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# The impact of learning communities on student and faculty engagement: the case for linking College Success and basic skills English courses at "A" Community College

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**THE IMPACT OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES ON STUDENT AND FACULTY  
ENGAGEMENT: THE CASE FOR LINKING COLLEGE SUCCESS AND BASIC  
SKILLS ENGLISH COURSES AT “A” COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

by

Mary Beth Boylan

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
Rowan University  
December 8, 2016

Dissertation Chair: Mary Beth Walpole, Ph.D.

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to the memory of my father, John J. Boylan Jr., who encouraged me to enroll in my local community college – a life-changing event that charted my path and inspired my personal mission.

And to my daughter, Margaret Mulvaney: May she continue to discover the extraordinary aspects of life every day and retain the wonder of childhood long into her years.

## Acknowledgements

The road from enrollment to completion of a doctoral degree is one that is paved with great sacrifice for not only the individual student, but the many people who support and sustain the student. I will be forever grateful to Dr. Kathleen Sernak for shepherding me through the dissertation process with care, compassion, and commitment. Dr. Sernak never began a work session without “So, how are you doing?” in a way that meant, ‘this is not a causal inquiry, how are you *really* doing?’ Without her, this work would not have been nearly as in-depth or heartfelt. Dr. Sernak challenged me to truly reflect on my thoughts and impressions throughout this project and to dig deeper at each step. I grew in ways that I initially resisted, and have been changed through the process, in spite of myself. Thank you, Kathy.

In addition, Dr. Mary Beth Walpole helped me to publish this work after a hiatus during which life had other plans. Mary Beth, ever optimistic, ever patient, has been a beacon of light and a paragon of pragmatism. I am forever grateful to her.

I thank too, my other committee members, Dr. Wesley Wilson and Dr. Phil Linfante. Dr. Wilson and I were not long acquainted, yet he willingly agreed to serve, and offered his significant experience and knowledge in student affairs and the community college. I thank him for his keen intellect and ready recommendations that helped to strengthen my work. Dr. Linfante, on the other hand, has been a mentor, and friend, for more years than either of us would care to acknowledge. When I was a community college student, Phil was the first to hire me as a student-clerk at a branch campus. He is a masterful leader, a brilliant strategist, and one of the finest human beings I have ever met. Phil Linfante has always been a voice of encouragement and truth; his friendship

and his insight remain invaluable. Words cannot convey the depth of my emotion and the sincerity of my thanks, Phil.

The New Jersey Council of Community College Presidents deserves my appreciation and gratitude for their involvement in, and endorsement of, the Community College Leadership Initiative at Rowan University. I am indebted to this group of dedicated professionals who committed their time, their experience, and their expertise, to growing and sustaining the original cohort, and investing in the future leadership of our sector. The American Community College provides so much for so many, and has truly shaped my life and my vocation.

It has been a gift for me to share this experience with colleagues from the state's community colleges. Our cohort worked and learned together, and forged friendships that will last a lifetime. While every member of our group enriched my experience with their unique contributions, I am especially blessed to count Elvy Vieira, Jayne Edman, Jim Crowder, Karen Archambault, Kelly Jackson, Paula Pando, Scott Ridley, Tom Setaro, and Yesenia Madas among my dear friends and cherished colleagues. They are a fine group of professionals and equally committed to the comprehensive community college's mission of social justice and democracy. Among that group, Yesenia Madas has been my steadfast anchor and my sounding board. Through shared laughter and tears, many late nights, and a few intense weekends, ours is a friendship like no other – the journey would not have been nearly as enjoyable without you, Jess. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart. Many of those late nights were made bearable by the presence and support of Natalie Fein, and Elizabeth Kelly. Liz, Jess, and I met most Tuesdays nights to work, and chat, and eat, and chat some more. Natalie is a tried and true friend whose wit, reason,

and unfailing encouragement helped me through many a tough day, particularly towards the end of this process. I am fortunate indeed to count Natalie as a colleague and friend.

My home institution has provided significant support throughout this process in allowing me to adjust my work schedule to attend classes, and lead the learning community initiative within the scope of my work day. “A” Community college, despite the politics and challenges present in any institution, is a wonderful place to work. I was inspired by a muse or two as I undertook this project, and will forever be a grateful member of this community and its faculty body. To that end, I am indebted to the amazing faculty members who allowed me to be part of their experience as they formed their learning communities, and worked with each other and their students. They are courageous, tenacious individuals; each a stellar professional and wonderfully committed educator. I applaud their work. To our marvelous students as well, I give thanks for their welcome as I entered their classes. I thank them for their honesty and earnestness as they shared their experiences and impressions. They are our reason for being, and I am regularly thankful that I may accompany them on their journey.

