomitant ability of campus leaders to effectively manage and reform school culture.

Adhocracies thus reflect an emergent organizational strategy that involves departure from established institutional norms and practices in favor of “rapid and continuous responsiveness to the environment [and] with minimal organizational momentum” (Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985, p. 190). Adhocracies in higher education might be said to function on two interdependent levels: operational (representing what social networks produce) and normative, embodying the “values, aspirations, and loyalties” that underlie their actions (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 91). The second component of my conceptual framework identifies adhocracy as an emergent organizational strategy for social networks undertaking educational reform, particularly in a resource-challenged community college setting (Figure 2).

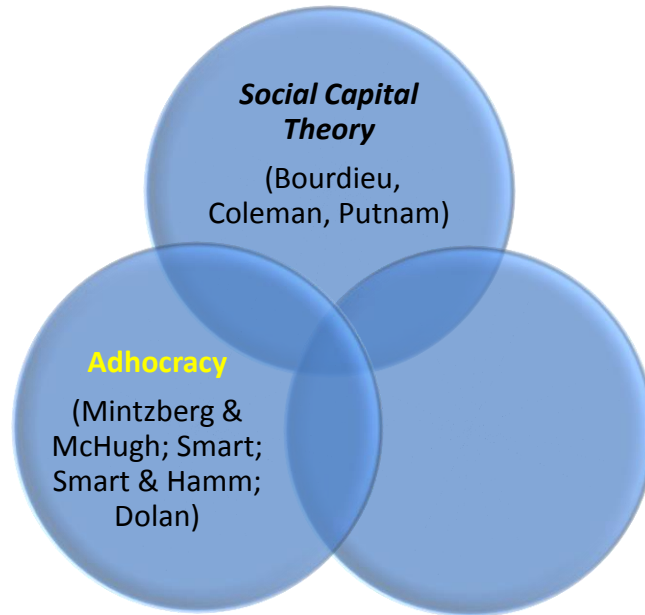


Figure 2. Adhocracy as emerging organizational structure for social networks engaged in education reform.

### **Social Justice Education Theory**

What impels innovators to undertake nontraditional approaches that fall outside the boundaries of an established institutional hierarchy? For Bourdieu, creation of capital derives from “an unceasing effort of sociability” (1986, p. 11). Social networks initiate and sustain strategies that, consciously or otherwise, transform organizations. In order to produce change, however, there must be consensus on the unmet need(s) collectively championed by members of a network. Put another way, solidarity of purpose conditions the initiation of agency.

Social networks operating in community colleges may represent a collective of faculty members or administrative staff (as often as not, both) advocating new pathways to student success in a harried, resource-challenged, and often change-averse educational

setting. My dissertation is concerned with group agency that conditioned the emergence of innovative instructional approaches for at-risk underprepared students at the college where the study was situated.

In the course of my research review for this case study, I was led to an underlying ideology that energizes social networks to assemble and embrace reform in higher education. Thomas Aquinas' characterization of "a certain rectitude of mind" or recognition of "natural duty owed by one person to another" (in Zajda, Majhanovich & Rust, 2006, p. 9) may explain why many school reformers struggle to achieve transformative change (Coburn, 2003). Needed innovation in higher education can be left rudderless from the lack of an underlying social principle around which people effectively organize together. Social justice theory represents an activist foundation based on fairness and equity (Theoharis, 2007). Adhocracies in higher education could be said to embody this prerequisite concern: They seek out innovative approaches, at the core of which lies a shared commitment that allows students to...

...think critically, to participate in public dialogue, to consider the rights and needs of others, to live in harmony with diverse groups of people, to act on important social issues, to be accountable for one's choices and decisions, and to work to bring about the conditions in which all individuals can develop to their fullest capacities (Hyttén, 2006, p. 221).

Freire (1970) differentiated between integrating learners into a mechanistic educational arena and instead "transforming the structure, so that they can become 'beings for themselves. (p. 74)'" It should come as no surprise that these same goals and objectives

are principally reflected in the mission and vision statements of a great number of American community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Social justice educational leaders can be said to be in concert with the “soul of the school”, situating their reform vision through “a lens of equity” and collaboration (Theoharis, 2007, p. 252). Socially just education reformers (deliberately or otherwise) uphold an inherently moral social contract. They enhance the intellectual capital (Hanson, 2001) of their schools by “directing the organization in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent” (Kerrigan, 2010).

Social justice agency can be both transactionally adept and morally transformative in serving a student constituency (Burns, 2003; Dantley & Tillman, 2010). At the research study site (as well as at the two-year college where I conducted pilot studies), extrinsic reward (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and sustained institutional advocacy for educational reforms were not always in evidence. In their place, the initiation, implementation, and persistence of instructional innovations tend to be the by-product of emergent social networks whose agency serves both the target constituency and broader institutional mission by autonomously undertaking lasting institutional learning (Senge, 1990; Argyris & Schon, 1995). In simpler but more universal terms examined below, network stakeholders arrive bearing faith capital.

Greene (1988) regarded educating for social justice as “concerned with basic human rights that all people are entitled to, regardless of conditions of economic disparity or of class, gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, religion, age, sexual orientation, disability, or health” (p. 11). My observation is that in higher education (and particularly in community colleges) an overabundance of need and paucity of resources often accounts



for much innovation being left institutionally adrift or at best under supported. The first to suffer in such circumstances are the educationally unentitled. Educational reform predicated on socially just means can be sustained in innovation-starved organizations where those outside the dominant hierarchy (Dantley & Tillman, 2010, p. 24) find ways to provide hope and learning pathways to disenfranchised student constituencies. The third component of my conceptual framework suggests that social justice education theory represents praxis for social networks undertaking education reform by way of their collectively espoused belief systems (Figure 3).

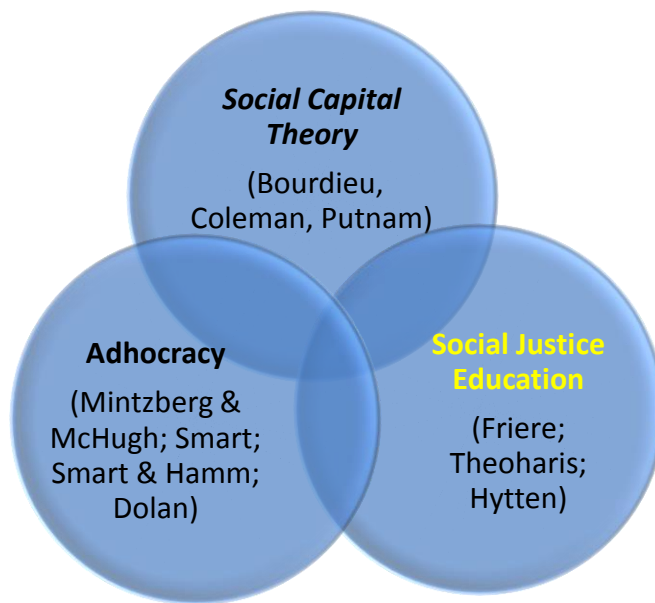


Figure 3. Social justice as an espoused belief system for social networks engaged in education reform.

## Faith Capital

Organizational effectiveness in institutions of higher education appears driven in no small measure by institutional culture and legacy, espoused beliefs and values, and unique organizational strategies put into practice by social networks. Enlarging on Hanson's (2001) notion of the term, I propose *faith capital* as an integrative locus for the production of capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001; Ortega, 2011) and emergent organizational strategies (Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Smart & Hamm, 1993; Smart, 1993, 2003) as a means to socially-just education reform (Hyttén, 2006; Zajda, Majhanovich & Rush, 2006; Theoharis, 2007; Dantley & Tillman, 2010).

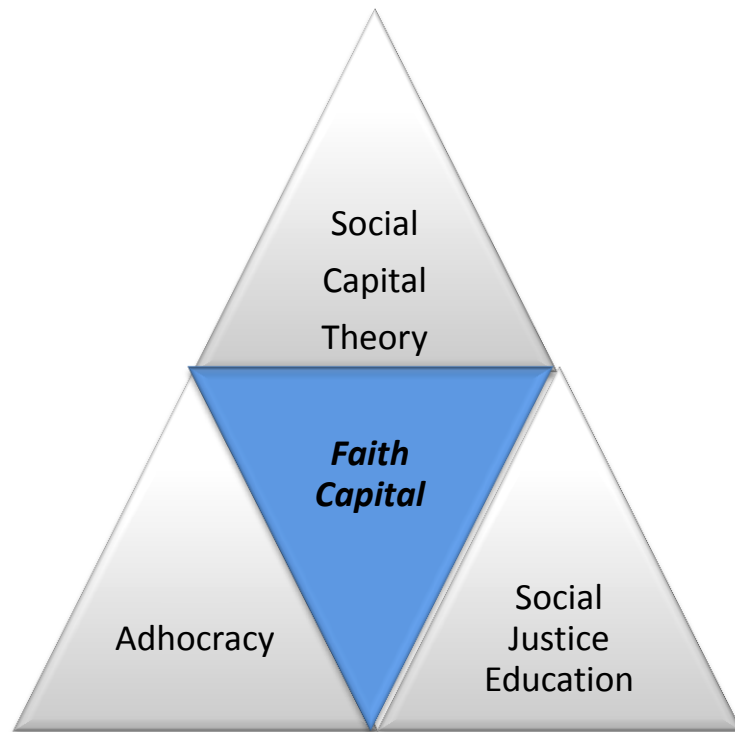


Figure 4. Faith capital as an integrative locus for principles, espoused values and strategies employed by social networks engaged in education reform.

This secular notion of faith capital embodies an “energizing attitude that drives [a] group toward its goal” and nurtures the realization of reform goals and transformative organizational learning (Hanson, 2001; 2012). It is derived from and depends largely on both the public goods and associability perspectives of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Leanna & Van Buren, 1995).

Not unlike other forms of capital, faith capital facilitates production (see Becker, 1994; Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988) –specifically the production of drive and intent to bring about educational reform. Faith capital is not, however, concerned with physical or economic output based on technological, monetary, or economic notions of capital (Kerrigan, 2014). And, unlike social capital, although also intangible, faith capital inheres in individuals, but is galvanized by networks of stakeholders working collectively. Members of those networks contribute their unique knowledge, expertise, and drive for the provision of public good. The public good produced by these social networks are student learning communities that create enhanced pathways to postsecondary degrees for at-risk, underprepared students at the college. While this dissertation does not address how faith capital originates, the research suggests that faith capital is nurtured and sustained by social networks.

### **Stakeholder Incentive and Faith Capital**

My purpose in this dissertation was to explore and understand what social and institutional factors account for the success or lack of success in developing, delivering, and sustaining learning communities in support of at-risk, underprepared students enrolled at the college. An underlying premise of my research study is that institutional

need coupled with intellectual and moral conviction empowers stakeholders to innovate and bring about educational reform. While an exhaustive review of the literature on motivation in higher education settings lies beyond the purview of this work, noteworthy distinctions of stakeholder motivation repeatedly surfaced in the collection of my data. After a time, I began to informally classify participant responses to interview questions as either integrative, instrumental (Gardner, 2001), or transformative (Coburn, 2003). Alignment of motivational preferences may have helped network members in building and sustaining their empathic guiding coalitions (Kotter, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000). What became evident from the study was that learning community network stakeholders were integratively or instrumentally motivated or both in approaching their learning community affiliations at the college.

For the purposes of data collection, I later refined my terms to reflect *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation as they apply to academic setting and scale (Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, Brière, Senécal, & Vallières, 1992). As impetus to taking action, intrinsic motivation is most accurately characterized as “doing an activity for itself and the pleasure and satisfaction derived from participation” (Vallerand et al, 1992, p. 1014). By contrast, *extrinsic* motivation reflects precepts based on externally provided reward and not contingent on integrative satisfaction for the activity or work performed (Vallerand et al, 1992; Gardner, 2001). People with an internal locus of control (Spector, 1982; 1988) embody intrinsic motivation and tend to actively identify alternatives and solutions to conditions and challenges they encounter while taking action. They are not averse to a participatory approach to supervision, as opposed to people who prefer directives and more prescribed supervisory control. Those with an external locus of control look to

others for the impetus, recompense, and anticipated outcomes of their labor. People demonstrating an internal locus of control believe that hard work will produce desired results (Spector, 1988).

While I might have predicted beforehand that participants in the student learning community initiative were intrinsically motivated, my research study findings revealed a much less absolute analysis of what fueled their collective desire to innovate on behalf of at-risk students at the college. I was undeterred by these unexpected variations, but also left to decide where participant motivation might best be included in a conceptual framework that generalizes to theory (Yin, 2013), as this dissertation attempts to do. Ultimately, I reasoned that the types of motivation displayed by research study participants are likely bound up in the “energizing attitude” that drives resourcefulness (Hanson, 2001). Faith capital, as an integrative locus for the principles and strategies that informed this work, is conditioned by the motivational inclinations present in its practitioners.

In the following chapter, I present my research study design, which includes primary and corollary research questions posed in advance of data collection and analysis.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Study Methodology**

This embedded single-case study (Yin, 2009 & 2014) examines student learning community initiatives at a mid-sized suburban community college in the northeastern United States. The purpose of my dissertation was to explore and understand what social and institutional factors account for the success or lack of success in developing, delivering, and sustaining learning communities in support of at-risk students enrolled there. Towards that end, I considered two pedagogically similar learning community course pairings at the college –one that has persisted and resulted in promising academic and student learning outcomes and another that did not. My intent was to apply constructed theory and research findings to instructional practice in order to provide pathways to change and greater institutional learning at the community college where the research was conducted.

More than one half of entering freshman students at the college where the research study took place lack the basic academic skills needed for full matriculation towards earning a degree. These at-risk students are required to undertake at least one developmental education course prior to attaining full college-ready status. An additional 12% of incoming students at the college are assessed as entering with limited English proficiency (LEP) and are similarly required to enroll in one or more English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. The college has identified and implemented instructional and student support strategies to assist underprepared students towards achieving greater rates of success in their pre-college courses and programs, as well as their persistence towards degree completion.

The college's current (2012-2015) strategic plan includes an explicitly stated goal of expanding student learning communities as one of several strategies to "provide an excellent education to students pursuing professional, academic and personal goals." One goal of this research study was to explore how student learning community courses were developed, implemented, and persist by way of an underlying locus of faith capital epitomized by faculty and staff participant benefactors. For reasons I will later enumerate and analyze in detail, early momentum in the development and delivery of learning community courses at the college has not been evenly sustained.

### **Research Study Design**

**Research questions.** My primary research question for this embedded single-case study is:

1. What evidence if any exists for faith capital as an integrative locus in the development and persistence of student learning communities at the college?

Corollary research questions are:

2. What are defining characteristics of social networks engaged in developing and sustaining student learning communities at the college?
3. How do current and formerly engaged stakeholders perceive student learning communities as an instructional practice at the college?
4. How do current and formerly engaged stakeholders account for the persistence of or decline in student learning communities at the college?

I approach these research questions using strategies of inquiry involving multiple sources of data gained from embedded single-case study methodology (Yin, 2009 & 2014) and outsider collaborative research (Yorks, O'Neil, Marsick, Nilson & Kolodney,

1996; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Creswell, 2007 & 2009). My rationale for using a case study design method is multifaceted. At the college where my research study took place, two discrete but pedagogically similar learning communities were examined.

**Research study setting.** Commencing in 2007, a learning community initiative entitled *SCRUBS (Students Can Read and Understand Biology Successfully)* was designed and implemented by a small coalition of faculty and staff members at the college. The overarching goal of SCRUBS was to assist students in gaining “the knowledge and skills necessary to master basic biology, developmental reading, and overall college success” (Organizational Scan, 2009, p. 6). Paired sections of SCRUBS were offered during two consecutive semesters at the college, but not thereafter.

*PSYCHed to ExSeL* (hereafter: *P2E*), was similarly envisioned and developed by an unrelated network of faculty and staff stakeholders in 2009. P2E pairs two upper-level ESL courses in a learning community with an introductory psychology course. The purpose of this learning community is to provide a “situated learning environment [to] motivate learners to excel and recognize the significance of reading, writing and critical thinking skills in their college work” (Organizational Scan, 2009, p.6-7). P2E continues to be offered each fall and spring semester at the college to this day, with consistently favorable student learning outcomes.

Yin’s (2009) embedded single-case study design methodology aligns well this dissertation study because the two units of analysis are contextually identifiable (Stake, 1995). Both learning community initiatives found their genesis during approximately the same time period at the college by comparable associations of stakeholders. Together, they represent subunits reflecting discrete social networks unique to their subject matter



and student constituencies (developmental education and ESL). Moreover, the persistence of P2E appears to meet Yin's criteria for studying an atypical organizational rarity (2009, p. 47), given a complex and at time adversarial governance construct at the college. SCRUBS, a similar learning community triad discontinued after only a brief duration at the college, provides a juxtaposed unit of analysis from which to examine cause and effect for the overall phenomenon.

The community college where my research took place is situated on a 200-acre suburban campus and at two satellite urban learning centers in the northeastern United States. Enrollment is approximately 12,000 credit students annually, of whom 51% are enrolled full time. An additional 10,000 students enroll in non-credit continuing education courses each year.

The college employs approximately 600 faculty members, roughly one-third of whom are full-time. There are four collective bargaining units in operation at the college. The most predominant is comprised of slightly fewer than two hundred full-time faculty constituents (American Federation of Teachers). College governance is complex and not always effectively addressed by maintaining institutional operations and collective bargaining negotiations at arm's length from one another (Cuban, 1990; Corry, 2000). College faculty and staff members generally embody pluralistic institutional roles at the college (Becher & Trowler, 2001), often holding membership in and assuming the default beliefs of more than one (and possibly competing) network at a time.

Approximately 32% of enrollees at the college are White and 28% are Hispanic (all values as of fall 2014). 13% of students are Asian and 11% are African American.

Female enrollees (53%) slightly outnumber males at the college. The average age of a matriculated student at the college is 23.2 years. More than one half of all enrolled students (full-time and part time) range in age from 19-24 years old, while slightly under one-quarter of the student population falls between 25-44 years old. The college's overall adjusted student retention rate (fall 2013 – fall 2014) was 57.25%. During the 2013-2014 academic year, 1,474 students earned an associate's degree or certificate.

The college is comprised of three academic divisions: Arts and Sciences (47% of student enrollment), Professional Studies (46%), and Open College (7%). Between 2005 and 2010, the college engaged in a process of academic and institutional self-study in anticipation of a reaccreditation review by the Middle States Association (MSA) Commission on Higher Education. In the spring of 2011, an MSA reaccreditation team certified the college as compliant with all fourteen of the Commission's accreditation standards. In September of 2012, a monitoring report and subsequent MSA monitoring team visit recertified the college as MSA compliant. At this writing, the College has begun preparations for a periodic reaccreditation review, due in 2016.

Student learning communities operate at the college from within guidelines established by a founding network of faculty and staff members beginning in 2007. Direct administrative oversight of learning community course pairings is not in evidence. Rather, participating faculty members who have interest in aligning subject matter engage and plan course content independently, resulting in pairings usually vetted with faculty colleagues, departmental chairpersons, or division or academic branch leadership. Departmental chairpersons liaise between faculty members and support staff to ensure

that scheduling, registration, grading, and student learning outcomes assessment for learning community pairings are sustained.

Two discrete student learning communities comprise the substance of this embedded single-case study. SCRUBS was designed and implemented beginning in late 2007. The effort brought together a social network consisting of biology, developmental English, and student success course faculty members, as well as participating administrators from the academic and student affairs branch of the college. The overarching goal of SCRUBS was to assist students in gaining “the knowledge and skills necessary to master basic biology, developmental reading, and overall college success” (Organizational Scan, 2009, p. 6). Paired sections of SCRUBS were offered during two consecutive semesters at the college, but not thereafter.

P2E, similarly envisioned but developed by a separate network of faculty and staff stakeholders, aligns two upper-level ESL courses in a learning community with an introductory psychology course. This purpose of this instructional triad is to provide a “situated learning environment [to] motivate learners to excel and recognize the significance of reading, writing and critical thinking skills in their college work” (Organizational Scan, 2009, p.6-7). The P2E student learning community continues to be offered each fall and spring semester at the college, with favorable student learning outcomes for each of the three paired courses.

Engagement with the registrar, academic advisement, and finance offices are acknowledged as integral to successful course development, launch, and continued scheduling. While there are written guidelines for implementing student learning

communities at the college, they are largely unused, and no administrative approval process for learning communities exists per se. The extent to which student learning communities depend on institutional support but are operationally unaligned is pertinent to the conceptual framework for this research study.

**Research setting rationale.** The research site is a community college in its sixth decade of operation in the northeastern United States, reflecting both a historically traditional two-year college setting and an evolving institutional model for student success and life-long learning. While fiscally stable, the institution is nonetheless faced with an evolving mission, an archaic curriculum, and complicated governance challenges. Demographically, there is evidence of a clearly defined, academically underprepared student body (developmental English, mathematics, and ESL) in need of innovative instructional modalities for improved course, program, and student retention outcomes. Not unlike most urban and suburban community colleges, approximately one half of first-time student enrollees require basic academic skills programming prior to becoming fully college ready (Engstrom, 2008). It is not unusual for the actual number of students entering either through the developmental or ESL portals at the college to more closely approach two thirds of the incoming population at the beginning of each full academic semester.

Development of a student learning community model to address the academic needs of under prepared students at the college was initially derived from an enterprising, unaligned network of faculty and administrators beginning in 2007. This guiding coalition (Kotter, 1996) was a network comprised of faculty and staff members whose values, goals, and productivity may or may not have persisted autonomously without

direct dependence on a prevailing organizational hierarchy (Bennis & Slater, 1964, 1998; Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Birnbaum, 2008).

**Research study participants.** I drew from a stratified purposeful sample of research study participants (Creswell, 2007) employed at the community college where the study took place. Each played a role in the creation and development of a student learning community model. One subset of the sample were practitioners currently engaged in teaching pre-college and content-course student learning community triads. A second subset was comprised of practitioners formerly but not currently engaged in the teaching of learning community pairings. I included as part of my case study academic and student services administrators who fulfill a non-instructional role in advancing student learning communities at the college.

Individual participant interviews with faculty and staff members associated with student learning communities were conducted over a period of three months (January - May) during the 2013 spring semester at the research study site. Using interview protocols developed to contain both open-ended and specifically designed questions, face-to-face interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher (Appendix A). Ten of a possible twelve invited faculty and staff members agreed to be interviewed. (See: Table 1) Two retired faculty members invited to participate in the study declined. So as to minimize interruptions and distractions, all individual (and focus group) interviews were conducted in a private conference room at the college.

Thereafter, I conducted expanded focus group interviews whose purpose was to offer a public narrative on the history and practice of offering student learning

communities at the college. Selected members (4) of the SCRUBS learning community network were interviewed on April 11, 2013. Similarly, P2E learning community participants (4) were interviewed on April 16, 2013. Focus group session protocols were derived from previous individual interview sessions. This served to clarify, confirm, or disconfirm responses from individual interviews (Appendix B & C). In order to further clarify and expand upon initial data collection, I conducted follow-up conversations –in person and by telephone- with several study participants over time. None of the participants taking part in the research study had prior knowledge of my conceptual framework or notion of faith capital when interviewed individually or as part of a focus group dialogue.

Of the ten research study participants, eight are female, two are male. Five of the participants are tenured faculty members who are or were in the past involved in learning community course pairings at the college. One is long-standing adjunct instructor. Two of the faculty members teach courses in advanced ESL reading and writing; two are developmental English instructors who teach developmental reading and writing courses. The remaining three faculty members are content-course instructors who teach psychology, biology, and student success. Content course syllabi are contextualized and embedded within the co-requisite pre-college course syllabi.

I enlisted three academic administrators associated with learning communities at the college: the director of the first-year experience program, one departmental associate chairperson, and the vice president for academic and student affairs. Each was invited to contribute her/his unique perspective of learning communities to the research study individually (face-to-face interviews), as part of focus group sessions, or both.

Table 1. *Research Study Participants*

<b>Learning Community Network</b>	<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Role/Tenure</b>	<b>Program Affiliation</b>	<b>Focus Group Participant?</b>
SCRUBS	<b>Cyndi</b>	Faculty (adjunct), 20+ years	Student Success	Yes
SCRUBS	<b>Gigi</b>	Faculty, 20+ years	English	Yes
SCRUBS	<b>Lucy</b>	Faculty, 30+ years	Biology	Yes
P2E	<b>Daniel</b>	Faculty, 7 years	Psychology	Yes
P2E	<b>Nancy</b>	Faculty, 20+ years	ESL	Yes
P2E	<b>Nora</b>	Faculty, 20+ years	ESL	Yes
P2E	<b>Troy</b>	Associate Chairperson, 11 years	ESL	No
Unaffiliated	<b>Claire</b>	Director, 20+ years	First-year Experience	Yes
Unaffiliated	<b>Hallie</b>	Vice President, 7 years	Academic and Student Affairs	No
Unaffiliated	<b>Rachael</b>	Tenured faculty, 20+ years	English	No

In order to ensure that all persons connected to student learning communities at the college or having potential impact on the case study might be reflected in my data collection, I made referral queries to all primary participants in order to identify any overlooked stakeholders. This snowball sampling strategy (Atkinson & Flint, 2001) allowed me to identify at least one stakeholder (Rachael) whose participation lent confirming authenticity to my study findings.

**Face-to-face interviews.** Seidman (2006) characterized individual stories as “a way of knowing” and the purpose of interviewing as an outgrowth of “understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make” (p. 9) of those stories. My intent in this study was to combine “life-history interviewing” with “focused, in-depth interviewing” (p. 15) in order to unpack “multiple realities” (Stake, 1995, p.12) reflecting the phenomenon of learning communities at the college where my research study took place.

In conducting face-to-face interviews with individual study participants, my intention was to identify narratives that characterize the social networks engaged in learning communities, as well as offering evidence that could ultimately foster educational reform at the college. Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggest that effectively compiling oral histories necessitates presenting “interviewees’ perspectives with the minimum possible amount of interpretation or selection by the researcher” (2005, p. 143). Although I consider myself a reflective player in this research undertaking, I was not part of the guiding coalition that developed and implemented learning communities and have no current role (other than advocacy) in the ongoing provision of student learning communities at the college. As such, my role was that of a nonparticipant (Creswell,



2007), outside researcher in collaboration with the insider participants (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 31) whose narratives constitute my body of research data.

I held face-to-face interviews with the faculty and administrators who comprise my stratified purposeful research study sample (Creswell, 2007), namely, current and former contributors to the SCRUBS and P2E learning community initiatives. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for relevance in answering my research questions. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by means of explanatory correspondence and participant consent forms, as well as written permission from the Institutional Research Boards (IRB) of Rowan University and the community college where the study was undertaken.

**Focus group dialogues.** Selected research study participants from both social networks were invited to attend focus group discussions conducted on the college campus. My intent in bringing these stakeholders together was to provide a socially-derived, interactional perspective of the phenomenon being studied, as well as an expression of the cultural predisposition informing learning community initiatives at the institution. Advantages to focus group dialogue in this study were several: They provided additional information and insights from practitioners not possible from individual narratives. Interactions among participants in these informal group settings augmented narrative content to clarify or dispel information derived from the earlier, individual face-to-face interviews (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, the focus group dialogues afforded me an opportunity to watch participants interact as they might have in their respective social networks.

In the two pilot studies that preceded this study, I observed noteworthy differences between how participants related their recollections and perspectives in our face-to-face interview and in subsequent focus group settings bearing elements of both affinity and social hierarchy. For this study, it was useful to pay explicit attention to and integrate into my data analysis ways in which participants responded to focus group queries in public discourse. I was grateful to discover and document how focus group participants articulated their recollections and ideas both as “individuals sharing held truths” and as “social beings co-constructing meaning” (Belzile & Öberg, 2012, p. 461). Interactive markers such as non-verbal cues, qualified responses, and a discourse contrast between consensus and dispute gave me opportunities for deeper analysis and understanding of the phenomena being studied.

I had a related research interest in determining whether and how egalitarian adhocracies (Bolman and Deal, 2008, p. 59) might be considered as an organizational medium around which student learning communities evolved at the college. Providing a forum for expressing perspectives common to their lived experiences allowed participants to demonstrate such alliances or hierarchies (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) within their respective social networks. Exploring and documenting the public, interactive dynamic between those responsible for development and implementation of student learning communities at the college turned out to be invaluable to my research study intent. As with the individual interviews, confidentiality and anonymity of focus group participants was ensured by means of explanatory correspondence and participant release forms, as well as written permission from the Institutional Research Boards (IRB) of Rowan University and the community college where the study was undertaken.

**Analytic memoranda.** I have actively maintained a dissertation journal throughout the initiation and development of a conceptual framework for this dissertation study and beyond. Its value has been both archival and personally transformative. The purpose was two-fold: A dissertation study journal allowed me to “refine the understanding of the responses of the participants in the study” and to have “an interactive tool of communication between the researcher and participants in the study as a type of interdisciplinary triangulation of data” (Janesick, 1999, p. 506). Sustaining my journaling practice throughout the data collection and analysis process represented not only a means to chronicling and confirming data, but also as a self-narrated test of the validity of data and findings gleaned from the various facets of my research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The dissertation journal also chronicles my own internal dialogue over the course of several years. It is filled with insights discovered in the dead of night, critical self-examination, and notions of hope.

**Data analysis.** For individual interview transcriptions, I constructed an inventory of prefigured (anticipated) and emergent codes as indicators of trends, patterns and themes that might be collectively aggregated, analyzed, and triangulated (Creswell, 2007). Focus group narratives were likewise categorized and mapped onto evolving coded formats. In addition, I created an extensive data summary table as a means to accurately associate and cross-reference participant responses (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

There are three data analysis methods that applied in unison have allowed me to correlate raw data from my study and anticipated research outcomes. Robert Stake’s data analysis method is primary and most readily addressed my desire for aggregation and

direct interpretation of “individual instances” (1995, p.74-76) into categories, alternately confirming and disconfirming data in order to better understand the participants and phenomena being studied. Once aggregated, patterns of conditions, issues, and observed behaviors were integratively coded. For me, Stake’s approach to data analysis, particularly the observation and assimilation of individual instances, aligns well with Glaser’s (2004) constant comparative method:

The constant comparative method enables the generation of theory through systematic and explicit coding and analytic procedures. The process involves three types of comparison. Incidents are compared to incidents to establish underlying uniformity and its varying conditions. The uniformity and the conditions become generated concepts and hypotheses. Then, concepts are compared to more incidents to generate new theoretical properties of the concept and more hypotheses (Glaser, 2004, p. 53).

Glaser’s method complements an embedded single-case study such as mine because there are structurally homogenous units of student learning communities to be studied, but with differing outcomes. Multiple-case sampling facilitates the emergence of a unified theory when similarities and differences in the observed sample occur uniformly (Miles & Huberman, 1994). My intention was that the resulting “unified” theory might describe and apply faith capital as an integrative locus for the social networks responsible for the two learning communities examined in this dissertation.

Together with Stake and Glaser’s complementary data analysis methods, I also employed a third method of data analysis, elaborative coding, which I believe enabled me

to build on my original conceptual framework. Elaborative coding (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) is a data analysis approach that assists in analyzing and coding raw data to a theoretical construct or hypotheses (including those gained from earlier pilot studies), while at the same time organizing and interpreting themes towards new theory.

Elaborative coding struck me as consistent with the purpose of my research study in a reflexive way: my desire to keep in the forefront of data analysis a synergy of theories of social capital, emergent organizational strategies, and espoused belief systems as they pertain to the practice of offering student learning communities at the college where my research took place. By triangulating narrative and observed data and consciously expanding the ways in which I interpreted themes emerging from my research sample, it was possible to rely on and later return to those integrated theories introduced in my conceptual framework.

**Validity and rigor.** Yin (2009) provides four tests of validity to building a research design for qualitative case studies. Construct validity refers to the application of ideal research measures, such as multiple-source data collection, evidence threads, and participant validation. I discuss my research instruments and integrated approach in detail below. Tests of internal validity apply to explanatory case studies and experimental research, and are not applicable to this research design. External validity poses the question whether research findings are generalizable beyond the case study being examined. Mine is a case study exploring the nature of student learning communities in a single institutional setting. Applying my integrated conceptual framework to other, more global educational outcomes may or may not be warranted. Research study reliability indicates whether future research could follow the identical design protocol I have in

examining two student learning communities and arrive at the same findings. I am confident that this embedded single-case study is replicable.

I chose two primary research instruments for this case study. One-on-one participant interviews were conducted with faculty members and administrators directly or indirectly associated with the learning community model in practice at the college. Using an interview protocol developed to contain both open-ended and specifically designed items, participant interviews were either audio taped or transcribed by hand (the latter for follow-up inquiries). Two voluntary focus groups contributed to a “public” narrative on the history and practice of offering student learning community courses at the college. Sets of both face-to-face interview and focus group protocols are attached to this dissertation (Appendix A, B, and C).

**Trustworthiness.** Brinberg & McGrath (1985) characterize research validity as “not a commodity that can be purchased with techniques” (p.13). With that in mind, I attempted to put into practice strategies that could address threats to the validity of my study (Maxwell, 2005). I addressed the standard of trustworthiness by subjecting my findings and inferences to tests of credibility by those participants who volunteered data as part of their role in the study. This type of interpretive validation (Stake, 1995, p. 66) differs slightly from member checking, addressed below, in which follow-up dialogue with study participants serves to confirm the accuracy of initial participant responses.

Participant validation seems well suited to drawing accurate inferences for an embedded single-case study in which two subunits of the same phenomena (student learning communities), similar in structure and intent but distinct in outcomes, are

explored by way of participant narratives gained from dyad and group discussion settings. I approached data collection and analysis aware of the potential for “socially desirable” participant responses to protocols in my face-to-face interviews and in focus group settings. By employing methods of indirect questioning (soliciting perspectives of the external world), I actively attempted to reduce instances in which subjectivity (reflecting personal opinion or notions of *rightness*) might be projected in participant responses (Fisher, 1993). The value of this approach hit home with one research study participant in particular, who initially responded to each of my interview questions with the rejoinder, “Is that what you needed?”

Integrating theory that attempts to explore social and organizational factors impacting success or lack of success of student learning communities was a complicated and multi-layered undertaking that involved collecting and analyzing a large body of narrative data. For that process to be valid, my research study needed to reflect an iterative process of weighing various explanations for behaviors, events, and perceptions. Yin describes that iterative process as follows: “The gradual building of an explanation is similar to the process of refining a set of ideas, in which an important aspect is again to entertain other plausible or rival explanations” (2009, p. 143-144). My goal was to consider rival notions that would both challenge and augment my conceptual framework. It might be plausible, for example, to attribute student learning community success or lack of success to innovator fatigue or other characteristics of the social networks that supported them. Rival explanations to my findings are explored in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

**Bias and reactivity.** Unintended bias can emerge from otherwise reliable practice in qualitative research inquiry. From my pilot studies, I had learned that there can be noteworthy differences in how participants describe their remembrances and perceptions individually and later as members of a public, and possibly hierarchical, focus group. Similarly, my own worldview as an outsider collaborative researcher might impact how and what I observe as an interviewer. Roller (2011) poses several compelling questions for researchers in this regard:

An understanding or at least an appreciation for inherent bias in our in-person qualitative designs is important to the quality of the interviewing and subsequent analysis as well as the research environment itself. How does the interviewer change his/her type and format of questioning from one interviewee to another based on nothing more than the differences or contrasts the interviewer perceives between the two of them? How do the visual aspects of one or more group participants elicit more or less participation among the other members of the group? How do group discussants and interviewees respond and comment differently depending on their vision of the moderator, other participants, and the research environment?

These struck me as critical questions for qualitative research, as the professional and interpersonal relationships between participants likely influence at least some of my narrative data. In order to mitigate researcher bias, I engaged in post-interview dialogue with several study participants based on emerging (or conflicting) codes and themes beyond initial face-to-face interviews and focus group conversations. Member checking (Creswell, 2007) allowed me to move beyond mere data clarification. It fostered newly



constructed, contextually validated participant and researcher perspectives that I believe strengthened the analysis process and authenticated my data collection.

Like Roller, Herr & Anderson (2005) urge qualitative researchers to address the effect our mere presence and preexisting perspectives might exert upon qualitative research. They suggest an active practice of “critical reflexivity” (2009, p. 60) in all stages of data collection and analysis. Recognizing the potential impact of researcher reactivity (Maxwell, 2005) on the validity of this case study, I established myself as a nonparticipant, outside collaborative researcher (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Creswell, 2007 & 2009; Yin, 2009). This practice offered the dual benefit of building candor and solidarity with study participants, while allowing me to focus on “the thoroughness of the design of the work” by addressing “the conscientiousness, sensitivity, and biases of the researcher” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 76-77).

**Triangulation.** Embedded single-case study design methodology was appropriate for this dissertation study because the two units of analysis (Yin, 2009 & 2014) are contextually identifiable (Stake, 1995). The student learning communities under consideration represent subunits reflecting discrete but highly comparable stakeholder networks unique to subject matter and student constituencies. Attempting to establish study facts, I used Yin’s (3) principles of research triangulation to inform my research design.

To start, I employed multiple sources of evidence in my data gathering. They were: individual participant interviews; participant focus group dialogues; member checking; and, participant validation (Stake, 1995). Secondly, I created and maintained a

concurrent study database that compartmentalized case study data arising from the interviews, observations and content analysis separate from but complementary to case study documentation. Physical artifacts collected for triangulation included: an organizational scan undertaken in 2009 to reflect the development of student learning communities at the college; legacy materials provided by study participants (e.g., guidelines, agendas, flyers, course materials, and correspondences); electronic files containing transcribed interview and focus group narratives from the study; and, handwritten notes and journal entries authored by the researcher. In this way, I established a chain of evidence that allowed for circular tracking of all study variables so as to “follow the derivation of any evidence from initial research questions to ultimate case study conclusions” (Yin, 2009, p. 122). In Chapter 4, I present and examine findings from the research study.

## Chapter 4

### Research Study Findings

The aim of my embedded single-case study was to explore and characterize what social and institutional factors have influenced success or lack of success in implementing and sustaining student learning communities in support of at-risk, underprepared students at a northeastern community college. In Chapter 1 of the dissertation, I characterized *faith capital* as an “energizing attitude that drives a group toward its goal” (Hanson, 2001, 2012) and, through the collective industry of its stakeholders, nurtures institutional reform and transformational learning in higher education.

My research suggests there is a level of instructional practice and student advocacy that goes beyond teaching-as-work, and which motivates and empowers educators to innovate beyond what is adequate or mandated. The faculty and staff members I encountered in this study exuded such transcendence and led me to the conceptual framework for my research study. As my data collection progressed, their deeply-held activism on behalf of struggling postsecondary students emerged in an understated, yet consistent and uncompromising fashion. This dissertation is driven by the observation that their resourcefulness embodies unique and enduring characteristics of an organizing and sustaining force in higher education. Evidence of faith capital as a means to innovative and transformational educational practice is best supported by the words and common expressions of solidarity exhibited by the participants in my research

study. Their narrative experiences, insights, and dedication to underrepresented community college students frame any relevance this work may hold.

In this chapter, I present four findings obtained from my analysis of individual interview and focus group conversations provided by participants from each of the two student learning communities under consideration, SCRUBS (*Students Can Read and Understand Biology Successfully*) and P2E (*Psyched to ExSeL*). In addition, I incorporated notations from a research journal maintained throughout the data collection phase of this dissertation and beyond. Of the two learning communities, SCRUBS was the first to be developed. Beginning in 2007, it grew out of a previously-unaligned guiding coalition (Kotter, 1996) of faculty and staff members who assembled with the intent of developing student learning communities as an alternative instructional practice for at-risk students at the college. The stated goal of SCRUBS was to assist students in gaining “the knowledge and skills necessary to master basic biology, developmental reading, and overall college success” (Organizational Scan, 2009).

SCRUBS featured a non-credit developmental section of biology, a non-credit developmental English reading course, and a credit-bearing student success course required of students enrolled in two or more pre-college courses at the college. SCRUBS instructors were highly experienced: Two are full-time tenured faculty members and one a longstanding, highly regarded adjunct faculty member at the college. All three instructors were founding members of the learning community. Paired sections of SCRUBS were offered during two consecutive semesters at the college, but not thereafter.

P2E was offered for the first time in 2009 and aligns two non-credit, intermediate-advanced ESL reading and writing courses in a learning community with a credit-bearing introductory psychology course. The stated purpose of this learning community is to provide a “situated learning environment [to] motivate learners to excel and recognize the significance of reading, writing and critical thinking skills in their college work” (Organizational Scan, 2009). P2E features a teaching collaboration between two ESL faculty members and one psychology instructor, all full-time and tenured. Both ESL faculty members were founding members of the learning community. There have been three participating psychology instructors over the life of the learning community to date. At this writing, P2E is in its fourth year of continuous (fall and spring semester) enrollment at the college.

### **Participant Profiles**

In order to introduce and characterize stakeholders in the learning community networks examined in this case study, I provide below an individual profile for each. Following one-to-one and focus group interviews, I devoted more than one hundred hours to transcribing, proofreading, and revising what the interviewees had to say about themselves, about the guiding coalition of which they became part, and about the student learning communities they designed and implemented over time.

While engaged in the process of documenting and analyzing the resulting data, it struck me that our interview and focus group dialogues together may have represented a concrete (and possibly first) opportunity for participants to reflect upon what they had collectively undertaken together in bringing learning communities to the college. They

spoke not only with pride of the course pairings they developed and the benefits derived for their students, but also gave voice to what the experience has meant to their vocation as higher education practitioners. The purpose of the following stakeholder profiles, beyond description, is to situate each practitioner within the learning community networks as a whole.