I am ever mindful of the solid foundation of citizenship, right action, and spirituality that I received growing up in my family, and the community in which we lived. My early education helped set my moral compass, and guided my life and work. My mother, Mary Curry, was a stalwart of support through my program of study. She lived a life of advocacy and passion, and set a fine example in her own actions of social justice. I miss her daily. I wish to also recognize and thank my brother, John, and my sisters, Maureen, Jeanne, Ellen, and Nance. Our family home was full of lively, intelligent, conversation as they engaged with our parents and each other, and I looked on

from my booster seat. Their active participation in dinnertime discourse provided an example for me, when I finally found my own voice in the classrooms of the community college, years later.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge those who sacrificed most, by thanking my husband, Dan Mulvaney and our daughter, Maggie. Dan and Maggie represented our family at countless parties and outings, and spent many weekend days without me. They ate too many meals out, and had too few bedtime books, and goodnight kisses. They did not complain nearly as much as they could have, and loved me when I was busy and stressed, and not always loveable. Dan and Maggie, you have my undying gratitude and love for your support and your patience. You are my heart and my home, and I love you both very much.



## **Abstract**

Mary Beth Boylan

THE IMPACT OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES ON STUDENT AND FACULTY  
ENGAGEMENT: THE CASE FOR LINKING COLLEGE SUCCESS AND BASIC  
SKILLS ENGLISH COURSES AT “A” COMMUNITY COLLEGE

2010-2011

Mary Beth Walpole, Ph.D.

Doctor of Education

The purposes of this action research study were to: examine the (a) impact of linking basic skills English and College Success courses on the engagement and satisfaction of students and faculty at a branch campus of a large community college, (b) chronicle changes in scheduling, registration, and assignment of faculty as the initiatives are grown, and (c) examine my espoused servant leadership and social justice orientation, as I lead the project using Kotter’s (1996) eight-step process for creating major change.

The quality of the relationship between the learning community faculty members had an impact on satisfaction for students and faculty. Faculty who chose to work together because of shared traits or interests were more engaged and satisfied than those who chose a partner of convenience, or those assigned to teach a learning community. Positional power plays a significant role in growing learning communities, as does the development of personal relationships with key stakeholders. Action research methods allowed me to participate and lead the change project through four cycles of data collection: a quantitative study; a qualitative questionnaire; interviews with faculty and students; and an ad hoc work group of professionals from across the college community. Student learning communities and their potential impact on the college’s culture is discussed in the context of the community college mission and learning organizations.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **The Action Research Project**

In 1927, Meiklejohn's groundbreaking formation of a learning community on the campus of the University of Wisconsin enacted John Dewey's concept of education as a social enterprise in which all have opportunity to participate and to which all feel responsibility (Hubbert, 2002; Minkler, 2000; Moore, 2000). Learning communities are adopted by many community colleges as a way to improve the retention, persistence, and success of their most vulnerable populations (Tinto, 1997). Faculty recognize that students increasingly bring personal and developmental issues to the classroom that impede their academic success, and they further note students' inability to make connections between discrete skills sets and bodies of knowledge (Reynolds-Sundet, 2007). Learning communities offer students a structure for building relationships, increasing affiliation, and fostering high levels of social and academic support (MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2002; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

The purpose of this action research study is to examine the impact of linking basic skills English and College Success courses on the engagement and satisfaction of first-semester students and faculty members at a suburban branch campus of a large community college in the northeastern United States. The results of the research are intended to support the College's commitment to expand offerings of such initiatives by highlighting the benefits of learning communities for students, faculty, and the institution. Another principal goal is to explore the congruency between my espoused leadership theory and my practice. The cyclical, participatory, nature of action research will enable me to reflect on my work with the faculty, my approach toward navigating the College's



methods in scheduling and supporting learning communities, and determining future directions for the benefit of all stakeholders.

“A” Community College, a large, suburban community college in the northeastern United States has included increasing learning community offerings as a primary objective on the institution’s Strategic Planning Matrix. Also stated as a priority in this document is increasing student access to the 1-credit College Success Seminar (HUDV 107) and restructuring the course to improve its meaning and benefit for first-year students. As one of the coordinators of the College Success Seminar and an author of its curriculum, I am passionate about its continued viability, and believe that linking it to an academic-content course will enhance its benefit for students. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) note there is particular value in linking basic skills or developmental courses with first-year seminar-type courses instead of adding-on a tutoring, lab, or counseling component, which carry an additional burden to students’ already overscheduled lives. Targeted first-year offerings afford community college students in particular the support services in the classroom which is the environment in which they spend their time with us.

My interest in learning communities grew out of work as Co-chair of the College-wide Basic Skills Committee from 2005–2007, during which time a series of conversations was held with department chairs and teaching faculty from all disciplines. This dialogue made clear the difficulty students have applying skills sets across the curriculum. The work continued in the form of an institutional grant I received to research learning communities which resulted in a review of learning communities literature, a qualitative study of two faculty members who have run the only successful initiative at “A” Community College (three consecutively enrolled semesters of linked

College Composition and Environmental Science courses), and a survey of summer teaching faculty's perceptions of, and interest in, learning communities. "A" Community College verbalizes recognition of the value of these initiatives, but has yet to commit institutional resources or an organizational structure to operationalize and support them.

The College is one that prides itself on a culture of collegiality and democratic processes where individuals are valued and their participation is encouraged. An initial view of the organization's functioning might point to the Human Resource and Symbolic frames as described by Bolman and Deal (2003). As many higher education institutions do, "A" Community College ritualizes events throughout the year (faculty days, fall and spring convocation days, commencement, an annual garden party, employee recognition events, and a holiday party), but imbues them with characteristically "A" Community College language and symbolism. The artifacts of the culture are propagated so that new members of the community are acculturated in their every day encounters at the institution as well as via orientation programs, formal and informal mentoring, and attendance at college-wide functions.

Many members of the community do participate in the collegial governance system at "A" Community College, and many attend the college-wide events throughout the year, yet when it comes to the management of the organization and day-to-day decision making, the operations of the institution evoke the characteristics of Bolman and Deal's structural frame, as well as the political frame. Bolman and Deal's structural frame emphasizes assessment of outcomes and measurable standards (2003). "A" Community College has undertaken systemic efforts to develop standardized outcomes for whole academic programs, college service departments, and individual courses. The

administration places great value on the completion of annual reporting and periodic program reviews that detail the goals of the program, department, or course, and whether or not identified outcomes have been met. Faculty members have not embraced the process of measuring outcomes, and derive little or no satisfaction from the endeavor.

Under the College's most recent Executive Vice President (EVP) for Educational Services, a new position was created (Administrator of Assessment) to aid in the formulation of measurable outcomes and collection and assessment of data. The structural leader is one who focuses on strategy and implementation, but is also purported to hold people accountable for their actions. However, when it comes to accountability and reactions to those who do not meet the objectives that have been articulated, "A" Community College and its leadership function in Bolman and Deal's political frame, where alliances are built, negotiations conducted, and coercion invoked when all else fails. The EVP is a structural and political leader operating in a culture that views itself through the Symbolic and Human Resources frame.

In a collective bargaining environment where faculty members are tenured and collegiality is the order of the day, accountability can be a challenge. The administration has difficulty finding appropriate responses to faculty who do not complete course outcome reports, program reviews, or professional development obligations. The responses from the leadership and management of the institution often perpetuate the failure to hold individuals accountable for their inaction. There are patterns of behavior in the institution that are undiscussables, where the administration develops a complex series of steps to work-around ineffective individuals or practices (Argyris, 1990). For example, a department chair may carry the burden of completing department or program

reviews that are supposed to be shared by all members of the department or division. Or, the untenured or lower-ranked faculty members perform all of the department's service obligations in the college because the full professors will do nothing but teach their classes.

Some of the complaints I have heard from faculty over the past few years indicate they perceive the report writing as a time-consuming distraction that takes away from their "real" work of educating students. Both at governance forums and the monthly faculty meetings held by the Executive Vice President for Educational Services, faculty members indicate a desire to be participants in the College and its business as it relates to their work. We are a great culture of discussers, however, action is likely to fall on the shoulders of a few who wear a title of accountability (department chair, Academic Division Dean, etc.). However, when faculty are energized, reflective, and fully engaged themselves, they may be more interested in examining the effectiveness of their efforts and the impact they have on their students (Cox, 2004). I assert that faculty who work in collaboration with a colleague in a learning community effort are more energized, engaged, and reflective, and thus may have increased interest in measuring outcomes, examining student learning and engagement, and participating in aspects of their professional duties and responsibilities that lie beyond the confines of the classroom.