To briefly review, I drew from a stratified purposeful sample of ten case study participants who collectively played a role in the creation, development, and delivery of a student learning community model at the college. One subset of the sample includes instructors currently engaged in teaching pre-college and content-course student learning community course pairings (P2E); another is comprised of teachers formerly engaged in but no longer teaching learning communities (SCRUBS). I also included as part of my study academic and student services administrators who played a non-instructional but key facilitative role in advancing learning communities at the college. Except where warranted, I draw few distinctions between the faculty and administrative stakeholders in this study. My observation in this regard is that the work undertaken and educational reforms gained from their collective efforts were, first and foremost, egalitarian and largely free of category or undue influence from an organizational hierarchy. To the extent that my notion of faith capital may be substantiated by this study, portraying participants as collaborative and like-minded activists is warranted.

**Cyndi.** Cyndi was responsible for teaching a student success course component for the SCRUBS learning community. Entitled SSD 101, the course is required for entering students at the college whose placement mandates enrollment in two or more developmental courses. SSD 101 topics include a general orientation to the college;

adopting methods for success in college and lifelong learning; study skills, critical thinking skills, and learning styles. Cyndi holds a doctorate in Nursing Practice (DNP) degree and has taught a variety of allied health and social science courses at the college for more than twenty-five years. Cyndi was a unique contributor to SCRUBS: She represented the only non-fulltime, untenured faculty member in either learning community initiative and, as such, received no set-aside financial reward, no course release time, nor explicit institutional recognition for her participation.

Cyndi's contributions to SCRUBS were situated pedagogically apart from the more measurable developmental reading and biology curriculum components, a distinction she embraced and regarded with professional pride. She reported that her teaching partners would often approach her for help in how to address behavioral and other socially dynamic aspects of the SCRUBS student learning community. In my interview notes, I refer to Cyndi as the "conscience" instructor of the SCRUBS collective. While content course instructors may have correctly perceived mastery of course materials as their primary concern, and while the reading and writing instructors concentrated on providing the skills needed for that mastery, Cyndi saw her role as one of creating a critical structure and personal support platform for meeting student learning outcomes.

I think it is being able to see the students as being successful across the board. Not just in your class, but in the other ones, as well --and hoping that you played some part in that by the support that you provided them. I don't even think that it's necessarily what they learned, but it's being successful. Having them be successful and knowing

they can do it. The self-efficacy of, “I can do it, now I can go out and do something else.” That there are other options than walking away. (1:1)<sup>2</sup>

Cyndi exemplifies a learning community contributor who, while recognizing the primacy of content instruction, provided her students diverse practitioner perspectives (Kezar 2014), thus allowing for more rounded and comprehensive student instructional support.

**Claire.** As director of the first-year experience program at the college, Claire cobbled together an early network of faculty and staff members who had heard about and expressed interest in learning more about student learning communities. Thereafter, once the guiding coalitions began to assemble in earnest, she provided ongoing organizational and material support to both SCRUBS and P2E. A counselor by training (MSW), Claire drew upon her twenty years of service to the college in becoming a trusted liaison between the academic vice president and the fledgling learning community networks.

Based on a charge given by the academic vice president, Claire researched student learning community programs at sibling institutions and envisioned ways in which this alternative instructional approach might be mapped onto the culture of the college. Thereafter, she called together and facilitated informational gatherings with faculty and staff members meant to explore the concept of learning communities as a promising alternative instructional approach. In our one-to-one interview, Claire was careful to situate the point at which she chose to step away from an active organizing role to that of a loosely-engaged mentor, honoring the autonomy of the networks while providing support where needed:

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation, direct participant quotations are represented as drawn from either an individual face-to-face interview (1:1) or from focus group dialogues (1:4). Both the SCRUBS and P2E focus groups were comprised of four research study participants.



I made sure it kept moving [but] not in terms of curriculum development. I was, you know, like: “OK, what do we need to do next? What do you guys need? We need to go to a conference? Let’s find the conference, process all the [paper]work it takes to get to the conference.” So, I kept administratively and in terms of the conversations, kept those going. Lucy and Gigi I would tell you probably met very, very often to discuss curriculum. They didn’t need anyone to prod them; they were engaged. I was there to simply do the, “OK now, OK now, OK now. Here are your deadlines.” (1:1)

Claire’s facilitating role has not entirely abated over time. She continues to advocate on behalf of the P2E learning community for institutional recognition and material support, so as to sustain the success it has thus far achieved. Although her administrative role at the college has changed significantly since the early organizational stages in the process of implementation, study participants unanimously acknowledged Claire as an engaged and unswerving advocate. Several learning community stakeholders reported that to this day members of the P2E team refer to Claire as their *go-to woman*.

**Nancy.** One of two instructors who teach ESL reading and writing alongside an introductory psychology course, Nancy was a co-founder of the P2E learning community at the college. She holds a Master’s degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) and, like several of her learning community counterparts, has over two decades of service to the college.

While Nancy feels pride in the ongoing success of the P2E learning community, she and her ESL reading counterpart have lobbied in favor of recalibrating psychology and ESL reading and writing content for more cadenced mastery of critical content, especially the

production of text. She emphasized in both one-on-one and group interview sessions that skills instruction is not always viewed on par with content courses in a learning community:

I think from the very beginning, we ESL people had to fit in with psychology. I don't think the psychology course was going to make any modification or changes for us. We could maybe suggest doing one chapter before another, but in general the psychology was the psychology and we tried to build our lessons around them. (1:1)

Nancy explained that because her course provides writing support for introductory psychology course content, her second-language learners are required to compose several reaction essays and a sustained research paper for the combined ESL and psychology courses. At times, the pace of her ESL writing instruction lags behind the content course, if for no other reason due to the volume of course material:

The psychology class is a survey class. They do one chapter per week. In my class, I can't really have them write an essay or do some type of writing for every chapter in that psychology book. It's just not happening! So, in my writing course, not every one of my lessons is synchronized with Daniel's lesson scheme for psychology (1:1).

Nancy suggested that corollary writing instruction is a slow and exacting process for the ESL instructor and students alike. She would like to see the P2E skills/content instructional plan more balanced.

**Nora.** Even the most egalitarian social network craves leadership. Nora, who routinely described herself as “bossy” and impatient with administrative red tape, was and continues to be an opinion leader (Valente, 1995) and advocate for learning

communities at the college. An instructor of ESL writing and co-founder of P2E, Nora assertively and routinely reminds her administrative and faculty colleagues of the founding intents and purposes of the learning community initiative, as well as citing current resource needs and challenges to the sustenance of P2E at the college. Like Nancy, Nora has a Master's degree in TESOL and more than two decades of teaching service to the college. One of her more noteworthy contributions to this research study was her depiction of faculty and administrator reluctance to embrace innovation and change, an institutional predisposition that I address in some detail in a forthcoming finding of this chapter. In our individual interview, Nora proposed that student enrollment in and successful completion of student learning communities should be celebrated and acknowledged as academically on par with honors courses at the college:

We asked our chair if he could sort of consider the learning community as more of an honors class. We don't make it more difficult but, because it is a content course by nature, it requires students to pay more academic attention. They can't just be ESL students; they have to be *college* students. (1:1)

Of all study participants with whom I engaged individually or in focus group settings, Nora most emphatically expressed the transformative quality of her learning community participation at the college. Her work reflects both a personal and professional value. When I asked her how learning communities might have impacted her worldview as an educator and an individual, Nora replied reflectively (and with moderate emotion):

You're asking somebody who has a Chinese father, a French Jewish Armenian mother, someone who has lived in third-world countries. I like to think that working

in learning communities allows me say to myself that my parents were right in forcing us to move to third world countries. Maybe I have become more appreciative.

(1:1)

Not unlike Lucy (profiled below), who assumed a similarly vocal role in the SCRUBS learning community network, Nora has embraced the role of opinion leader and advocate for several educational enhancements at the college.

**Daniel.** Daniel was not an original founder of the P2E learning community network. During the early organizational period, he served as chairperson of the history and social science department at the college. In that role, Daniel would ultimately review and endorse the proposal to pair ESL reading and writing course sections with an introductory psychology course, effectively breathing life into the new P2E learning community. Daniel holds a PhD in psychology and had just celebrated his seventh year of service to the college at the time of this study.

It was only after he stepped down as a departmental chairperson that Daniel decided to join the learning community as an instructional partner. He has taught the companion psychology course since then as a full-time faculty member. His most valued contribution to the P2E learning community, acknowledged by his P2E counterparts, is an insistence on meaningful student-centered instruction. Daniel differentiates meaningful classroom instruction from a pedagogy of *endullment* (Shor, 1992), wherein students are expected to engage passively at best. Freire (2002) characterized such educational precepts as “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (p.72). Daniel is mindful of and outspoken about classroom

dynamism and what he perceives as education for liberation (Esposito & Swain, 2009). He has warmed to Nancy and Nora's desire for ESL instruction to enjoy greater parity with his content course. He seems to have gained an appreciation of how his two learning community partners enable him to be a more observant and inclusive content course instructor:

They [ESL faculty members] have much more expertise about our student population because that's their area. They understand well the impediments of language. Often they will talk to me about colloquialisms or different phrases that I might use. I'll say, "It's sort of a *rule of thumb* that you use *such and such*." I have to be so careful! Because of them, they made me very sensitive about that for other audiences, but also for me to make clear to students if I ever use a phrase they don't understand there's no shame in [questioning] it. (1:1)

At this writing, Daniel, Nora, and Nancy were gravitating towards a pedagogical shift: After several years of dialogue about the ratio of content between the P2E psychology and ESL course components, Daniel is considering a syllabus change. Once enacted, he would realign psychology course content to better accommodate his teaching partners' need to more broadly address mastery of critical reading and writing skills associated with his course assignments and student learning outcomes.

**Gigi.** Of all the learning community network members, Gigi demonstrated the greatest investment of time and preparation in order to effectively partner with her SCRUBS teaching counterparts. She holds a Master's degree in Developmental English and more than twenty-five years' teaching and curriculum development experience at the

college. By her own estimation, Gigi spent an entire summer season in advance of the first SCRUBS offering, relearning and fine-tuning instructional content for the forthcoming companion biology course to be offered alongside her developmental reading course in the learning community.

Sunday! I told you, my husband was over there [saying to me], “I’d really like to go and see a movie one of these days!” It was tough because I did not remember as much of biology as I should have. Not only that, the way biology was delivered to me was a whole lot different than the way Lucy delivers to her students. To make it interesting, to bring it home, I needed to have some gimmicks. I needed to have anecdotes. I needed to find articles. I needed to learn the material that I thought I knew. And then go from there. It took a lot of time! (1:1)

Gigi expressed a sentiment echoed by other study participants that ESL, developmental English, and student success course instructors must thoughtfully align their pedagogy with comparatively inflexible content course syllabi. Never, however, to the exclusion of instructional innovation:

Lucy never tweaked hers [biology course syllabus]. She taught the course straight. That’s the way the course was delivered. I myself had to change a lot of what I do. I made sure that what they needed to accomplish was what I was on. Just because the syllabus said vocabulary, context, etymology, main idea, [and] inference –I didn’t have to stick to that. (1:1)

The extent of Gigi's full immersion into mastering the biology textbook over the course of several months prior to the start of the SCRUBS learning community was not lost on her teaching partner, Lucy.

**Lucy.** For more than three decades, Lucy has taught a biology course whose purpose is to provide critical preparation for college students who either lack knowledge of basic biology concepts or who are in need of remediation to qualify for credit-bearing science courses. Lucy's Master's degree in biology and her extensive teaching experience have afforded a focused perspective about equity in the teaching of natural sciences at the college. She explained that her full-time science faculty colleagues no longer volunteer to teach developmental biology as they once did. In her opinion, they have become increasingly apprehensive about teaching an at-risk, underprepared student constituency. Lucy's longstanding premise is that many developmental and ESL students struggle with and ultimately abandon her biology course because they do not possess the lexical and critical thinking skills to associate content and context. This led Lucy to envision and propose the SCRUBS learning community pairing at the college in the first place:

My underlying thing is I can teach biology to anyone, [but] I can't really teach them how to read the book. And so if the reading teacher was using the biology book as the reading book, [which] is what Gigi did, and the student success teacher is helping them with my syllabus to get them on track...eventually, they [are] able to expand and look at other things and how you might have student success in other courses. But the first half was all on the biology book. (1:1)

Lucy maintained that the SCRUBS learning community succeeded well in helping enrolled students master biology course content, a notion supported by superior student pass rates earned by enrollees during the two semesters that SCRUBS was in operation. She lamented its eventual cancellation, citing complex operational factors and not the comingling of biology, reading and student success instruction for its demise. The role of institutional logistics in the demise of SCRUBS and sustenance of student learning communities in general appears as a forthcoming finding in this chapter.

**Troy.** In his role as ESL program associate chairperson at the college, Troy's contributions consist largely of recruiting and placing appropriately-assessed ESL students for enrollment in the P2E learning community. Troy holds a Master's degree in TESOL and, in addition to more than a decade of academic administration, has taught at almost every level of ESL at the college. In our interview, he sought to downplay the significance of his administrative role as "limited" and not unlike what he might do in support of any and all ESL courses at the college. Troy nonetheless addressed two prevalent obstacles to successful learning communities at the college, scheduling and instructional rigor, both of which are explored in a forthcoming finding.

On more than one occasion, Troy has requested but been denied an opportunity to teach in the P2E or subsequent ESL-based learning communities. To date, no academic administrators (despite holding adequate academic credentials) have been allowed to participate in learning community instruction at the college. This, Troy suggested to me, is due to reluctance on the part of full-time participating faculty who, when pressed, cite collective bargaining precedence for teaching preference. Moreover, Troy echoed the



opinion of some (but not all) study participants that faculty participation in P2E and other learning communities at the college is at least partly driven by reward incentive:

I don't think there are many faculty on this campus who are willing to do that [teach learning communities] without some form of extra compensation... This one [P2E] has worked exceptionally well because those two faculty [Nancy and Nora] work well together. I don't think it would take much [compensation], I think faculty just want to be recognized for the extra effort. (1:1)

This and other, somewhat divergent participant narratives on what energizes and sustains learning communities' stakeholders ultimately led to an unanticipated finding in my research study.

**Rachael.** After wrapping up individual interviews with all research study participants, I agonized over the question of whether to retain Rachael as an active participant in the dissertation study. An English instructor and curriculum coordinator with a Master's degree in Reading Education and more than 20 years' experience at the college, Rachael played an organizing role in the early guiding coalition effort to introduce learning communities as a viable instructional alternative for at-risk students at the college. She joined a prototype learning community for developmental mathematics, reading, writing, and student success (entitled SWIFT). By all available accounts, this precursor to the SCRUBS and P2E learning communities fared quite poorly and was disbanded after one academic semester.

Because my dissertation is situated around two student learning communities that subsequently met with some degree of success, I was concerned about the alignment and

validity of Rachel's perspectives with the larger body of case study data. I wondered if I should categorize her as an outlier because she was the only faculty participant not in any way associated with either SCRUBS or P2E. I also struggled with the trustworthiness of her less-than-ideal learning community experience: To what extent might that outcome impact her objectivity as a study participant? Sometimes, despite good intentions, what can go wrong in instructional innovation does go wrong:

We had this big, uh, grand plan and when we got there, they couldn't add or subtract. Maybe we picked the wrong cohort of students. Not that they were unintelligent. They were not bad. They were not misbehaved. I wouldn't say that they were the most motivated, but that is what we have to do... We thought we were integrating but we weren't. I thought we could just plug ourselves in under the umbrella of a learning community and travel together. My personal obstacle was that I did not know enough, I hadn't read enough. I hadn't schooled myself enough. My motives for doing it then were as pure as they would be today. But, you know, it's a learning curve, a learning experience. (1:1)

Despite her personally disappointing learning community experience, I was later surprised to observe that many of Rachel's recollections of and perspectives about the early guiding coalition and teaching legacy at the college very closely mirrored those of stakeholders whose learning community experiences followed her own. Though unaffiliated with P2E and SCRUBS, and while much of her actual learning community teaching experience was decidedly negative, Rachel's perceptions of learning communities at the college were in fact confirming and valuable to the purpose of my research.

**Hallie.** Hallie was chief academic officer during the research, development, and implementation phases of learning communities at the college. She holds a PhD in Higher Education Administration and was in her seventh year as academic and student affairs vice president at the time of this case study. It was Hallie's charge to Claire (later formally delivered to the college community) which set out the overarching institutional goal of identifying a means to greater student success at the college:

All conversations must focus on developing an answer to the following question:

What is best for our students' academic progress? Secondly, all recommendations must include commitment and buy-in from all of the constituents whose resources are needed to carry out the plan (Organizational Scan, 2009).

In our interview and in follow-up conversations, Hallie categorically dismissed suggestions that her influence in developing learning communities at the college might have been in any way predominant. As vice president for academic and student affairs, she instead described her role as one of institutional advocacy, secondary to direct faculty and staff member effort in support of the evolving innovations: "The idea came from them. My role in this was to be supportive and help facilitate the administrative part of it." (1:1)

One of three unaffiliated participants in the study, Hallie was the most removed from day-to-day operations and milestones related to the two learning community networks that she championed. Yet, there was unanimous and oft-cited acclaim by all other learning community stakeholders for Hallie's support of the fledgling enterprise at the college:

We are the worker bees. We needed to have a certain amount of backing and understanding that the backing was there. But it didn't need to be involvement on a daily basis type of thing. I think it's difficult for administrators to step back because they want to know everything [LAUGHTER]. Hallie was instrumental because she was willing to take a risk. And, she stepped back --a little like Claire did later on. Hallie said, "Here, this is what I want; and as long as you don't do anything bad...Hallie had the vision to take the risk and say, "Go with it! Do it. Make us proud." (Nora, 1:4)

College administrators who find ways to cultivate intellectual autonomy to innovative social networks enhance the likelihood of enduring educational change (Smart, 2003). It was this measure of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2000; Kezar, 2014) that would flourish and produce the teaching and learning initiatives that stakeholders at the college so stridently desired.

### **Research Study Findings**

Following are four key findings arising from my study of SCRUBS and P2E student learning communities at the research study site.

Research study participants unanimously credited initiation and implementation of student learning communities to a previously unaligned association of contributors who shared a multi-faceted commitment to innovative teaching and learning outcomes for at-risk, underprepared community college students.

A majority of research study participants (9) expressed pride and satisfaction at the ease with which faculty and administrative members of the guiding coalition were

able to assemble, collaborate, and implement learning communities in an environment of mutual trust and independent agency. The learning community networks appear to have organized and flourished without undue dependence on a prevailing organizational hierarchy. Moreover, one network member assumed a substantive role in the initiative, functioning as both active SCRUBS and P2E contributor and as an interlocutor with academic administration at the college.

Some study participants (5) found activism on behalf of underprepared students to be an intrinsic, self-affirming form of motivation and reward. Others (5) felt that extrinsic factors -monetary compensation and course release time- play a crucial role in sustained practitioner participation. Some stakeholders (4) described a “deepening” of their professional practice resulting from participation in student learning communities at the college.

Research study participants variously cited an adversarial collective bargaining milieu, peer opposition, and ambivalent support from departmental leadership as prevalent, but transitory barriers to the success of student learning communities. Most participants (8) identified well-intentioned but incompatible enrollment management practices, such as student suitability and pool and enrollment management processes, as the greatest and most enduring obstacles to sustaining learning communities at the college.

### **Finding One: A Coalition of Stakeholders**

Research study participants unanimously attributed their success with implementing student learning communities to the formation of groups of faculty and

staff stakeholders united by a common purpose: the desire to better serve struggling, underprepared college students. Those who researched, developed, and eventually implemented student learning communities at the college immersed themselves in the enterprise largely without a compass. Embracing learning communities as a new instructional modality required that stakeholders re-learn the ways they had traditionally approached developmental and ESL students. Often, that meant moving from singular practice to a more synergistic approach to teaching and student service. Research study participants reported encountering and overcoming unanticipated obstacles and setbacks along the way. For faculty members in particular, participating in a learning community network represented their first career foray into contributing to a teaching and learning enterprise other than as a solitary instructor.

This coalition of stakeholders came together not entirely by happenstance. They were responding in part to a charge given to the college community by the academic vice president, who wished to see more innovative instructional opportunities available to struggling pre-college students. Yet, the faculty and staff members who would eventually deliver learning communities to the college did not congregate based on that organizational directive alone. SCRUBS and P2E stakeholders organized because they shared an activist predisposition to socially just educational outcomes for underrepresented students, which in turn nurtured a professional affinity for each other based on intellectual curiosity. Their individual will in addressing this institutional need was undergirded by professional collegiality and a willingness to defer individual and professional preferences for the collective good of the learning community initiative at the college. As part of this research finding, I address activism, camaraderie, and

associability as complementary components in the establishment of a coalition of innovators at the college.

**Activism.** Learning community stakeholders shared an activist professional agenda while developing and implementing their course pairings at the college. Underlying their social networks was a shared desire “to try something, anything” different in support of those students whom they saw struggling academically in the absence of focused instructional support. Their goal was clear: address developmental and ESL student success rates and in doing so improve the likelihood of persistence to degree attainment. The objective was to contextualize reading and writing skills alongside content course instruction.