Through regular communication, close personal and professional relationships, and consistent expression of, concern for, and validation of, the faculty members' experiences I hope to examine my leadership and its impact on the ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 learning community at the branch campus of "A" Community College. These initiatives allow faculty members to reshape their pedagogy, redefine their courses, and

connect with their colleagues, students, and the college in meaningful ways. The faculty members who are the primary participants in this research with me are junior faculty members and in the early stages of their career and enculturation at “A” Community College. I hope to gather insight into how my social justice and servant leadership and advocacy on behalf of the faculty and the learning community initiatives are received and potentially impact the broader college community. I hope to also provide the college with a structure for new ways of building relationships with and among its student body and faculty.

The chapters that follow set this action research project in the context of the existing scholarly literature on developmental education, learning communities, first-year seminars, and the American community college. I provide relevant information about the institution in which the study takes place; discuss my interest, investment, and position within the College; and examine my leadership of the project and its evolution throughout the cycles of research. I chronicle the work that begins with a focus on the student experience in linked sections of a basic skills English class and a College Success Seminar course. I set about examining both student and faculty perceptions of satisfaction and engagement in a learning community, and followed up with a closer look at the faculty relationship and how it impacted the student experience in a subsequent cycle of research. Finally, I tell the story of how in a two-year period, “A” Community College moves from enrolling one cohort of students into a single linked section of a College Success Seminar and a basic skills English class, to scheduling and enrolling six cohorts of students in linked sections of College Success and basic skills reading, English, and

math classes. The change within the institution, its faculty, and me are all documented in these chapters.

## Chapter 2

### Leadership and Change Theory

My proclivity to be decisive, exacting, and judgmental in thought and action has been tempered by the resonation of literature that references spirituality, social justice, servant leadership, and the ethic of care (Batten, 1998; Capper, Hafner, & Keyes, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Greenleaf, 1998; Jaworski, 1998; Mawhinney, 2002; Palmer, 1998). Aspects of these theories under-gird my experiences and my personal philosophy, and I believe that it is the recognition of the divine in every individual that makes a leader a servant leader. I further acknowledge the presence of “grace” as an elemental ingredient in my personal development, in my interactions with others, and in my current and future leadership.

There is an imperative of personal unification for the individual who seeks to cultivate community in education or within any organization. Palmer (1998) writes about teaching and learning from the aspect of community building and notes that before community is manifest externally, it must be present in the “undivided self” (p. 90). Personal integrity is an implicit feature of those called to serve others in roles of leadership. As a young person, my personal life was fraught with lack of direction and discipline. I arrived at the threshold of the community college for an additional opportunity to unify my early adult experiences and continue my personal growth toward a positive and productive future. As a returning student, the community college provided a life-changing environment that allowed me to develop my own sense of social justice. I see the mission of the comprehensive community college as one that not only promotes inclusion of all, particularly marginalized members of the population, but also works

towards caring and supporting that population in a way that encourages the very best in individuals. My community college experience as a student evolved into a deep professional commitment that has given my work and life greater meaning.

A form of grace inherent in my approach, and ever-present in my life, is that which comes in service to others. My early training as the youngest of six children in a family steeped in Catholicism, taught me to be ever mindful of the needs of others and put them before my own. This foundation, coupled with years of customer service experience in another industry, led to the manifestation of my genuine warmth and passion to serve and assist those with whom I come in contact today.

Scholars and leaders from the business world who write about servant leadership recognize the presence of a greater entity in their work, something more important than oneself (Batten, 1998; Jaworski, 1998; Palmer, 2002). Batten (1998) discusses caring, sharing, and forgiving as the three most crucial ingredients involved in passionate serving. He further mentions grace as one of the characteristics of the servant leader and notes its definition as a “special warmth felt and expressed toward all other human beings; an absence of pettiness or self-concern” (p. 40). One must subordinate ego and approach the work of serving others from a standard which promotes the growth and well-being of those individuals. I have found, as Batten (1998) expresses, that the more I serve, promote, and build others, the better my own life becomes.