Responding to a charge by the academic vice president to identify improved means of instruction, stakeholders discovered and nurtured an intellectual curiosity about learning communities as applicable their teaching approaches, administrative practice, and shared vision for enhanced student success. Everything that led to the research, development, and implementation of learning communities at the college grew from a primary recognition of and determination to remove the basic skills obstacles that at-risk, underprepared college students traditionally face. Their student advocacy, while originating from a variety of roles and perspectives, led stakeholders to align with like-minded practitioners to learn more about each other’s practice and the new learning community instructional approach. When asked what more than anything else made contributing to a learning community worthwhile, all participants (10) cited working together to help students succeed in their course work and academic goals. Gigi attributed stakeholder solidarity to student-focused practice:

Number one, [we were] student centered. Everything had to be about students, about what they need, their needs. There was no ego involved. No ego. You had to be pliable, willing to change, not headstrong. You know, [not] only your way will work. You had to be savvy. I am going to say that Cyndi and I were savvy, but Lucy was brilliant. She had a lot of good ideas and we ran with them. (1:1)

Hallie offered an administrator's perspective on stakeholder activism and faculty collaboration:

[While] the impact on students is the primary motivator in continuing to offer learning communities, it's also, like we talked about before, what it does for faculty: They are able to help students to learn in a different way; they have an opportunity to present content in a different way; they have an opportunity to learn about what their colleagues do and how to work with their colleagues to educate students. (1:1)

Research study participants, though generally modest (and at times self-deprecating) in both one-to-one and group interviews, spoke with pride when describing their mutual commitment to leveling the playing field for at-risk students at the college. In the absence of a shared activist intent, it is conceivable that the guiding coalitions might not have flourished and sustained the SCRUBS and P2E learning community pairings.

**Collegiality.** Complementing their activist agenda was the discovery of fellowship and trust among contributors to the P2E and SCRUBS student learning communities. In most but not all cases and, given their differing roles and disciplines at the college, coalition members knew of each other generally but not directly prior to taking on the new initiative. From the participant narratives, what appears to have grown



from their shared learning community associations are relational trust and recognition of their individual obligations in the endeavor. In both individual and collective interview settings, participants appeared to genuinely value one another and delight in each other's company.

Collegiality may have helped guide networks through the development and implementation of learning community pairings at the college. With focus group interactions in particular, I observed a tendency on the part of individual participants to generously celebrate and highlight their colleagues' industry while at the same time deflecting their own learning community accomplishments. Should an example of one individual's hard work be cited by another in the assembled group, disclaimers inevitably followed, deferring to others or to the collective as a whole.

If the organizing principle for learning community networks was an activist determination to provide better pathways to degree completion for struggling students at the college, the means to that end might have been a natural compatibility and acquired collegiality discovered and enacted while building the programs. Cyndi described her shared affinity with SCRUBS counterparts in a compelling way:

We all three of us have been around a long time. We're all three women. We all come from a Catholic background. We've all been working with developmental students for a long time. We all have children. We're all at a community college. I'd like to think that we're all open to being shaken up...and willing to put in the extra time and willing to work together. And not feel, if somebody tells me, "Would you please do it in this way, that way, or another way?" that they are impinging on you and how you

do things. Willing to share your successes and failures and go out and get some help when you need it. (1:1)

Nora framed P2E collegiality in terms of a concerted professional spirit:

It was such a wonderful thing to have people interested in what a learning community was and how they work. And these are people not from second language learning. These people were in the arts and the humanities and they said, “Oh, this could work!” Working with people who are like-minded enough that they want to give rather than to take. So the givers and the takers, I think those are probably most important. (1:1)

The first two stakeholder attributes, activism and collegiality, are thus complementary, but incomplete. A deeply held commitment to student success and growing synergy with colleagues worked together organically. Sharing a similar, unswerving passion for student advocacy gave rise to relational trust and solidarity as means to move the initiative forward. Yet, there emerged a third piece to this puzzle: When research study participants spoke of “the work” performed in preparation for and during the provision of learning communities at the college, the value of and necessity for personal deference to the overarching goals and objectives of the undertaking began to surface in the interview narratives.

**Associability.** Associability refers to those who “subordinate individual goals and associated actions to collective goals and actions” (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999, p.541). Faith capital, as proposed in relation to my study, depends greatly on both the public goods and associability attributes of social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986). That is, the

myriad strategies employed (deliberately or otherwise) by members in social networks are by nature transformational and preserved the “energizing attitude” that characterized participants’ early affiliations as a guiding coalition (Hanson, 2001). Each research study participant in some measure acknowledged the need to exercise flexibility in their daily teaching and student support roles in learning communities. They used such terms as: *generous, flexible, supportive, open-minded, pliable, willing to change, patient, deferential, respectful* and *humble* to describe their fellow learning community stakeholders. This deferential practice appears to have evolved organically over the course of time participants worked together and is prevalent in the SCRUBS and P2E interview narratives. Participants consistently reported that their roles as individual contributors had been greatly modified in order to become part of more collaborative, meaningful teaching and student service:

First, there were no power struggles. If we didn’t agree, we could talk it out and come to whatever solution was required. I don’t remember any difficulties that were a function of the three people [learning community partners]. What I said before is that flexibility is the big issue. You have to be willing to change what you do and the way that you do it if you’re going to be part of a bigger...part of a community. Sometimes you have to change midstream what you’re doing. Innovation and flexibility are the most important things. You presumably will have strong teachers. If you’re not strong, you’re not going to want to do this. (Lucy, 1:1)

When I asked specifically whether stakeholders need to embrace the same or similar values and educational philosophies in order for their learning communities to be successful, a majority of participants (6) responded affirmatively:

I certainly do think so. They need to see the students in the same way. They can't demean or demoralize them [students] because they can't read or perhaps they can't write properly or perhaps they're not quick with getting the information. They have to have patience, patience with each other, patience with students. (Gigi, 1:1)

Yeah. I'm thinking specifically that the people who understand a learning community are people with whom we have an affinity –for politics, for language, for methodology. We're just drawn to each other. (Nora, 1:4)

For these learning community contributors, aligned belief systems best advance instructional goals and objectives. Some described an almost intuitive “screening” process to determine who might (and might not) best complement their own values and approaches to student advocacy.

Other participants (3) did not feel learning community participation should be limited to those practitioners espousing an exacting, common worldview. They instead saw likeminded, deferential practice as more conducive to effective student advocacy:

I don't think it [shared values and philosophy] is super necessary. I think you have to be willing to work together and you have to be willing to see other people's way of doing things, to be able to compromise. You certainly have to be invested in the educational process and working with students...valuing their success. (Cyndi, 1:1)

I don't think [so] politically in the sense of caring about people and wanting to break down barriers. Philosophy is important -being student centered and committed to student learning- making that first. For me, content is very important. For someone else, learning how to learn is very important. I guess they're not mutually exclusive. I

think it would be hard if I had a teacher [partner] say, “Look, it’s not so important to worry about content. It’s very important to learn how to learn.” The relationship with each other is quite important. (Daniel, 1:4)

A final opinion on stakeholder principle and practice merits mention. Hallie, vice president for academic and student affairs under whose administration learning communities proliferated at the college, framed the alignment of shared values and educational philosophy as ultimately outcomes driven:

Maybe one value -our students can be confident learners- has been persistent. If students are coming out of the learning community better educated, more informed, [with] more understanding, more able to work with their colleagues in a productive way. If they have learned more, if they have retained more, and if they are motivated to continue their education, what more could you possibly want? (1:1)

While learning community members consistently demonstrated professional deference towards their colleagues, they were not above creative friction and candor in their work on behalf of students. The SCRUBS and P2E focus group narratives were in particular punctuated by anecdotes about differences in approach and underlying philosophy --but never personally degrading or at the expense of prevailing goals and objectives. Moreover, humor and the freedom to poke fun at themselves and each other seemed to empower teachers and administrators to tell their learning community stories in an objective and balanced manner. For learning community participants, neither individual proclivities nor institutional affiliations appear to have trumped solidarity of purpose or obscured the primary goal of improved student outcomes:

People who are involved [in learning communities] are people who are involved, whether in the classroom or at the college. There are people on campus [who] could be very good educators, who teach their courses and then go home. And then there are people who sit on the committees, try to push themselves to try different things. Those are the people who take on innovative learning opportunities. (Nancy, 1:1)

My observation on this case study population is, thus, that student activism engendered stakeholder collegiality and was substantially strengthened by the practice of associability in both the SCRUBS and P2E learning communities. These complementary member attributes represent an important underpinning of faith capital, learning community persistence, and change agency at the college.

### **Finding Two: Autonomy, Agency, and Synergy**

Following the initial blush of excitement about learning communities as a promising alternative instructional approach, a confluence of institutional factors influenced and sustained the learning community initiative to its fruition at the college. Research study participants uniformly expressed pride and satisfaction at the ease with which members of the guiding coalitions were able to assemble, design, and implement learning communities in an environment of mutual trust and non-authoritarian agency. There were differing participant perspectives on the impact of organizational factors, such as the role of collective bargaining or the type and extent of structure needed to fully implement learning communities at the college. Yet, I discovered full consensus on the ability of the learning community guiding coalition to design and offer paired instruction independently, while at the same time benefitting from senior administrative support.

Moreover, research study participants unanimously recognized a single member-liaison whose bicultural role as a both a stakeholder and interlocutor with the institutional hierarchy proved invaluable to SCRUBS and P2E success.

**A vertical adhocracy.** To the relief and gratification of nearly all research study participants, a flexible and egalitarian coalition emerged, one which was from the beginning unburdened by struggles for internal power, claims to disciplinary ownership, or undue dependence on the administrative hierarchy at the college. No one individual was designated as “in charge” of either social network. Rather, each contributor to the learning community initiatives embraced a role or roles in the development of course pairings and associated operational processes. The SCRUBS learning community network came into being in late 2007 in response to a college-wide challenge from the vice president for academic and student affairs to design alternative course delivery modalities as a gateway to improved retention for at-risk developmental and ESL students at the college. Her charge read in part:

All conversations must focus on developing an answer to the following question: What is best for our students’ academic progress? Secondly, all recommendations must include commitment and buy-in from all of the constituents whose resources are needed to carry out the plan. (Organizational Scan, 2009, P.4)

The resulting learning community networks included full- and part-time faculty members, a first-year experience program director, and academic administrators from the Natural Sciences, English, English as a Second Language, and History and Social Sciences departments at the college. The vice president functioned as an *ex officio*

authority and resource provider, while the first-year experience director became invested as both a participating member and as a member-liaison between the learning community networks and senior administration.

Learning community curriculum design was regarded from the beginning as the exclusive purview of faculty members, created “by the faculty and for the faculty.” (Claire, 1:1) Irrespective of faculty or administrative affiliation, learning community network alignment and stakeholder responsibilities were uniformly described as collaborative and organic:

Gigi was the reading instructor and Lucy was the biology instructor and I was the [student success course] instructor. I don’t think anybody was in charge, but I think it was driven by Lucy because what Gigi did with reading was [to] use the biology book as her reading text. And then I was supposed to work with the students on student success things: the goal setting, the outlining, the organizational time management, test taking skills, things like that. (Cyndi, 1:1)

I would be more of an advocate on the administrative end to push for that and to look at some academic advising rules to be looked at and examined that would allow students to do things a little differently in terms of the sequencing of their courses. I’ve learned more over the last five or six years that I think would make me a better advocate for enrolling learning communities and scheduling them. (Claire, 1:4)

Some network members initially questioned administrative goodwill in support of learning community design and implementation over time. Those suspicions were said to quickly fade once the networks got down to the business of building courses and



enrollment processes. In the following passage, Claire provides a chronology on initiating the guiding coalition and fostering stakeholder solidarity:

[After] conversations with the vice president, I basically went to the faculty... We began conversations about how we could improve success rates in developmental education... There were lots of topics being discussed, one of which was learning communities. All of a sudden I hear Lucy say, "I have always felt that if I had a reading teacher with me in biology, we would have better success rates! They don't know how to read the text and they don't know how to study. It's not that they're not good students, or that they're not intellectually good enough. It's that they don't know the strategies. And in biology, you're dead in the water if you can't do that the first week." And...she looked at Gigi and says, "I want to do it with you!" ...Gigi is like, "What? OK." She [Lucy] was literally that one person who said, *I have a problem. This is what I think can solve it. And I want to do it with you.* The rest was sort of history. (1:4)

From the start, SCRUBS, and later its P2E learning community counterpart, mirrored a vertical adhocracy (Gailbraith, 1973; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Schein, 2010; Dolan, 2010) by independently fulfilling a defined institutional purpose while being recognized and materially supported by the prevailing institutional authority --in this case, leadership of the academic and student affairs branch. This adhocracy was unique by virtue of three attributes: a shared commitment to educational reform; emergent structure design and strategy formation; and, sanctioned autonomy --the academic vice president's demonstrated "public commitment to change." (Waterman, 1990, p. 24).

Early on in the formation of the guiding coalitions, some stakeholders expressed skepticism followed by surprise and relief that senior administration at the college was willing to recognize and support the fledging learning community effort without exerting undue interference:

Hallie was involved and she was extremely supportive. She would come to our meetings every once in a while. She couldn't have been more supportive of the idea of having a learning community. No one was standing over us and saying, "You have to do this and this and this." We had our courses; we had our guidelines we had to do for our courses, but nobody said, "You have to do it this way." (Cyndi, 1:1)

Similarly, ad hoc learning community affiliations between faculty and staff members does not reflect the traditional governance norm at the college. A complex and at times adversarial faculty collective bargaining environment led some early stakeholders to worry that the guiding coalitions might not hold together in the learning community endeavor. Faculty members were concerned that union contract precepts and organizational defensiveness (Argyris, 1997) might represent a significant barrier to success. Collective bargaining was more frequently cited by participants as an obstacle than as an incentive for their collaborative goal of enhanced student success.

For the vice president, the faculty union contract represented "a foreign object" and "a bit of a stumbling block," but ultimately not a formidable barrier to learning community implantation at the college. Administrators new to the initiative felt unsure about the nature of and limits to their roles in implementing and later supporting the learning community program alongside their faculty peers. Could faculty and

administrators forego their conventional roles and innovate on a level playing field for the greater good?

The faculty had a fear that we were just going to want to slap courses together and not make them true learning communities. And then, any number of things would happen: It wouldn't work. Outcomes [might] be skewed because they weren't done appropriately. (Claire, 1:1)

Participating faculty members initially voiced moderate doubt that the learning community initiative could be administratively condoned and at the same time accorded pedagogical autonomy:

We needed to have a certain amount of backing and understanding that the backing was there. But it didn't need to be involvement on a daily basis type of thing. I think it's difficult for administrators to step back because they want to know *everything* [LAUGHTER]. The vice president didn't make a big deal of it. That's one of the things I think I appreciated most. She backed that initiative. And once she said she was going to back us, she really delivered. And then she stepped back and let us do the work. I think that's admirable, because most administrators don't know how to do that. (Nora, 1:4)

Given collective bargaining and other governance complexities at the college, the tendency to doubt good intentions and full instructional autonomy was a commonly-held apprehension for participating faculty members. "There [was] always this sort of cultural belief on campus that the administration was not going to support" student learning communities in the end (Claire, 1:1). Participants reported that a new and unanticipated

operational construct emerged instead. Learning community networks were allowed and even encouraged to be masters of their own design.

**The learning community scaffold.** Having been provided a reasonably unobtrusive environment in which to innovate, network members did not always agree as to the emergence of group synergy and process in support of SCRUBS and later P2E. Some participants (4) recalled formal guidelines either derived from external models, authored by academic administrators, or homegrown. One P2E participant remembered adapting learning community practice primarily from her SCRUBS predecessors. Still others (3) could not recall formally written operational guidelines of any kind in building their learning community curriculum: “We may have just made them up” (Lucy, 1:1).

College records demonstrate that written conventions were in fact established and eventually archived on the college intranet. In June of 2008, after the SCRUBS network was essentially underway, three planning, proposal, and teambuilding worksheets were developed and published for those who might consider designing a learning community course project at the college. A Subcommittee on Academic Strategies, comprised of four faculty members and one administrator, composed the protocols and for a time offered assistance as a support and review resource for learning community developers. This learning community blueprint addressed planning and proposal guidelines in advance of learning community approval; curriculum, instruction, and procedural precepts were never established. It is unclear whether the intention of the subcommittee reflected consensus or was meant to mandate a formal proposal convention to be followed. At this writing, the learning community worksheets remain published and available, while the putative support group has never formally met.

Depending on their role in the learning community networks, research study participants tended to frame their individual contributions from either an instructional (classroom practice and faculty team interaction) or operational (administrative protocol) perspective. Four learning community faculty members (staunchly) characterized their roles as independent course creators whose primary research and development activities lay in building connections between content and skills course syllabi and establishing common student learning outcomes. Three faculty members who had also served as academic administrators at the college acknowledged the bicultural nature (Senge, 1990) of some network contributors --especially Claire, whose role included frequent liaison with the academic vice president.

We had a certain amount of autonomy. We had the responsibility as well as the authority to do a certain amount of things. And I think that's a huge thing, because we are able to develop the curriculum, assignments --you know, what we do. (Nora, 1:4)

They [SCRUBS] were a group that worked to some degree without a title. We all listened to each other. I always felt comfortable with that group saying something about the content. And I thought it was important that the institution know that this was a process developed by the faculty for learning communities, not by administration. (Claire, 1:1)

Administrative engagement in the learning communities consisted of managing such operational facets as devising student referral and placement processes, tracking course scheduling and enrollment with the registrar's office, and negotiating faculty

compensation or course release with the collective bargaining leadership. This division of learning community labor seemed equally comfortable to instructors and administrators:

Our role as administrators is to support what the faculty want to do –in this case, the learning community. They shouldn't have to deal with the scheduling, the timing, enrolling the students. They should make the best curricular outcomes and leave the rest to the administrative staff. (Hallie, 1:1)

We [faculty members] started out with objectives: What did we want to do? The learning objectives were of course the ones they wanted to accomplish in Biology. But then we realized that we had to put a little more in there, like how to study it and what to do when you finally get to study. We had objectives. (Gigi, 1:1)

As the SCRUBS biology content instructor, Lucy viewed some degree of structure as a critical means to learning community and student success:

By structure, I mean that we have a common goal. We have to do steps A, B, and C to get there. I think the learning outcomes have to be met. And if we are not structured, we are not going to be successful in meeting those learning outcomes. Outcomes should drive your course always. If we were going to assess this [learning] community, then we had learning community goals as well as goals for the courses (1:1).

Not everyone perceived the need for a defined learning community instructional master plan in the same way. Daniel interpreted structure differently, more so as a pliable means to reflect upon and “tweak” learning community course content, where needed:

Different [learning] communities will succeed in different ways. I don't think structure is required, but it is very helpful. If you can depend on what's happening when and if you have a sense of what our [faculty] roles are, that can be very helpful. But then it can be over structured, too. For me, you have to have something that feels alive; to have it flexible enough that you can make changes and talk to each other (1:1).

Operational structure was perceived as distinct from instructional structure in the organizing networks, and research study participants found process important in managing and sustaining the network over time. Several referred to an underlying platform that served to hold the initiatives together:

It wasn't a free-for-all. Our best learning communities have been when we have sat down and talked about, "Are we doing what we said we were doing?" Claire has periodically called us and said, "How is it going? I haven't touched base with you. Is there a problem with something? Where can I help?" I think knowing there is someone who keeps bringing us back to what the structure of the learning community is. (Nora, 1:4)

I think [the learning community] would go off the tracks pretty easily if it weren't structured...The guidelines, I remember them saying that a learning community was not just three different teachers. They would need to take time to meet, to set aside time to actually discuss the curriculum and work beyond just [teaching] the same students to have a learning community." (Troy, 1:1)

The fact of the matter is that you need some rules. But as an institution we look at those rules, those processes, and say: “What can we simplify?” Because we are not an institution of four or five thousand people any more. You’ve got to be like a duck: calm on top, paddling like hell underneath. (Claire, 1:4)

Perceptions of structure notwithstanding, the SCRUBS and P2E founding networks evolved separately yet mirrored each other in member composition and organizing protocols. To review, for both networks, there was an initial predisposition to believe senior administration might not unconditionally support instructional innovations such as learning communities. Faculty members in particular believed that the learning communities could not flourish without autonomy of purpose and process. When asked about freedom in establishing and implementing learning communities at the college, a majority (9) of participants responded by acknowledging their institutional leaders as active, but unobtrusive partners:

I can’t think of a negative word. I think I said earlier it was a group of people without a title. The purpose was to help students succeed in an area where more than 60% of students would [otherwise] fail. So, there was an urgency there. There was a need and we all recognized that. From my point of view, it was one of the best things we have ever done in terms of working relationships with people. Because when you do a learning community, you have to see each other’s stuff. I don’t remember any tension, just hard work. Synchronicity plus. (Claire, 1:1)



Complete [autonomy]. I can do that in one word. Nobody interfered. Nobody told us what to do. Maybe Hallie asked Claire, “How is it going?” I’m sure she did. We knew that. We took license to build it as we saw fit. (Rachael, 1:1)

**A go-to woman.** Research study participants unanimously acknowledged one individual, Claire, as having played an essential, bicultural role (Senge et al, 1999; Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005) in chartering and later sustaining the nascent guiding coalitions. As first-year experience director, Claire regarded her dual identity as not-incompatible components in supporting faculty and staff colleagues who were modeling learning communities for the first time at the College. Claire was at once a functioning stakeholder in both guiding coalitions, while at the same time providing a sustained pathway to administrative agency once the SCRUBS and P2E learning communities were fully underway. Although participants described Claire’s role variously, they collectively regarded her as an integrator of ideas (Bohen & Stiles, 1998) and –perhaps more centrally- as a key interlocutor with the academic vice president:

Claire was always available. And when we came up with questions, “Do you think this would work? Who could we go to? What do you think about this?” she would always have an answer, guide us, or come back with what would work. She always supported us, telling us that administration was behind us. And that was... a trump card. We said, “This is what we want to do. These are the important questions we want answered.” (Nora, 1:1)

She is our go-to woman. (Jane, 1:4)

Claire's learning community role is relevant in several respects: First, as an initiator, she identified and enabled the steps leading to formation of the organizing networks.

Thereafter, as an integrator, she participated in building the learning community scaffold by spearheading the enactment of guidelines from which current and future innovators could proceed. Finally, and perhaps most centrally as a sustainer, Claire contributed both as an active network member and liaison to senior administration at the college.

### **Finding Three: Self-Affirmation and Recompense**

Learning community network members perceived themselves and their practice as distinct from other colleagues in the campus community, albeit in a non-pejorative way. While participants uniformly acknowledged educational commitment on the part of many of their teaching and administrative colleagues, they found alignment in learning communities at the college as something of a higher, more transformative calling. Some research study participants perceived innovating on behalf of underprepared students as an intrinsic, self-affirming form of motivation and reward. Others cited extrinsic factors, monetary compensation and course release, as necessary to sustaining practitioner commitment. Several participants recalled time spent "tweaking" their learning communities and developing relationships with each other as treasured, yet often limited institutional resources. Two respondents cited institutional recognition of teaching and learning innovations as a valued reward mechanism. Moreover, some participants (4) reported experiencing a "deepening" of their professional practice from participation in learning communities at the college.

It is worth noting that at one point or another (usually early on) in individual interviews, a majority of research study participants felt compelled to volunteer a preeminent *Of course, I would do this for free* disclaimer to their learning community affiliation. It appeared important to individual contributors to establish that their commitment had been based first and foremost on an activist concern for at-risk students. It may also have provided a platform for nurturing relationships with other network members. In time, all interviewees warmed to and became more unambiguous in volunteering their notions of recompense, variously addressing forms of reward as natural if not complementary components in learning community practice.

**Intrinsic motivation.** While distinctions between types of motivation and reward varied among research study participants, foremost in all the narratives was a single and enduring learning community member attribute:

These people come to work every day with one primary motivation: That is that their students are going to be successful at the end of the semester. To me, working with them has been about that incarnate. They care about *student success*. (Claire, 1:4)

Student learning community practitioners who described their participation as intrinsically self-affirming (5) did not do so without recognition of and appreciation for remuneration. Rather, they appear to have situated intrinsic reward as a primary but not exclusive motivator:

I would put these courses together without compensation. I would do whatever I do because it is for the welfare of the students and the goals of the college. As a worker, I have promised by taking, by signing the contract every August that I am going to

fulfill what the college is supposed to fulfill. Now, for other people, I think the compensation means a lot. Some people want to be paid for everything they do. And, you know, you don't want to give it away. But you don't want to ask for so much that you are hindering progress. What is more important, your pay or the progress you want to make? (Gigi, 1:1)

Faculty members and administrators alike described a principled attraction to the learning community initiative in the early stages of development and planning, one born of intellectual curiosity and the desire "to do something, anything" that would better prepare at-risk students for success in their courses and greater persistence towards earning a college degree. Like Jane, Rachael felt the need to differentiate between her occupation and a calling:

For me -and this is personal- but [innovating] is who I *am*, not what I do. Teaching is always something that I've wanted to do and I'm not sure that everybody feels that way. I'm not saying others don't do a good job. I'm not saying they're not committed to their job. I'm saying it's a job as opposed to a career. In terms of a learning community, you cannot do a learning community with someone who is just here because it's what they do. (Rachael, 1:1)

**Extrinsic motivation.** Compensation for work performed beyond the classroom and advisement requirement is a legacy practice at the college and is valued by full-time faculty members. By way of contractual guarantee, SCRUBS and P2E learning community faculty members received a one-time stipend for the development of paired courses, as well as a one-course release during their first semester of learning

community instruction. When I asked whether or not monetary compensation is essential to learning community affiliation, initial participant responses were largely directed at other, non-learning community faculty members and the predominance of faculty collective bargaining. “I don’t think you could get faculty to put in the kind of work that it takes to create a learning community without it” (Claire, 1:1).

Troy characterized remuneration in purely collective bargaining terms: “It is crucial for our college. With this union and this faculty, we haven’t seen any evidence that they are going to take part without those incentives” (1:1). Hallie suggested that intrinsic motivation, while laudable and certainly not lacking, has historically taken a back seat to union-mandated remuneration at the college: “It’s hard in an environment where everything is a debate. It has always boiled down to money instead of content, the value of the learning community” (1:1). Along these same lines, Nora cautioned that monetary incentives potentially create self-limiting conditions under which continued learning community participation becomes contingent on recompense:

When you do the money, you have a tendency to say, “Let’s do it from this time to this time, and then go.” Because you know you’ll be paid for it. And there’s always the time where you’ll say, “Well, we’ve done enough, right?” (1:1)

**Tweak and reflect.** For still other network members (3), course release time –as distinct from monetary reward- represented a motivational pathway to more collaborative, reflective teaching. SCRUBS and P2E faculty members received a one-course release from their standard in-load teaching assignment during the first semester in which paired courses were offered, but not thereafter. Most participants spoke to the need

for set-aside hours each week in order to remain connected with each other, to sustain learning community innovation, and to simply “recharge” from time to time.

I think it [release time] is a motivator. I think because there is so much work up front, you need that because you are going to develop it for the first time. I don't think you need it after that. The biggest amount of release time would be up front when you're planning, working on all the if's, and's, and but's. It's the scheduling of time together that was difficult. I think we had more up front [than] when we were running it. (Lucy, 1:1)

Reflective practice, as described by the learning community instructors below, appears to have fulfilled two primary instructional purposes. First, it allowed instructors to collaboratively analyze and stay attuned to their students' evolving abilities and needs:

The time we were given to meet was time that I don't think you could really equate to any kind of a number, because that one hour a week in sharing was great. We knew the students; we understood what we were doing. We would say, “You're going too fast. They didn't really understand this point. Could you go over it again? Do you want us to go over it again?” It was one hour where we just sat down and talked. Give us the time and we'll do it. The money is not what is driving us; otherwise we wouldn't be in teaching [LAUGHTER]. (Nora, 1:4)

Faculty course release time also seemed to signal institutional recognition that learning community teaching is both intellectually and temporally demanding. Beyond monetary compensation, two study participants described a subtle interplay between learning community participation and the need for institutional recognition:

What I like about [learning community] teaching is the sharing some of us do. Time together is much more valuable. I think of [names a former instructor]. In semester one or two, as soon as we removed the [course] release, he wouldn't do it anymore. I think that's actually very important because I don't know about resources or whether it is possible. But I think he really appreciated this as an important effort; and he was getting recognition from his chair and support –in the way that he viewed it- from the college. And, as soon as it was taken away, he was like, “What, you don't understand I have to work a lot extra to do this? I have plenty of time to spend on everything else I'm doing. Then, you take it away?” For him, that was kind of the thing. (Nancy, 1:4)

It's the administration showing, “This is important to us and we're willing to make an investment in it.” I think that's more important than the time itself. (Daniel, 1:1)

In summary, every research study participant made a point of establishing that their primary motivation lay in helping students succeed, not in remuneration. The realization of some form of compensation was nonetheless appreciated as an affirmation of higher-order institutional service. Recognition by the prevailing organizational hierarchy likewise seemed to matter to everyone associated with the networks. While learning community staff members received no additional compensation or release time, their participation and reward seemed to reside in supporting and associating with their faculty counterparts, both as a natural part of and beyond their primary job responsibilities.

**A deepening practice.** Not unrelated to time spent together reflecting on and reworking the paired courses they had developed and delivered together, some participants (4) reported experiencing a “deepening” of their professional practice from

participation in learning communities. As described earlier in this chapter, for both learning community networks there was an articulated pride about the journey from initiation to implementation of paired courses at the college. For these contributors, collaborating with their peers in a learning community appears to embody an unexpected, yet transformative experience (Jackson, 1992; Phifer, 2010) that changed the path of their professional practice permanently:

I think [the learning community] has changed me as a teacher. As a teacher, I want the students to realize that for the most part they can do it. If they do poorly on one exam, they can do better on the next one. If they don't understand something, they can get help from somebody else. I think it's changed me as a teacher in the sense that I have become more curious about how we should all be more connected. (Nora, 1:1)

You have this partnership where they're all working together. Just from what I've read about learning communities, I know that faculty say that it is life changing and how they teach...And I think Lucy and Gigi and Cyndi would probably say that it changed how they taught. Not just in their learning communities. I've heard them say this even in their own classrooms, their single classrooms. (Claire, 1:1)

Non-teaching contributors likewise identified with participation in learning communities and its effect on thoughtful administrative practice. Hallie described her personal growth as a product of recognizing individual learning differences and her institutional responsibility to help address them:

I don't know that it has affected my view of students as much as deepening my understanding of the fact that students learn in different ways. It's a way of



recognizing that students don't learn in isolation. You don't learn content without having some foundational content or the ability to go out and find answers to what you're studying. So, for those students who had a great academic experience before they got to the college, that is just fundamental and they don't think twice about it. If you haven't had that academic experience before coming to college, you don't know of the possibilities and all of the resources that you have available to you. So, to answer your question, I think it has deepened my understanding of the kinds of support we need to offer students who don't have a great academic experience before they enroll. (1:1)

While research study participants uniformly voiced pride and personal enrichment from their teaching and service to underrepresented students, what was not clear from the individual and focus group dialogues was whether and how personal motivations change over time. At what point might an intrinsically motivated contributor to learning communities feel the need for more material support and accolades from the institution?

As reported earlier in this chapter, to a person participants voiced a primary, activist commitment to the learning community charge. Yet, an equal amount of interview dialogue was devoted to categorizing and dissecting the need for sustained practitioner recompense. In the end, there were in play a variety of motivational factors for learning community participants, ranging from integrative satisfaction to instrumental compensation, then (for some) retrospectively to self-affirmation and deep pride in the work they had collaboratively undertaken.

#### **Finding Four: Addressing the Institutional Divide**

No innovation in higher education succeeds without challenges and setbacks. While the vast majority of data gathered on the initiation and implementation of learning communities at the college was affirming in tone and pedagogically promising for future practice, noteworthy obstacles impacting the effort surfaced early and throughout my data collection. Research study participants cited peer opposition, a moderately adversarial collective bargaining milieu, and tepid support from departmental chairpersons as prevalent, but transitory obstacles to implementing and sustaining learning communities. In contrast, almost all research study participants identified enrollment management processes such as student recruitment, placement, and course scheduling as the greatest and most enduring barriers to sustaining learning communities. Prevalence of incompatible organizational factors of these types is consistent with the body of research on barriers to implementing organizational change (Gross, Giacquinta & Bernstein, 1971; Bohlen & Stiles, 1998).

**Peer pressure.** Joining and remaining a contributing member to the learning community initiative at the college involved unanticipated professional drawbacks. Some participants (4) related that faculty peers reacted with suspicion and a subtle defensiveness to the learning community initiative they had taken on. Resistance to their work was not directed at faculty members directly or towards learning communities in particular, but rather, according to study participants, reflecting general opposition to any faculty work performed beyond primary teaching responsibilities (Schilling & Kluge, 2009). It is noteworthy that much of the resistance to faculty innovation appears framed

within an understated mandate to perform to the letter of the collective bargaining contract, but not beyond.

This form of organizational defensiveness (Argyris, 1997) was wryly referred to by several participants as “the union shuffle” and as pervasive in the full-time teaching ranks at the college. Rachael (1:1) described experiencing anxiety when confronted by her faculty peers in the early stages of her involvement in the learning community network: “I’ve been caught by my colleagues in the summer and they say, ‘You’re getting paid for this, right?’ And I say: ‘Sure!’ or ‘Oh, I’m not doing anything. I’m just here.’”

Other non-participating faculty and staff members at times challenged or dismissed the educational rationale for providing an alternative course delivery option to struggling developmental and ESL students at the college. Gigi was surprised at such reactions from her long-standing faculty colleagues (some of whom likewise teach developmental English courses) to the learning community initiative:

Such negativity sometimes! I met someone on the elevator that asked me why I still want to do this. “How much money do you make doing that?” I do it because there are students on this campus who are needy, who deserve somebody, people who are concerned about them. Their negativity is the worst thing: “Why do you do all this work? Why would you want to do that? It will never work. How can you spend so much time with them [developmental students]? They don’t know anything. We did that years ago. It never worked!” (1:1)

In time, faculty participants overcame peer resistance and settled in to their work as a learning community team (Seabury & Barrett, 2000). Yet, while there was participant consensus that administration at the college had principally (and in most cases, materially) championed and sustained learning communities, several interviewees reported that their departmental supervisors, namely, departmental chairpersons, emerged as somewhat less than receptive to the initiative:

A supportive department chair was also important, but I don't think that the chairs were really that involved. Some of the criticisms in the department could have been avoided if the department chair had been supportive in terms of scheduling courses and to identify students. To make sure that the faculty –their colleagues- knew of what was going on and what the success was for the learning community. And that's too bad, because I think that some of the things that Claire facilitated would have been easier. Some of the issues the faculty faced wouldn't have happened if they had had strong support. (Hallie, 1:1)

One of the obstacles that we had for a long time was the fact that the English department was really presenting barricades. Originally, when we wanted to get the learning community going, they said, 'No. They are not able to read if they score this low.'" The obstacles were not from the administrators, except our former chair, who, I mean, he supported it the way I support the no-smoking ban. But there was no real buy-in into what it was. (Nora, 1:1).

Participants described three academic chairpersons (all tenured faculty members) who to varying degrees resisted the learning community initiative. They and other faculty peers

objected on the putative grounds that: 1) at-risk students would be unable to thrive in such a multi-course environment; 2) participating faculty might be shirking their primary teaching responsibilities in deference to learning communities; and, 3) participation in learning communities should be explicitly compensated and endorsed in advance by the full-time faculty collective bargaining unit.

**The labor legacy.** Matters of compensation and full-time faculty union endorsement of learning community participation are as complex as the prevailing governance milieu in evidence at the research study site. The nature of the collective bargaining agreement mandates that any full-time faculty member “activity” beyond teaching and student advisement load is subject to formal negotiation and mutual written endorsement by *both* administration and the union. This practice, while seemingly simple on paper, sometimes results in stalemate and can significantly delay or at times render obsolete instructional and other initiatives at the college.

Generally, faculty interviewees reported enjoying tacit support from the union for their work on learning communities. Problems have nonetheless arisen during those periods of time when the union and college administration are engaged (“at war”) with each other regarding other, complex negotiations. In an environment where “everything is a debate,” academic administration has occasionally elected “to make decisions independently” (Hallie, 1:1) on faculty incentives for learning community participation without explicit endorsement of the faculty union. The union may respond by either filing an unfair labor practice grievance or declining to endorse any and all faculty compensation proposals –often for extended periods of time. This prohibition sometimes extends to otherwise critical instructional collaborations, wherein practitioners might visit

each other's classrooms and/or co-teach certain elements of learning community course syllabi.

A relevant example lies in this research study, itself undertaken during one such period of union and administration impasse. While preparing for my dissertation data collection, the college and its full-time faculty collective bargaining unit were unable to reach a negotiated settlement to a renewed cyclical contract. In response, the union membership voted to withdraw all services other than teaching and student advisement, during which time (roughly two years) no pending course, program, or other instructional initiatives of any kind were allowed to move forward. In order to begin data collection for my research study, I petitioned the faculty union president directly for permission to conduct my interviews with full-time learning community faculty members. That permission was granted only after I was able to demonstrate –with the affirmation of those participating faculty members- that my research intent was unrelated to new course, degree program, or other pending educational initiatives.

To summarize, none of the research study participants (faculty or staff members) perceived peer, departmental, or collective bargaining obstacles as having more than a passing, moderately oppositional effect on the development of learning communities at the college. They instead devised various means, or *workarounds*, to maneuver through transitory impediments to their intended innovation. Participants spoke more so of resiliency and a transformative purpose to providing learning community instruction to their underprepared students:

I was walking by a classroom this morning and the [faculty] were talking about the importance of developmental education and how it leads to good student outcomes. They were sitting outside the doorway, talking about that. You might expect them to be talking about the contract that hasn't come through [LAUGHTER]. But that's not what they were talking about. They were talking about real stuff, and that's what happens in learning communities. It gives you a sense of pride and satisfaction as a professional. Architects get together; they talk about buildings. Educators, when we do that, it really makes us... [experience] joy. Definitely [in] the learning community that I'm in now, [there is] a lot of sensitivity toward our own student population, better than I have ever had before. (Daniel, 1:1)

As the nascent SCRUBS and P2E learning community pairings began to coalesce, a less transitory set of operational determiners emerged and began to collectively condition how effectively learning communities would function at the college over time.

**The pool and the process.** All but one participant in the learning community initiative (9) cited student suitability, enrollment management procedures, and logistical institutional factors as accounting for the greatest difficulties impacting learning community success. All new student enrollees to the college are required to take a placement test in reading, writing, and mathematics in order to determine academic readiness for degree or certificate program study. As reported in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, the number of students entering through the developmental education portal (defined as enrollment in one or more basic skills courses) can constitute as much as 70% of the total incoming student body at the beginning of each full academic semester.

The SCRUBS learning community sought to identify a pool of qualified students in need of reading remediation for co-enrollment alongside a developmental biology and student success course. P2E continues to actively recruit student enrollees required to take ESL reading and writing courses alongside a credit-bearing introductory psychology course. Both learning community initiatives depend on access to underprepared students either upon their initial placement or subsequent to concurrent enrollment in developmental or ESL courses at the college.

Research study participants perceived student readiness and institutional support as primary and worrisome obstacles to successful recruitment into learning communities. First, they cited a lack of consistency in the academic advisement and referral of students exiting the incoming placement test or becoming eligible for learning community enrollment through prerequisite course mastery. Stakeholders found that individual student performance on reading and writing placement tests was highly variable, not always providing an accurate barometer of whether those students would thrive in the corresponding level into which they were placed. P2E instructors eventually chose to “hand pick” ESL candidates for their learning community course sections, either based on direct corresponding knowledge of their students’ readiness, or by way of re-interpreting those students’ placement scores.

In a similar vein, participants cited a lack of recruitment solidarity within their respective departments --particularly as applies to “getting the word” out to eligible students on advantages to co-enrolling in a learning community. Not unlike the more transitory peer opposition described earlier in this finding, P2E faculty members (2) suggested that some fellow faculty members teaching other ESL course sections routinely



discourage student enrollees from taking on the learning community because “it’s harder, too much work.” They reported “tepid” support from non-teaching peers at the departmental level, suggesting that staff members may not always provide eligible students with readily-available learning community marketing materials. One P2E faculty member recalled having to repeatedly request that learning community print brochures be moved from “a rack behind the door” to a more prominent location in the departmental office.

**Enrollment management.** By far most prominent in my interview narratives were participant concerns that the established operational practices and processes by which students are placed and registered into courses tend to work in opposition to robust enrollment for learning communities at the college. In particular, they found targeted course scheduling as a critical but often inconsistently provided component for learning community viability. Some participants likewise spoke to an element of student learning “saturation” that comes with long learning community course meetings held over the course of a fourteen-week semester.

Seven research study participants cited advisement, placement, and course sequencing as the most enduring obstacles to enrollment in their learning community pairings. For example, Allied Health student majors who might readily qualify for alternative instructional support for their science course requirements were more likely to be advised (by the advisement office, departmental staff, or other faculty members) to undertake a more traditional course sequence. According to participating SCRUBS faculty and staff, such enrollment management logistics negatively impacted the likelihood of enrollment in the SCRUBS learning community triad and may have

eventually led to its discontinuance. ESL advisement occurs at the departmental level, in large measure due to the need for targeted mentoring of English language learners at various stages of English language proficiency. According to P2E faculty members, much of the P2E “story” is thus told by either departmental office staff during orientation at the start of each term, or by teaching colleagues to students enrolled in prerequisite ESL courses.

Lucy and Cyndi described an inherent unwieldiness resulting from “blocked” or back-to-back SCRUBS course scheduling. The nature of a student learning community pairing is that skills and content course meetings best take place when held in close proximity (time and location) to each other. This was harder to achieve in practice than anticipated:

Scheduling was an issue, trying to find a time to schedule the three courses that made sense. Each of us was willing to alter our professional day. It kind of needed to be a middle-of-the-day class as part of the attractiveness, part of the cookie, if you will, to get them [students] to take it. I like 8:00 AM, but that was not going to work for them [LAUGHTER]...so we sort of scheduled it midday. It was difficult to do that.

Because of scheduling and rooms and labs, it became complicated. Along the way, the stumbling blocks would come. (Lucy, 1:4)

Because of scheduling, the [student success] class had to be blocked. It had to be once a week from 8:00 to 10:50 AM, for a *double* period. We wanted to meet from 9:00 to 10:20 AM, and because of rooms, we were asked...that took [the place of] two periods per week. Even if we did it once a week, it messed up the whole schedule. So

we were asked by the person who did the rooms if we could do it that way. And that was one of the big complaints of the students...that long block. (Cyndi, 1:1)

P2E participants likewise cited the availability of desirable course meeting times as a major obstacle to learning community enrollment. Nora spoke of ‘competing priorities’ in the scheduling protocols for both the academic advisement and academic department office:

Another obstacle we have is not just where we’re placed as far as the hierarchy, but also [that] the learning community conflicts with other classes taught at the same time. It’s still happening. When we are teaching the [ESL reading] and [ESL writing] courses, there are also other [non-learning community ESL reading and writing] sections being scheduled at the same time. (1:1)

Troy, who is responsible for building and maintaining those ESL course schedules each semester, suggested that student perceptions of learning community rigor and scheduling preference impact his ability to consistently provide desirable meeting dates, times, and locations:

A lot of our students don’t like being locked into any particular schedule. Some would like to [attend] just a couple of times a week. Some, when they register for classes, will come day and night to reduce the number of days that they have to [be on] campus. I think that probably learning communities are a bit more challenging than the normal sections, and that word has spread among the students. Some students don’t really want to put in extra work for the learning community. I think scheduling and the rigor of the courses are the two things that stymie enrollment. (1:1)

**Workarounds.** Understanding the operational complexities of learning community course recruitment and sequencing logistics took time and came as an unpleasant surprise to both SCRUBS and P2E guiding coalitions. Participants' assumptions that learning communities would succeed organically, as appeared to be the case at other institutions they had researched, simply did not ring true at the college:

Imagine how I felt with SCRUBS when everybody told me that we were going to enroll it in thirty-three seconds. And then months later, we *still* weren't enrolling it. We discovered there is no pool. Oh, man that was a sorry day for me. I had to go in [to the vice president] and say, "Guess what? We've gone to conferences. We did this. Everybody's excited. And now don't have people to sit at the dinner table." It was not fun day in my life. (Claire, 1:4)

Daniel likewise cited enrollment management disparities, such as targeted student outreach and the appearance of "unaligned" enrollees on his core course roster, that result in chaos and disillusionment during the first few learning community course meetings:

We haven't been successful in the way we communicate the availability of a learning community to the audience. Seems like a lot of students I have in my regular classes have never heard of it. And sometimes, we'll have [students] try to sign up and I'll already have twenty to twenty-five students in my class [who] weren't enrolled in the learning community, but they were somehow able to register. They just see an open spot and they sign up for it. The unaligned [students] get in, and then they have to get out. It doesn't really affect the learning community, but it affects them because they have missed a chance to get into a class with me. (Daniel, 1:1)

Speaking directly to her P2E colleagues during a focus group dialogue, Claire recalled lessons learned with respect to overcoming operational logistics -in this case, identifying a viable pool of learning community students, which increasingly became the purview of the instructors themselves:

We were all so new at this that we were literally flying by the seat of our pants. We learned that the pool was very important. I remember this because I remember how well you did it. We had a conversation that one of the first things you want to do is make sure there is a group of people. And if you have to seat a class of eighteen or twenty, you'd better have seventy, eighty, or even 100 people who might be willing [to enroll]. Who schedules, who can't, who does this [and] who does that...this is an important point, because if you come at a learning community with somebody else doing all the work, it's not your learning community. (Claire, 1:4)

In general, networks of stakeholders responsible for implementing learning communities at the college uniformly reported both transitory impediments (organizational defensiveness, a complex collective bargaining milieu, tepid support from academic managers) and enduring logistical barriers (student suitability and pool, enrollment management processes) standing in the way of their shared goal of providing enhanced success for at-risk, under prepared students.

To overcome these challenges, they undertook a variety of measured strategies to ensure that their learning communities might continue to thrive. Participating faculty members self-promoted their learning community pairing with students in their own course sections and at large. Participating administrators “camped out” at the registrar’s

office to ensure the assignment of desirable block classes and reasonably close classroom locations for their pairings. Developmental and ESL faculty and staff took on “intrusive” learning community advisement during first-year experience and student orientation to ensure the classes would make. On occasion, faculty members appealed to their member-liaison to petition directly to the vice president for academic and student affairs for intervention.

These and other practitioner workarounds are by nature trying and labor intensive. Contingencies depend largely on individual practitioner willingness to cyclically engage a viable student pool; to maintain institutional support at several levels concurrently; and to ensure a reliable logistical flow from one academic semester to the next. Put another way, the onus for vigilance and preservation of student learning communities at the college over time appears to have fallen not on a collaborative majority, but rather on a determined few.

In the following and final chapter of this dissertation, I begin with a summary of the research findings. Thereafter, I address research study limitations before addressing my original research questions with perspectives gained from my data analysis. I conclude the chapter with an examination of implications for research methodology, educational practice, educational leadership, and theory.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The primary focus of this dissertation has been to explore and better understand social and institutional factors that impact success in developing, delivering, and sustaining learning communities in support of at-risk, underprepared students enrolled located at the college where the research was situated. Towards that end, I aligned theories of social capital ((Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995; Hanson, 2001), social justice education (Hyttén, 2006; Theoharis, 2007; Dantley & Hillman, 2010), and emergent organizational strategies (Mintzberg, 1979; Birnbaum, 1988; Smart & Hamm, 1997; Smart, 2003; Bolman & Deal, 2008) with practitioner perspectives in an embedded single-case study of two student learning community initiatives.

My overarching intention in this dissertation is to argue in favor of faith capital as an integrative locus for the principles, espoused values and organizational strategies employed by members of social networks engaged in education reform and as a means to socially-just educational practice. Faith capital represents an energizing and determined attitude that members of the networks contribute to their collective effort in planning, implementing, and sustaining delivery of learning community courses to at-risk, under prepared students at the college.

#### **Summary of Research Study Findings**

This chapter of my dissertation interprets and analyzes the findings presented in Chapter 4. For the first finding in that chapter, I determined that stakeholders personified

a comingling of social justice activism, emerging collegiality, and acquired professional associability (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999) in order to successfully design and implement two new student learning community initiatives at the college. A blend of professional attributes originating from a variety of roles and individual perspectives led stakeholders to align and innovate alongside their like-minded colleagues. Their shared intention was to implement a new instructional model for at-risk, under prepared students at the college.

In finding two, research study participants uniformly attributed an environment of mutual trust and non-authoritarian agency to the successful launch of student learning communities as a new and promising alternative instructional modality. Enacting a vertical adhocracy model of operation (Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Smart & Hamm, 1993; Smart, 2003; Dolan, 2010) within the greater college governance system, the early guiding coalition addressed an institutional priority while being actively recognized, supported, but not impeded by a prevailing administrative bureaucracy. An unanticipated social network feature in my study was the emergence of a member-liaison, who functioned biculturally as a contributor to and interlocutor between the social networks and their administrative benefactor.

The third finding presented in Chapter 4 identified motivational precepts as a behavioral platform from which learning community stakeholders collectively engaged in purposive action towards educational reform. Research study participants associated two primary categories of stakeholder motivation in play for the learning community initiatives (Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, Brière, Sénécal, & Vallières, 1992; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gardner, 2001). Intrinsic motivation reflected stakeholders' integrative reward for



participating in the instructional initiative: greater success for at-risk, under prepared student enrollees at the college. Extrinsic motivation came in the form of monetary or temporal compensation provided learning community practitioners. An unexpected and transformative result of learning community affiliation lies in what some participants characterized as a “deepening” of their individual commitment to teaching and student service over time.

Finding four identified both transitory and enduring obstacles to the realization of reform goals established by learning community networks at the college. Participants cited peer pressure, an adversarial collective bargaining climate, and ambivalent support from middle academic supervisors as transient obstacles to implementing learning communities. Institutional determiners such as student pool reliability, accurate level placement, registration and scheduling, and other enrollment management logistics were perceived as more enduring barriers to learning community success at the college. One of the two learning communities in this embedded single-case study, *Students Can Read and Understand Biology Successfully*, SCRUBS, ceased operation after one academic year despite consensus on performance gains realized by student completers. In contrast, *PSYCHed to ExSeL*, or P2E, has been continuously offered at the college for several consecutive years with similar promising results. Research study participants were unanimous in asserting that the former learning community had, despite the presence of a vibrant vertical adhocracy, fallen victim to well-intentioned but discordant institutional practices, while the latter learning community has managed to persist due in large part to practitioner steadfastness.

Taken together, I believe my research study findings inform and expand upon an under-interrogated body of field research examining faculty and administrative collaboration in support of nontraditional learners (Grevatt, 2003; Boylan, 2010; Lundberg, 2014). While there is ample and growing field evidence on the efficacy of alternative instructional and student service strategies in improving at-risk, under prepared student learning outcomes in higher education (CCCSE, 2014), I frame my research study from within theories of social capital, social justice education, and emergent organizational strategies.

For me, it was not enough to merely describe and document the phenomenon of learning communities at the research site. Almost from the beginning of my data collection, I became aware that persistence in this study might signify much more than sustaining student learning communities at the college. What began to emerge were several manifestations of persistence, which I explore in detail below. My conceptual framework for the dissertation allowed me to critically address the questions of how and why communities of practice (Wegner, 2000; Kezar, 2014) assemble and innovate, what personal attributes stakeholders bring to that assembly, what the resulting networks look like, and in what ways their collective industry might be better understood and applied to future research and practice.

### **Research Study Limitations**

Authentic research must address the potential for bias and reactivity. I am an academic administrator at the college where the study takes place and oversee a division in which student learning communities are in practice. While formation of a guiding

coalition and establishment of student learning communities began several years prior to my arrival at the college, it is not inconceivable that participant perceptions of my administrative role might have affected responses to interview or other data-collection protocols. Seidman (2006) acknowledges the drawbacks involved in interviewing subordinate participants, suggesting that impartial inquiry reflects conditions in which the interviewees do not feel vulnerable or manipulated in the data collection process. By establishing myself as a nonparticipant or outside collaborative researcher (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Creswell, 2007 & 2009; Yin, 2009), I hoped to ensure “thoroughness of the design of the work,” while remaining vigilant about the “conscientiousness, sensitivity, and biases of the researcher” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 76-77).

While I provide a moderately comprehensive review of the literature on learning communities in higher education, it was not my intent to explore or interpret the efficacy of student learning communities in this dissertation. Recent studies (Minkler, 2000; Visher et al, 2010; Weiss et al, 2015) have come to modest and at times conflicting conclusions on the ability of learning communities to impact overall success for at-risk, under prepared students in two- and four-year colleges. That being the case, I consider learning communities to be the most socially-just of all alternative instructional approaches in higher education because, as O’Banion (1997) has written, they offer the greatest hope for genuinely collaborative curriculum and instruction, allowing students to be “responsible for determining their own learning goals, for actively participating in the design of their own learning experiences, for sustaining the community” (p. 135) alongside their committed practitioner-mentors. Learning communities work when

informed and collaborative communities of practice collectively design, implement, and sustain them programmatically.

A related potential research study limitation concerns absence of an in-depth discussion of race, class, gender, and ethnicity for those at-risk, under prepared students who populate the learning community classrooms examined in this dissertation. I acknowledge that my conceptual framework and research protocols do not inform that otherwise critical aspect of social justice education theory and practice. Following models (Yin, 2013) that recommend carefully defining case study boundaries, and aside from citing the relevance of Greene's (1998) work in that regard, at length I chose not to explore elements of race, class, gender, and ethnicity as part of my research study design. A breakdown of student demographics appears in Chapter 3, revealing a moderately diverse student body at the college where this research was situated.

A further possible research study limitation concerns sample size. The stratified purposeful sample for this study was not large, numbering ten participants –all faculty and staff members in some way involved in learning communities. Also limited is the size and scalability of the learning community initiative at the college where the research was undertaken. As such, implications for instruction in higher education settings may reflect a local phenomenon and might not be generalizable to other higher education institutions. Yin (2014), however, differentiates between statistical and qualitative generalizability: While my participant pool is small and programmatic development of student learning communities has not occurred at the college, my qualitative research attempts to follow Yin's notion of generalizing to theory, rather than establishing statistical relevance.

Finally, while I suggest there is evidence of faith capital in practice at the college where this research study took place, other, rival explanations (Yin, 2013) could account for the sustenance or discontinuance of student learning communities in settings where educational reforms are tried. All manner of obstacles to implementation could be identified as influencing the outcome of initiatives in higher education. It is, however, worth noting that the social networks in operation at this particular research site overcame a legacy of instructional lethargy and enduring collective bargaining challenges while successfully bringing learning communities to fruition at the college. I suggest that what drives stakeholder persistence under these and other circumstances merits examination and analysis. Nevertheless, because this is a case study that explored the origin and nature of student learning communities in a single institutional setting, applying my integrated conceptual framework to other educational settings might not be warranted.

**Research Question Two: What Are Defining Characteristics of Social Networks Engaged in Developing and Sustaining Student Learning Communities at the College?<sup>3</sup>**

In the fall of 2007, an otherwise unaligned group of faculty and staff members gathered together in response to a charge issued by the academic and student affairs vice president to address the unmet academic needs of under prepared remedial and ESL students who were not thriving by way of traditional instruction at the college. More than

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of clarity and ultimately enabling my research study conclusions, I address my second, third and fourth dissertation research questions in advance of the primary research question, whose relevance to this study is conditioned in large part by those that precede it.

one such exploratory meeting was held during that time, uniformly described as candid and exploratory dialogues by participants in the research study. Conversations that began as a subdued, private sharing of opinions and ideas soon grew into more focused themes of need, possibility and industry. This newly-formed community of practice reflected not only the principles, espoused values, and expertise in evidence from individual contributors, research study participants also recalled palpable levels of excitement and optimism in their conversations.

Early contributors embodied two fundamental attributes that helped define the networks of which they would become a part: First, they professed a passion for and commitment to student success. While each brought a unique skill, perspective, or disciplinary expertise to the group, membership in the networks and the learning communities they would produce reflected a collective “higher calling” to these contributors. Secondly, stakeholders shared an intellectual curiosity about the available means by which remedial student performance and attrition challenges might be obviated. In practice, they found in each other an activist commitment to helping the developmental and ESL students for whom they shared responsibility. The promise of a new and potentially game-changing pedagogy involving cross-disciplinary collaboration helped push the initiative along. Everything that led to the successful implementation of learning communities at the college grew from a primary recognition of and concern for the academic challenges that underprepared college students face at the college.

Content course faculty engaged with skills instructors, and academic administrators envisioned new enrollment management protocols that might accommodate the pairing of credit course content alongside supportive basic skills

instruction. Participating faculty and staff were not unaware of learning communities as an alternative instructional modality: Several nearby two-year colleges had already embraced the practice, some at the programmatic level with quite promising student learning outcomes. Successful national models of learning community programs were likewise known to the assembly. Over time, these exploratory assemblies narrowed to an engaged guiding coalition in possession of an agenda, which ultimately grew into a proposal submitted to and endorsed by the vice president. In this way, a committed social network of like-minded faculty and staff innovators was founded. An initial defining characteristic of the learning community network lay in the assets stakeholders individually brought with them to the enterprise: an activist commitment to at-risk, under prepared students at the college, as well as an intellectual curiosity about available means to address those students' unique academic challenges.

Structurally, the learning community networks constituted an adhocracy, a spontaneous and flexible alignment of contributors who wished to devise a promising new teaching and learning model to the higher education setting of which they comprised a part (Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Smart, 1993; Smart & Hamm, 1993; Bennis & Slater, 1998; Smart, 2003). These early adopters operated parallel to an engaged and supportive administration, which, given a somewhat adversarial collective bargaining legacy at the college, surprised more than a few of the stakeholders with its unswerving advocacy.

In the eyes of research study participants, unencumbered support from academic administration was essential to the successful implementation of a learning community model at the college. Network members strongly preferred and were ultimately granted

autonomy for the intellectual substance and operational structure of their learning community initiative. As such, they grew into a vertical adhocracy (Mintzberg, 1979; Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 2008). That is, they enjoyed pedagogical and operational freedom in addressing a critical institutional need while being acknowledged and materially supported by the prevailing bureaucracy. A second defining characteristic of the learning community networks lies in their organizational structure: Collectively, stakeholders established independent, yet institutionally supported adhocracies from which to approach their goals and objectives. At the heart of those early organizing efforts was faith capital: the principles, espoused values and organizational strategies individual stakeholders brought with them to the initiative.

In at least one respect, the student learning community networks represented an anomaly at the college. All research study interviewees referred at some point to a “complicated” and “adversarial” collective bargaining milieu (Ehrenberg, Klaff, Kezsbom & Nagowski, 2004) as an acknowledged but generally undiscussable (Argyris, 1990, 1997) obstacle to innovation at the college. An early defining characteristic of the student learning community networks reflected their willingness to assemble, innovate, and persist in a less-than-receptive collegial atmosphere after launching their initiative. Stakeholders experienced peer opposition in various forms, ranging from subtle personal criticism by fellow bargaining unit members to ambivalence on the part of departmental leadership unwilling to principally or materially shore up the student learning community initiatives. Such resistance, however, played only a transitory role in the initiation and development of the learning community networks. As I noted in my research journal and parenthetically in interview transcripts, participants generally reported “waving off” and



even parodying what they referred to as “the union shuffle” and other subtle challenges to their work. It can, then, be asserted that an enduring feature of learning community network membership at the college is resilience to a change-averse environment.

From among the fledgling networks a member-liaison emerged who played a key role in both the SCRUBS and P2E learning community networks and concurrently as a go-between with their administrative advocate. This stakeholder, Claire, proved to be a critical asset to the networks in need of tangible resources that would nurture their purposive actions (Coleman, 1988; Ortega, 2011) and allow them to pursue their desired reform goals. Claire’s learning community role was defining in several respects. First, she acted as an initiator who enabled first steps leading to formation of the organizing networks. Secondly, she represented an integrator who helped construct the learning community scaffold by, among other contributions, co-authoring guidelines from which stakeholders might proceed. And finally, she functioned as a sustainer who met and conferred frequently with administration at the college on behalf of the learning community networks. Claire’s multi-faceted role was common to both the SCRUBS and P2E learning community networks.

In summary, defining characteristics of student learning community networks at the college were as follow: a) They assembled in response to an academic charge to improve course- and program-level outcomes for at-risk under prepared remedial and ESL students at the college; b) These networks were populated by intellectually curious stakeholders collectively committed to greater student success; c) Despite a complex collective bargaining environment involving transitory peer and leadership resistance to the innovation, network stakeholders persevered in launching and cultivating their

respective learning communities at the college; d) The resulting vertical adhocracies operated with principle and material support by a prevailing institutional hierarchy, but not to the exclusion of academic and logistical autonomy; and, e) As the networks began addressing their goal of implementing paired learning community course sections at the college, a member-liaison emerged, functioning as a concurrent network stakeholder and as a conduit to their administrative benefactor.

### **Research Question Three: How do Current and Formerly Engaged Stakeholders Perceive Student Learning Communities as an Instructional Practice at the College?**

The early guiding coalitions responsible for identifying new instructional approaches to teaching at-risk students actively embraced learning communities as a new and promising pathway to enhanced student success at the college. Drawing on an established body of higher education research and practice (Visher, Schneider, Wathington & Collado, 2010), network members independently researched learning communities --in particular, those in which two or more developmental or ESL courses are pedagogically aligned with a credit-bearing gateway course (Tinto, 2000a; Cox, 2004; Malnarich, 2005; Engstrom, 2008). In time, network members assumed all manner of instructional, operational, and promotional roles in their respective learning community pairings. In doing so, they collectively facilitated an opportunity for educational reform at the college, combining their collective determination and the individual attributes at that strengthened the enterprise. In other words, stakeholders addressed curriculum, instruction, and logistics through the practice and application of faith capital.

Student learning outcomes for both the SCRUBS and P2E learning communities were and have continued to be exemplary. Content course instructors (biology, psychology) reported that student enrollees in their classes routinely meet or exceed the (80% or better) grade performance benchmark, while achieving formal student learning outcomes associated with the course outlines. Skills course instructors likewise champion developmental English and ESL course outcomes as positively impacted by learning community alignment. In individual and focus group interviews, much participant commentary was devoted to the affirmative impact learning communities have on students' sense of institutional belongingness and socialization within and beyond their learning community course pairings (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 2000a, 2000b).

As examined earlier in this chapter, the guiding coalitions responsible for building curriculum and enrollment processes for learning communities at the college maintained that adhocracy -not autocracy- offered the most favorable circumstances for learning community success (Smart, Kuh, & Tierney, 1997). In particular, participants saw learning community curriculum development and instruction as an independently-derived practice "by the faculty and for the faculty" alongside their administrative co-contributors, who designed enrollment management protocols and systems in support of their collaborative teaching partners. While administrative contributors to the SCRUBS and P2E learning communities function somewhat apart from their teaching counterparts, they are acknowledged as equally invested in the enterprise, especially towards ensuring an adequate student pool, teaching milieu, and resource flow.

Practitioner associability is a key component in the practice of faith capital. Deferential practice (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999) emerged as a key instructional

component over the course of time faculty stakeholders spent together developing and teaching student learning communities at the college. In individual and group interview settings, participants related how they found their roles as solitary instructors altered as they became agents of collaborative, interdependent team teaching in their learning community pairings. They perceived openness to new and different pedagogical approaches as an early challenge but also a learned benefit to their collaborative relationships with faculty members from dissimilar disciplines and professional backgrounds. ESL reading and writing skills instructors (Nora and Nancy), for example, persuaded their introductory psychology faculty counterpart (Daniel) to consider alterations to his syllabus in order to better balance the amount and cadence of skills instruction relative to his course learning outcomes by the end of a standard semester.

Participants voiced mixed opinions on the need for learning community practitioners to espouse similar principles in order to be effective in their learning community teaching. In response to an interview question on whether learning community practitioners need to espouse the same values and educational philosophies in order to effectively work together, approximately one-half (6) of study participants found these commonalities to have an impact on effective learning community collaboration. A slightly smaller number of participants (4) perceived practitioner values and philosophies as immaterial or at most secondary to practitioner flexibility and the ability to reach compromise inside and outside of the classroom. These differences reflect the strength of individual contributor attributes and reflect the practice of faith capital in learning community instruction.

English as a second language and developmental English instructors perceived skills instruction as dependent upon or even moderately subservient to content course instruction for their learning community pairings. Gigi, for example, devoted almost an entire summer in advance of the start-up of the SCRUBS learning community studying and preparing developmental reading lessons to mirror and complement the biology course counterpart. In contrast, their content course faculty counterparts (Lucy and Daniel) reported having gained a much greater appreciation of the centrality of skills instruction to the learning community teaching mission. Neither faculty group viewed learning community instructional pairings as anything other than a fully egalitarian professional undertaking.

One finding of this research study reflects how practitioners felt the need to devote a substantial amount of time together outside of their classrooms objectively “tweaking” curriculum and reflecting on their combined teaching effectiveness as an instructional team. SCRUBS faculty, for example, regarded their student success course faculty counterpart, Cyndi, as instructionally critical to the course pairings (her syllabus included general orientation to the college, study skills, critical thinking skills, and learning styles), but also as the conscience (my term) of the SCRUBS learning community, someone to whom enrolled students could approach as a mentor and personal support advocate. Cyndi lent faith capital to fulfilling her teaching and collaborative role in the learning community network

Moreover, the experience of participating in learning community teaching affected practitioners in both personal and professional ways. As has been variously described in this dissertation, research study participants viewed learning communities as

a “higher order” service to the college when compared to nonaligned instruction of developmental and ESL at-risk students. They discovered that collaborative interdisciplinary course instruction energizes their students and classrooms (Ebert, 1990; Minkler, 2000; Bandyopadhyay, 2009). Some participants (4) described experiencing a “deepening” of their professional vocation from participation in learning communities, a transformative experience (Jackson, 1992; Phifer, 2010) that has had a lasting effect on their professional growth and worldview.

While both SCRUBS and P2E stakeholders perceived learning communities as more instructionally rigorous (especially as relates to syllabus preparation, collaborative course delivery, and practitioner “tweaking”) and operationally more complex than their stand-alone course counterparts, there was unanimity on the professional, personal, and outcomes value of being a contributing member of a learning community. Nor could I denote substantive differences in how currently and formerly engaged teachers and administrators perceive learning communities at the college. The predominance of positive, proud commentary about how their courses served to provide at-risk, under prepared students improved pathways to course- and program-level success was highly consistent for both case study units. Moreover, faculty stakeholders regarded their classrooms as instructional safe havens providing a holistic and thematically coherent learning experience to at-risk, under prepared students. Their administrative co-contributors relished the opportunity to “make it work, hold it together,” while supporting instruction operationally from the sidelines. Regardless of outcome and inherent in the immutable energy and determination reflected in the perceptions of both currently and formerly engaged stakeholder is the embodiment of faith capital.

#### **Research Question Four: How Do Current and Formerly Engaged Stakeholders Account for Persistence or Decline in Student Learning Communities at the College?**

In building a research methodology for this dissertation, I assumed there would likely emerge stark differences in how research study participants perceived student learning communities at the college. That premise was based on two clearly divergent outcomes for the SCRUBS and P2E learning community initiatives. In point of fact, I discovered more similarities than differences in the perceptions of actively engaged (P2E) and formerly engaged (SCRUBS) learning community participants as to the viability of learning communities over time.

While SCRUBS student learning outcomes were highly encouraging, the learning community abruptly ceased operation after just two academic semesters. P2E has thrived and continues to be offered each fall and spring semester as of this writing. With those contrasting stories in mind, I predicted that members of the SCRUBS team would likely view student learning communities through a somewhat different, less optimistic lens than their P2E counterparts. My expectation was that retrospective responses to interview questions by SCRUBS network members would be conditioned by the inability of their particular initiative to persist. I intentionally constructed interview protocols to address anticipated differences in how stakeholders no longer engaged would perceive the viability of learning communities as compared to their actively engaged counterparts. Interview questions 11 and 16 (Appendix A) were constructed for individual participants in anticipation of predictive responses. These protocols feature an if/then progression of questions, based on the interviewee's active or inactive learning community status.

What varied most between stakeholder perspectives for the two learning communities were the type and scale of available contingencies to institutional obstacles (of which there are many --some transitory, others enduring). P2E practitioners, for example, have learned to practice targeted promotion as one of several workarounds to student recruitment anomalies for their course pairings. In contrast, SCRUBS practitioners struggled with biology prerequisite standards as a disincentive to otherwise qualified student recruits. They could find no answer or fix to inflexible placement criteria and other logistical barriers to a consistent student pool. While SCRUBS interviewees did more pointedly volunteer specific enrollment management processes as causal to that learning community's demise, my data summary tables demonstrate that P2E stakeholders responded almost identically to the most prevalent and troublesome operational factors and their impact on overall learning community persistence.

Research study participants accounted for the viability of student learning communities at the college as marginally impacted by such transitory obstacles as an adversarial collective bargaining milieu, peer opposition, and middle management ambivalence. These challenges to learning communities were largely confronted and overcome in the design and implementation phase of learning community development. They were, to my thinking, no match for the determinism displayed by faculty and staff practicing faith capital. More assiduous, however, are operational factors related to standard enrollment management processes at the college, in particular: student assessment, advisement, and placement; learning community course scheduling and facilities management; and, reliable promotion of learning community pairings at the



college. These factors have themselves persisted over time and were of concern to all learning community network stakeholders.

A majority of research study participants (7) predicted that learning communities will remain static or expand at the college over time. Some voiced concerns that learning community persistence at the college depends on sustained institutional recognition and material support of innovative instructional practice, which is naturally subject to change along with institutional priorities over time. Irrespective of individual course outcomes, most stakeholders regarded student learning communities as worthy of continuance, if not expansion, at the college.

Several participants (3) worried that administrative advocacy is only as strong as those principals who have been engaged with and consistently support learning communities at the college over time (e.g., Claire, Hallie). Two participants predicted that the learning community legacy at the college will depend on the influence of faculty collective bargaining and willingness on the part of the prevailing institutional hierarchy to materially (stipends, release time) support those undertaking such initiatives in the future. If the solution to learning community persistence at the college depends on individual stakeholder vigilance (as appears to be the case with P2E), one wonders how long they might be expected to manage direct responsibility for both classroom instruction and operational continuity at the college over time.

Finally, it is important to note that by and large research study participants did not perceive learning community persistence or decline as sole indicators of whether their social networks have succeeded in what they set out to do. Most respondents instead

accentuated the transformative value in having been a contributor to student advocacy and substantive change at the college. For me, this mindset speaks authoritatively to faith capital: the belief systems and integrative intent stakeholders devoted to the networks that produced SCRUBS and P2E. Part of my personal reward as an outside collaborative researcher (Creswell, 2007 & 2009) in this study is having observed participants individually and collectively reprise the early exuberance and enduring satisfaction that their learning community association provided them as educators in search of public good. Addressing this research question has led me to reframe my initial assumptions of *persistence* as it impacts my research study conclusions overall. As I will explore in some detail below, in the presence of faith capital, persistence appears to signify a good deal more than just subsistence of instructional or programmatic outcomes.

**Research Question One: What Evidence If Any Exists for Faith Capital as an Integrative Locus in the Development and Persistence of Student Learning Communities at the College?**

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore and understand what social and institutional factors account for the success or lack of success in developing, delivering, and sustaining learning communities in support of at-risk students enrolled at the college where my research study took place. My primary research question is concerned with the interrelationship between social and institutional factors that fostered inauguration and persistence of the social networks responsible for learning communities. I believe its answer is conditioned by available theory and supported by the corollary research questions that I built around it.

Throughout this dissertation, I have proposed faith capital as collectively engendered by members of social networks whose innovative energy, values, goals, and collective determination incentivized the possibility of enhanced student success and educational reform at the college. As outlined in Chapter 1 of this work, I first came across the term in Hanson's 2001 article, *Institutional Theory and Educational Change*. From this early reference, I was able to apply constructed theory to instructional practice, wherein faith capital functions as an integrative locus for the production of capital and emergent organizational strategies employed as a means to socially-just education reform. In the process of collecting my data, I identified elements of participant predisposition in the faith capital formula: A majority of learning community stakeholders identified themselves as intrinsically motivated to join a guiding coalition whose intention was to provide improved pathways to underserved students (Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, Brière, Senécal, & Vallières, 1992, 1004; Gardner, 2001) at the college. They reported that their primary incentive for engaging in learning communities lay in helping students perform better in their courses and beyond, not in accolades or remuneration. Forms of extrinsic reward (course release, monetary stipends) were nonetheless acknowledged by most participants as both a symbolic and material affirmation of their higher-order institutional service. While learning community administrators received no additional compensation, their participation and reward appears to have been purely integrative (Gardner, 2001), earned by supporting their teaching colleagues in a logistical capacity and ensuring that the operational attributes of learning communities flowed as efficiently and consistently as possible.

I addressed research question two (What are defining characteristics of social networks engaged in developing and sustaining student learning communities at the college?) in part by acknowledging the presence of an institutional goal to identify an instructional means to greater student success, as prescribed by the chief academic officer at the college. Members of the SCRUBS and P2E guiding coalitions overcame a non-supportive professional environment to launch and implement their initiatives, and to that end established a vertical adhocracy as their operating structure. A member-liaison fulfilled a key role in concurrently coordinating the learning community networks and interacting with their administrative advocate.

Beyond the benefits of greater student belongingness (Astin, 1993; Pike, Kuh & McCormick, 2010) availed by learning communities at the college, research question three (How do current and formerly engaged stakeholders perceive student learning communities as an instructional practice at the college?) is best explained by an innovative curriculum and instructional practice generated and delivered collaboratively by participating social network practitioners. While learning community teaching and student service were acknowledged as professionally more rigorous and moderately dependent on non-instructional variables, other key components of the new instructional modality were: deferential practice, collaborative reflection, disciplinary parity, and discovery of a deeper vocational commitment by network members.

My fourth research question (How do current and formerly engaged stakeholders account for the persistence of or decline in student learning communities at the college?) intended to gauge participant perceptions of the present and future efficacy of learning communities at the college, with an eye on the social and institutional factors

conditioning those outcomes. An unanticipated finding from my study was that participant impressions on threats to the viability of learning communities (despite the clearly divergent outcomes for SCRUBS and P2E) were internally consistent. That is, all ten participants in the study concurred on both transitory and enduring obstacles to the success of learning communities. P2E practitioners successfully implemented workarounds to overcome more pervasive logistical barriers, while SCRUBS contributors could not. Seven out of ten research study participants predicted that learning communities will persist and possibly expand at the college, although uncertainties about factors such as sustained institutional advocacy, impact of collective bargaining, and dependence on active practitioner vigilance were given voice. Some stakeholders perceived the professionally transformative value to membership in learning communities as equal to or greater than measures of success or failure in the undertaking.

### **Implications for Research Methodology**

I addressed my research questions for this dissertation using strategies of inquiry involving multiple sources of data gained from an embedded single-case study methodology (Yin, 2009 & 2014) and outsider collaborative research (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Creswell, 2007 & 2009). My rationale for using a case study design method was that at the college where my research study took place, two discrete but pedagogically similar learning communities were available for examination. Embedded single-case study design methodology aligned well with my research intent in that the two units of analysis, the SCRUBS and P2E learning communities, were contextually identifiable (Stake, 1995), that is: non-identical. Both learning community initiatives were founded and implemented by comparable groups of stakeholders as an alternative instructional

modality during approximately the same time period (2007-2009) at the college.

Together, they represent subunits reflecting the collective organizing efforts of two social networks addressing unique subject matter (biology and psychology) and student constituencies (developmental education and ESL), respectively. My research appears to demonstrate that the value of an embedded single case study to similar studies lies in the concurrent similarities (context) and differences (outcomes) of the two sub-units. My data analysis and findings reflect the potential benefit of applying such juxtapositions to other research.

The P2E and SCRUBS learning communities likewise met Yin's (2009) criteria for studying atypical organizational rarities. A complex and at times adversarial faculty collective bargaining legacy effectively discourages much instructional innovation at the college. Collective bargaining was more frequently cited by research study participants as an obstacle than as an incentive for their collaborative goal of providing enhanced student success to at-risk underprepared students. Learning communities at the college have thus enjoyed marginal, but principled success. SCRUBS was discontinued after only a brief instructional duration, whereas P2E has persisted, providing aptly juxtaposed units of analysis from which to examine cause and effect for the case study learning community phenomenon at the research study site. For this study, P2E is the atypical rarity, because it survived both transitory and enduring challenges to its efficacy. Implications beyond my study might include assessing the legacy and climate unique to individual higher education institutions when planning or analyzing higher education reform.

I established myself as a nonparticipant or outside collaborative researcher (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Creswell, 2007 & 2009) for the purposes of this research study.

Because I am an academic administrator at the college where the study took place, and because several members of the participant pool are indirect subordinates, I acknowledged the drawbacks involved in interviewing subordinate participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006) by creating inquiry conditions in which interviewees felt neither vulnerable nor manipulated in the data collection process. In fact, my findings suggest the opposite effect: Individual and focus group participants freely volunteered data in response to my interview protocols, often associating the content of their recollections to both past *and* present institutional circumstances, and possibly addressing those perceptions critically for the first time.

As relates to data analysis, I employed prefigured emergent codes as indicators of trends, patterns and themes --later aggregated, analyzed, and triangulated (Creswell, 2007). Towards this end, an extensive data summary table served as a means to accurately associate and cross-reference participant responses (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) in singular and group interview settings. For me, the research value in aggregating and analyzing participant data in this straightforward manner cannot be overstated: In an embedded case study, there is a greater potential for collecting data from respondents whose perception of the phenomenon under examination (learning communities) might concurrently provide both confirming and disconfirming evidence. For that reason, I combined Stake's (1995) method for aggregation and direct interpretation of "individual instances" into categories (p.74-76) with Glaser's (2004) constant comparative data analysis method, as there were structurally homogenous units (student learning communities) in evidence, but with notably different outcomes. Multiple-case sampling of this type facilitates the emergence of a unified theory when similarities and differences

in the observed sample occur uniformly (Miles & Huberman, 1994). My sense was that a unified, yet incomplete working theory might emerge, allowing me to recommend faith capital as an integrative locus for the social networks that implemented the two learning communities examined in this dissertation.

In addition to Stake and Glaser's complimentary data analysis methods, I also employed a third method of data collection, elaborative coding (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Elaborative coding appealed to me as means to approaching my data analysis with a synergy of theories of social capital, motivation, emergent organizational strategies, and espoused belief systems in mind. By triangulating multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009, 2014) from my study (e.g., narrative and observed data, member checking, artifacts, and journaling), I was later able to construct findings and to some extent confirm those integrated theories proposed in my conceptual framework.

Faith capital is an abstract and complex concept as it is applied to the social networks and learning communities examined in my research study. In building this concept, I found the simplest and most straightforward means to compiling, analyzing, and applying case study data was the creation of data summary tables that cross-referenced interview protocols with participant responses. I never strayed far from these tables; in fact, I inadvertently memorized them, which is extraordinary given the enormity of categorized variables. Using the constant comparative method of data analysis, the practice of elaborative coding, and triangulating multiple sources of evidence in combination could serve a resource to others involved in qualitative examination of interview data.



## **Implications for Practice**

Student learning communities (Cox, 2004; Malnarich, 2005; Engstrom, 2008; Weiss et al., 2015) originally led me to this dissertation topic. I became enamored with them beginning a decade ago when, arriving at a community college for the first time, I observed various learning communities operating (and operating rather well) in the apparent absence of a visible, prevailing authority. This was contrary to my professional experience and perception as to what sustains innovative teaching, learning, and successful student outcomes in higher education. I also noted that the faculty and staff members who collectively taught and maintained the learning community program in that setting did so collaboratively and without local leadership. In this, I would later discover, lay the foundation of my concept of faith capital as an integrative locus between stakeholder attributes, the emergence of organizational structure, and innovation persistence.

Learning communities offered at the college where my current research study took place represent a similar contextualized instructional pathway, whereby two or more remedial or ESL courses are purposefully aligned with a content, or target, course. They have persisted nominally but as noteworthy exceptions to an adversarial collective bargaining environment, where instructional innovation is to a subtle yet real extent actively discouraged (Argyris & Schon, 1995; Argyris, 1997). Compounded by other, more complex and enduring logistical obstacles to innovation persistence, the elements aligned against SCRUBS and P2E learning communities thriving were substantial from the start. A potential value to this study as a resource for other institutions lies in identifying the means by which faculty and staff innovators were able to construct,

implement, and sustain learning communities despite these and other contrary circumstances.

Research study participants perceived peer opposition, a contentious collective bargaining milieu, and tepid support from departmental leadership as prevalent, but transitory obstacles to implementing and sustaining learning communities. Not all colleges will feature a model of governance such as that found in evidence at the college where my research took place, and that is generally fortunate for the purposes of attempting new and promising instructional approaches in support of nontraditional student constituencies in higher education. In contrast, almost all research study participants cited enrollment management processes such as student recruitment, placement, and course scheduling as enduring barriers to sustaining learning communities at the college. There are few if any college settings where climate and logistics do not in some impact reform initiatives.

The SCRUBS learning community was able to overcome transitory institutional barriers, but ultimately succumbed to comparatively inflexible enrollment management obstacles after just two academic semesters. P2E has survived by employing labor intensive but effective workarounds on a semester-to-semester basis in order to keep the learning community viable. One implication for educational practice arising out of this study is that higher education networks aspiring to innovate and to more fully serve their student constituencies will undoubtedly encounter both transitory and enduring obstacles to their aspirations. The measure of the strength and persistence of such networks may depend in large part on their ability to sustain practice resilience and devise operational solutions for the challenges they encounter. By way of this research study, I have

discovered that *persistence* pertains to more than one group or structure or program engaged in reform in higher education. Faith capital informs the ability to persist for each along the way.

Structurally, the guiding coalitions that developed learning communities at the college meet the definition of a vertical adhocracy (Gailbraith, 1973; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Schein, 2010; Dolan, 2010) by addressing a defined institutional purpose while being recognized and materially supported by the leadership of the academic and student affairs branch at the college. The assurance of institutional advocacy coupled with intellectual and operational autonomy provided a critical impetus for the learning community networks to take a needed next step: to organize and proceed without interference. Leadership enabled faith capital and the momentum to build network structure and strategies.

The early guiding coalition that envisioned the SCRUBS and P2E learning communities thus grew into independent yet institutionally-sanctioned social networks. They identified goals and strategies and collectively authored ground rules and processes for their respective learning community pairings. In this way, stakeholders effectively constructed the operational premise from which they would proceed and informally designated individual member responsibilities. With active assistance from a member-liaison who served both as member and direct advocate with the institutional hierarchy for resources, the network teams set about the work of preparing to offer learning communities to developmental and ESL students at the college. These attributes confirm Smart, Kuh & Tierney's (1997) and later, Smart's (2003) findings that community colleges employing adhocracies represent a dynamic setting for innovation and

educational change. An additional implication arising out of this research is that independent social networks bearing faith capital and adopting an adhocracy model of operational structure are able to organize and innovate in an autonomous institutional medium, while maintaining local internal order and access to needed institutional resources.

In summary and as explored in detail below, this research study suggests faith capital as an integrative locus between the principles, expertise, and determination that individuals bring to social networks and the underlying structure needed to facilitate innovative instructional programs and lasting institutional change. Sustaining instructional innovations depends on a continuum of operational and social factors. Once in place, social networks enact deliberate operational structure, ideally egalitarian in nature, in order to produce and sustain the working initiative. Faith capital provides a bridge between stakeholder attributes (espoused values, expertise, experience, motivation), the underlying organizational structure (vertical adhocracy, protocols, guidelines, roles), and persistence necessary to enable and sustain the social networks intending to provide innovative pathways to greater student success and higher education reform.

### **Implications for Community College Leadership**

Dantley & Tillman have written that “leaders for social justice take the moral position to critically deconstruct as well as reconstruct schools in a fashion that demands that schools are sites for equitable treatment for all students” (2010, p. 32). By far the most compelling features of the fledgling learning communities at the college where my research took place were their collective determination and the integrity of their

transformative premises. Participants unanimously maintained that unencumbered support from academic administration was essential to and invigorated the successful implementation of a learning community model at the college. Network members strongly preferred and were allowed ownership of the intellectual substance and operational structure of their learning community initiatives. As they grew into tentative learning community networks, stakeholders were able to address a critical institutional need while being acknowledged and materially supported by the prevailing organizational bureaucracy. From this paradigm, a flexible and egalitarian coalition emerged, unburdened by power struggles or disciplinary hegemony. Each contributor to the learning community initiatives had a stake in the development of course pairings and associated operational processes.

I attribute this organizational model to two forms of community college leadership with applications beyond the confines of my research for this case study. First, in an otherwise complicated and generally adversarial governance environment, one academic leader empowered a guiding coalition to assemble and take intellectual and operational control of its own destiny (Hallie). A member-liaison (Claire) functioned biculturally as a network member and interlocutor with senior administration. At all times during the initiation and implementation of learning communities at the college, senior administration was thus connected to and supportive of the initiative, yet wholly unobtrusive as stakeholders went about their work.

Secondly, members of the social networks independently comingled their individual attributes and embraced deferential practice (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999) while developing and delivering the SCRUBS and P2E student learning communities to

the college. They became agents of collaborative, interdependent team teaching and student service based on their respective roles and network affiliations. Research study participants reported openness to new and different pedagogical approaches as an acquired benefit to their collaborative relationships with faculty and staff members from dissimilar disciplines and professional backgrounds. They became practitioners of faith capital. Faith capital embodies a form of determinism espoused by individuals and groups functioning at various institutional levels whose intellectual energy and drive to serve is self-perpetuated and based on equity. As a community college leader, I can find little to argue with in the way this small initiative was allowed to subsist at the college where my research was conducted. The many challenges these networks overcame and the transformative value in a collaborative, non-authoritarian leadership model of this type best reflects its lasting message to the college community as a whole: Motivated networks bearing faith capital and persisting towards educational reform change can thrive and succeed given the attention, autonomy, and unequivocal advocacy of community college leaders like me.

Future research might examine not only whether social networks actualize faith capital embodied by individuals collectively undertaking educational initiatives, but also the extent to which sustained success of those undertakings depends on a measure of faith capital espoused and cultivated by academic leadership at the institutions where they are tried. While stakeholders directly associated with educational reform will contribute their unwavering spirit, professional expertise, and value systems, I suggest that social networks over time likely require more than a benevolent administrative nod. Participants in this study were quick to assert that intrinsic motivation alone was not enough to sustain

their work. They perceived material reward and institutional acknowledgement as being of value almost on par with their more integrative intents and purposes. In practice, academic leaders who actively engage with adhocracies innovating in the classroom and beyond to some extent either embody faith capital themselves or, at a minimum, endorse and leverage the drive and determination present in those undertaking instructional initiatives in higher education.

Adhocracies are by definition temporary organizational strategies (Waterman, 1990). Additional research that addresses attributes of innovative social networks in higher education could more closely consider the organizational climate of institutions contemplating change. The community college where my pilot studies were conducted reflected a dramatically different organizational culture than that in operation at the college where this study was situated. How does a largely unsupported lateral adhocracy fare over time as compared to a vertical adhocracy? I would also suggest case study examination of innovative educational networks originating in large, multifaceted bureaucracies versus those found in small, less operationally complex institutions. In this way, future research might provide distinct strategies for pioneering social networks operating in diverse organizational settings.

Finally, unexplored in this dissertation are the influences of gender and the not-insignificant issue of power in higher education reform. Eight of the ten participants in my case study were female. Might the characteristics and output of the social networks in my study have been more fully analyzed viewed through the lens of gender? To what extent does faith capital reflect stakeholder identity as a feminist determiner? Forthcoming case study research could frame educational innovation and the embodiment

of faith capital within a gendered dialogue or, at the very least, mindful of diverse manifestations of power in higher education among male and female agents of change.

### **Implications for Theory**

This dissertation has explored how social and institutional factors impact alternative instructional modalities such as learning communities in support of at-risk, underprepared college students. In advance of my data collection and analysis, I identified and researched theories of social capital, emergent organizational strategies, and social justice education as they might apply to my research study purpose. Faith capital is a secular extrapolation (Hanson, 2001) that I ultimately aligned with those theories as an integrative locus for institutional effectiveness and as a means to sustaining innovative instructional practice, such as learning communities. Hanson originally coined the term faith capital to describe a subtle “energizing attitude” that motivates individuals to engage in and contribute to lasting organizational learning and change. I have embellished and expanded it to personify those attributes collectively employed by the social networks that envisioned, implemented, and sustain learning communities at the college where my research took place.

I believe this case study provides evidence that the social networks responsible for learning communities at the college mirror Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of social capital by embodying the material and symbolic resources exchanged between stakeholders engaged in purposive actions (Ortega, 2011). These social networks effectively produced social capital by tapping into the unique attributes of each individual contributor’s education, skills, experience, and motivation. From this imagined or symbolic capital



(Quinn, 2005) grew the coalitions that would create and implement learning communities and the provision of public goods (Coleman, 1998).

In order to better understand and account for the underlying structure in social networks, I then looked to organizational theory, which holds that some organizations function more effectively than others by employing a combination of legacy, belief systems, and operative strategies in order to implement and sustain change over time (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; March, 1999). As discussed earlier in this chapter, adhocracies are emergent organizational strategies functioning on two interdependent levels: operational --representing structure, roles and strategies that social networks produce-- and normative embodying “values, aspirations, and loyalties” that underlie their actions (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 91). At the college where my research was conducted, these communities of practice (Wenger, 2000) assembled independently to further an identified goal: to increase success rates for at-risk developmental and ESL students through the provision of learning communities.

A deeper understanding of the character of social networks captures those predispositions that individual stakeholders bring to a collective enterprise. Following identification of social capital theory and emergent organizational strategies as components of my theoretical framework for this study, I turned to theory that accounts for the espoused belief systems personally and professionally held by stakeholders who align themselves with social networks. Social justice theory proposes an activist foundation based on fairness and equity (Theoharis, 2007). When applied to higher education, socially just education reformers enact a moral social contract with other members of their network and for those whom they serve. In team-taught or linked

learning community courses, practitioners in my research study integrated both their belief systems and their individual disciplinary approaches to the learning objectives established by the networks as a whole (Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes, Schneider, 2010). As the third component of my conceptual framework, social justice education theory represented praxis for social networks undertaking reform by way of the expertise, experience, and espoused belief systems of individual members.

Social capital theory represents the theoretical anchor to my research study (See: Figure 1). The identification of socially collaborative networks exchanging material and symbolic resources in “relationships of mutual acquaintance” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 9) accounts for the nature and characteristics of the innovative guiding coalitions (Kotter, 1996) or networks that grew from those preliminary dialogues in 2007 at the college where this research was situated. Evidence for faith capital as an integrative locus in the development of learning communities at the college resides first with the individual contributors themselves, who arrived bearing intellectual curiosity and a willing energy and determination (Hanson, 2012) to take on something meaningful. Once aligned, members of the networks generated social capital by lending to the learning community initiative their own individual, or human, capital embodying the collective assets of its members (Coleman, 1988). A thread of *collectivity* underlies much theory on social networks as a means to the production of capital. Collective action (Putnam, 2000) reflects a reciprocal exchange of stakeholder assets in a spirit of shared enterprise and for the provision of public goods.

Vertical adhocracies (Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Smart & Hamm, 1993; Smart, 2003; Dolan, 2010) represent the scaffold on which early learning community adopters

launched and organized their social networks. The deliberate (though informally derived) goals and premises that the adhocracies facilitated were first acknowledged and sanctioned by a prevailing hierarchy at the college. What grew out of the fledgling social networks were collectively-derived stakeholder strategies in need of structure: guidelines and protocols that would eventually define and facilitate the startup of learning communities at the college. The social networks authored ground rules for their respective SCRUBS and P2E learning communities, effectively constructing a scaffold from which they would operate and teach, including who (however loosely or formally) would assume the ensuing network responsibilities. An adhococracy, however, is only capable of providing an underlying structure for emerging social networks (See: Figure 2). Structure alone cannot replace the principles, vision, and goals professed by a social network (Mintzberg& McHugh, 1985). Faith capital signifies a galvanizing catalyst or locus between original stakeholder attributes (espoused values, expertise, experience, motivation) and the underlying structure (vertical adhococracy, protocols, guidelines, and roles) that eventually enabled the social networks to implement student learning communities at the college.

Social justice education theory (Hyttén, 2006; Theoharis, 2007; Dantley & Tillman, 2010) reflects the underlying values and ideologies held by individual members of social networks (See: Figure 3). At the college where my research took place, aligning individual espoused belief systems fostered a collective commitment to success for at-risk, under prepared students. Stakeholders who joined the SCRUBS and P2E viewed themselves as activist pioneers (Klein, 2000) collectively deconstructing then reconstructing (Dantley & Tillman, 2010) instructional practice in the interest of

academic opportunity for underrepresented students at the college (Theoharis, 2007). Faith capital embodies an integrative locus for the values and espoused belief systems that individual stakeholders contribute to social networks undertaking educational reform.

### **Faith Capital and the College Completion Agenda**

This dissertation began by addressing the need to redefine models of community college access, success and degree completion on behalf of traditional and non-traditional student enrollees seeking higher education training and work force credentials in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Towards that very practical end, a discussion of faith capital alongside instructional practice and new community college strategies for degree completion seems warranted. If there are, as seems increasingly clear, impending national standards of accountability for student retention and timely degree completion, community colleges will need to deconstruct and rebuild instructional and enrollment management practices to ensure more reliable degree pathways for their student enrollees.

I suggest that student learning communities and the participants in my study who built them represent one of many pathways toward such worthy institutional ends. Faculty members who committed themselves and lent their professional attributes to student learning communities at the college practiced faith capital as it relates to innovative pedagogical practice: The guiding coalitions they established were and continue to be comprised of determined risk-takers providing sustained instructional alternatives towards greater course- and program-level student success. Such innovative and time-efficient instructional approaches to reaching at-risk, underprepared students reflect a growing norm and in the community college sector (CCSSE, 2014).

Community college administrators have likewise begun to embrace inventive and more flexible means to enrollment, placement, and institutional support for traditional and non-traditional enrollees (Jenkins, 2015). For this research study, student learning community practitioner could not have succeeded to the extent that they did without the sustained symbolic and material support of their administrative counterparts, who more than occasionally moved procedural mountains to accommodate their paired course instruction. It may be that a combination of institutional readiness and those innovative practitioners who are compelled to innovate will determine the extent to which community colleges effectively address and enact new models of access, success, and degree completion. The measure of relational trust between frontline stakeholders practicing faith capital and their administrative counterparts acknowledging and leveraging their work could drive enduring educational change and more desirable indices of student retention and success.

### **Faith Capital, Persistence, and Organizational Learning**

While faith capital is theoretically complex and exists in abstraction when applied to the participants in my study, I have tried to heed Yin's (2014) advice to case-study researchers that associating qualitative findings with theory allows "going beyond the specific case or experiment" (p. 40) and leading to generalizable institutional applications.

From the time that I arrived to the community college sector and began observing the promise inherent in student learning communities, I wanted to examine and better understand what drove practitioners to assemble and what sustained them through the

rigors of course and program implementation. My research reveals a more comprehensive explanation as to what allowed them to take hold, to form adhocracies, and to persevere in the learning community enterprise over time. I have discovered that there are in fact several manifestations of persistence inherent in learning communities at the college. Today, the social networks responsible for the founding of learning communities persevere, albeit on a smaller scale than before and with some expected transitions in participating members along the way. The learning community course pairings themselves carry on by way of the public good in continuous play in their classrooms and beyond. Such benefit accrues to learning community students by way of enhancing their learning performance and college standing, as well as by empowering a greater sense of confidence and institutional belongingness. Practitioners profit from enhanced student success and a deepening of their professional vocation. They accomplish this through collaborative engagement with their colleagues and an attentive but unobtrusive institutional hierarchy.

All manifestations of persistence for the learning communities that were or are offered at the college depend on a determined, goal-oriented attitude collectively embodied by each stakeholder. The individuals who lend their presence, unwavering determination, and professional aspirations to the undertaking are practicing faith capital. Faith capital not only conditioned the circumstances under which social networks at the college engaged and identified their early goals and objectives, it remains an integrative locus for the ongoing provision of social capital, for maintaining organizational structure, and for enabling socially-just educational practice and student learning outcomes, so long as the learning communities are meant to subsist.

Some institutions innovate and learn better than others (Cook & Yanow, 1996; Hanson, 2001). The community college where my research took place does not boast a vibrant learning community program or inherent commitment to other alternative instructional approaches. The facts are that SCRUBS did not persist, and P2E perseveres by way of laborious workarounds and practitioner steadfastness. It may be that governance adversity, complex operational logistics, and general institutional legacy combine in some manner to generally inhibit teaching and learning innovation at the college. By way of their individual and collective responses to my interview protocols, research study participants provided evidence of enduring organizational defensiveness (Argyris, 1997) and a change-averse climate.

Like all higher education institutions, however, the community college where I conducted this study employs a number of diligent, committed faculty and staff members who ascribe to a higher order of student service and who, in doing so, deepen their own and others' professional practice. Stakeholders in both the SCRUBS and P2E student learning communities perceived the transformative nature of their participation to hold greater symbolic value than failure or success of their instructional initiatives. Moreover, they became an exception to the legacy rule against innovating at the college.

In the end, I hope this dissertation research study and its enrichment of faith capital might further inform Hanson's (2001) lone but immense characterization of the energy and drive that sustain committed innovators in their best practice aspirations, in addressing more reliable means to student success, and in the realization of lasting organizational learning.

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## Appendix A

### Participant Interview Protocols

Participant	Date/Location	Start/Finish/Time Elapsed	Record	Comments
Initials: Pseudonym:  Admin/ Faculty:		S: F: Total Time:	Audiotape Hand Realia Other:	____ of 25 interview protocols were answered by this participant.

1	
What motivated you to become involved in a learning community in the first place? What would you say is the goal of a learning community?	
2	
Which specific learning community course pairings have you been associated with? Name?	
3	
Describe your partners in developing the learning community initiative(s)?	
4	
What specific roles and duties were attributed to each member? Was anyone “in charge” of the initiative?	
5	
Where there guidelines used or developed for use in developing the learning community? Describe.	
6	
How did you choose the courses that would comprise the learning community pairings?	
7	

How much autonomy did your group have in developing the learning community? Was administration involved in the startup? If so, how?	
8	
How would you describe the relationships between the founding members of the learning community? Synchronicity? Trust?	
9	
What qualities do people involved in learning communities tend to have in common with each other?	
10	
Are you actively involved in a learning community today? (If <b>NO</b> : Go to question 17. If <b>YES</b> : Continue with the next item.	
11	
Describe a challenge that your group experienced along the way? What are common obstacles that tend to stand in the way of a successful learning community?	
12	
Has participation in the learning community affected your view of students at the college? If so, how?	
13	
How much added time and effort is required of you and your learning community partners during an average academic semester?	
14	

How is working with faculty members in a learning community different from the normal course of teacher interaction at the college? Explain.	
15	
How much intentional curriculum alignment takes place in your learning community? Is periodic tweaking essential to LC success? How or how not?	
16	
Were you involved in a learning community that is no longer offered at the college today? (If <b>YES</b> , answer the follow up and pose items 11-16 in past tense) If <b>NO</b> , why is it no longer active?	
17	
Do members of a learning community need to have the same values and educational philosophies in order to effectively work together? Explain.	
18	
In what ways are you alike or different from your (content or skills) learning community counterpart(s)?give it	
19	
What effect does/might course release time or compensation have on learning communities at the college? Essential to your participation?	
20	
Imagine planning a new learning community initiative at the college. List	

the characteristics you would want in planning/teaching partners for the undertaking.	
21	
True or false: A successful learning community requires lots of structure. Explain your choice.	
22	
Based on your experience, how do students enrolled in paired learning community courses perform compared to students not enrolled in learning communities?	[ITEM DELETED BY RESEARCHER]
23	
How has participation in a learning community influenced your teaching? Your relationships with other faculty members?	
24	
Which is more likely to happen: The number of student learning community courses will expand, level off, or remain about the same over the next several years at the college? Why?	
25	
What, more than anything else, makes contributing to a learning community worthwhile?	
NN	
Are there faculty or staff members at the college whose contributions to learning communities I might have overlooked?	
NN	
May I contact you later if I need a clarification or if further questions arise?	

## Appendix B

### *SCRUBS* Focus Group Dialogue Protocols

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Date/Setting</b>	<b>Start/Finish Times</b>	<b>✓ Audiotape</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Gigi; Cyndi; Lucy; Claire	<b>4/11/13</b>  <b>LH 207</b>	S: 2:30 pm  F: 3:40 pm	<b>Other</b>	

1	
Based upon interviews with each of you, this was instructionally a highly-successful learning community. Why was that?	
2	
How did the learning community first come together: When and how did things get started?	
3	
How formal was the effort? Was this a college task force with a charge? Or was it flexible and loose?	
4	
Did you follow or create rules for yourselves? Or did each of you contribute equally to the structure?	
5	
As a team, did you share an educational philosophy? If so, how would you characterize it? If not, does that matter?	
6	
How much did all of you communicate with each other during the planning	

and offering of the learning community?	
7	
Describe some obstacles that you experienced along the way?	
8	
What effect has participation in SCRUBS had on your professional relationships with each other? With your students?	
9	
Here are a list of adjectives each of you used to describe each other in the SCRUBS learning community (recited). Have I missed anything? What do these say about the effort and you as stakeholders?	<i>[Responses: Innovative, flexible, supportive, dedicated, student-centered, open-minded, no ego, pliable, willing to change, patient, passionate, respectful (deferential); knowledgeable; fun; energetic]</i>
10	
Are there key people at the college whose behind-the-scene contributions impacted the success of your learning community? Who? How?	
11	
What role did administration play in learning communities? Active? Passive?	
12	
If you organized a new learning community initiative today, how much would it resemble SCRUBS? What might be different about it?	
13	
What would you say are the professional rewards in participating in learning communities at the college?	



14	
Do learning communities matter? Why or why not?	[ITEM DELETED BY RESEARCHER]

## Appendix C

### P2E Focus Group Dialogue Protocols

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Date/Setting</b>	<b>Start/Finish Times</b>	<b>✓ Audiotape</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Nora; Claire; Nancy; Daniel	<b>4/16/13</b> <b>LH 207</b>	S: 2:30 pm  F: 3:47 pm	<b>Other</b>	Daniel exits at ~3:15 pm

1	
Based on interviews with each of you, this is instructionally a highly-successful learning community. Why is that?	
2	
How did the learning community first come together: When and how did things get started?	
3	
How formal was the effort? Was this a college task force with a charge? Or was it flexible and loose?	
4	
Did you follow or create rules for yourselves? Or did each of you contribute equally to the structure?	
5	
As a team, do you share an educational philosophy? If so, how would you characterize it? If not, does that matter?	
6	
How much did all of you communicate with each other during the planning and implementation of the learning community? How	

much now?	
7	
Describe some obstacles that you have experienced along the way.	
8	
What effect has participation in P2E had on your professional relationships with each other? With your students?	
9	
Here is a list of adjectives each of you used to describe one another in the P2E learning community (recited). Have I missed anything? What do these say about the effort and about you as stakeholders?	[E.g., Humble, committed, flexible, collaborative, connected, visionary, open, transparent, respectful, risk-taking, no ego, vested, affinity, creative, caring]
10	
Are there key people at the college whose behind-the-scene contributions have impacted the success of your learning community? How?	
11	
What role has administration played in learning communities? Active? Passive?	
12	
If you organized a new learning community initiative today, how much would it resemble P2E? What might be different about it?	
13	
What would you say are the professional rewards in participating in learning communities at the college?	
14	

Do learning communities matter? Why or why not?	[ITEM WAS DELETED BY RESEARCHER]
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