Opportunities to lead have arisen throughout my career and I have seized them with conscious choice. I believe my role in these venues is to promote the well-being and success of others and to provide a vehicle for work that will serve a greater good. Greenleaf’s (1998) conception of the leader as servant is one that references social



justice. If those served by the servant leader become better-off than they were, they are more likely to become servants themselves and become conscious of, and guardians of, the least-privileged in society. There is thus a rise in the moral compulsion to serve and to propel society in a direction that benefits its people.

Fitness of mind, body, and spirit are required for the rigorous work of the servant leader. Our personal communion with ourselves is manifest in community with others, which Palmer calls an “outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, the flowing of personal identity and integrity into the world of relationships” (Palmer, 1998, p. 90). As educational leaders, we seek communion with others in the pursuit of the “great things” in education; within community, courage and connection to our own souls are necessary. It is a central goal of the higher education institution, and the community college in particular, to invite students of diverse characteristics to come together to seek truth in ways that are personally meaningful. Palmer (1998) maintains that educators and students alike reach into the depths of their souls in the educational community to “invite diversity, embrace ambiguity, welcome creative conflict, practice honesty, experience humility, and become free” (p. 107) to live fully and benefit one’s own and others’ circumstances.

### **Social Justice and the Community College Mission**

The community college, subsequently, fostered in me what has grown into a deeply held belief in the transformational power of education and the necessity for each person to be heard and valued in his or her own right. The mission of the community college as an entity that offers access and equity is one that is aligned with a broader notion of social justice. It creates opportunities for those marginalized members of our

society and builds their cultural capital so that they may more fully participate and contribute to the larger community (Capper, Hafner, & Keyes, 2002; Mawhinney, 2002). Such institutions that are spiritually-centered and servant-led strive to provide opportunity for all members of their community to realize personal growth and success, and contribute to the betterment of the broader society. The Vision, Values, Mission and Goals statement of “A” Community College reads: “The College enables and empowers all persons to fulfill their aspirations to the maximum of their capabilities,” and “is committed to opportunity with excellence, opportunity with accessibility, and opportunity with appropriate support, to enable success.” (“A” Community College, 2009, p. 9).

Indeed, Kohlberg’s “just community” theory of schools was designed to bring students and teachers together to collaboratively solve problems, handle discipline, and run the institution (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005, p. 11). The goal of this approach is to embed the values of justice in the learning process so that students emerging from such an environment are grounded in the principles of “justice, equity, and respect for liberty” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2006, p. 12). For Kohlberg, the ethic of justice does not lead one simply to a set of rules, but is instead a moral principle, one that is desirable at all times. Rules, rights, and laws may provide guidance for decision-making that is concrete in nature, but addressing ethical issues and abstract concepts related to fairness and equity, requires careful consideration, civil behavior, and considerable thought. According to Kohlberg, the school is compelled to teach principles that lead to the development of a moral citizenry.

The environment created in a just-community, as envisioned and realized by Kohlberg and Gilligan (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005), is one where power-sharing is

possible and relationships form the basis of moral development. While I see the importance of a multi-paradigmatic approach as postulated by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005), my personal ethical core resonates most deeply with the ethics of justice and care. For me, there is a fortuitous coincidence in the convergence of Kohlberg's and Gilligan's work in the ethical community theory.

I view my work with students as a privilege and strive to provide the support and care that either introduces them to, or aids in the evolution of their own power. I operate with the categorical imperative as postulated by Kant, that student development is the primary concern in the community in which I work (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). Together, the student and I develop a relationship in which expectations are conveyed and respect is shared. From a Kantian perspective, people are treated as ends in themselves and, thus, encouraged to actualize their freedom and will (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). I believe that students demonstrate their awareness of my concern and care by maintaining contact, returning for additional meetings, and referring friends and loved ones to me for assistance. They evidence ownership of their power by moving forward with a plan of action and conscious decision-making that supports the goals they have defined for their future. It is a most gratifying experience when students initiate contact to provide updates on their progress and their lives after several years of leaving the college. The recognition of the early impact the counseling relationship has on a student's formulation of goals and personal development is personally profound, and it is one that is also shared with colleagues whom I mentor and with whom I continue to work.

Through a peer-mentoring program, my institution provides for the development of reflective practice in relationship with other professionals. I have mentored a few newer faculty members in my Division, have been mentored by others both in and outside my Division, and have found each experience and the resultant relationships to be enormously gratifying, and professionally and personally beneficial. The time spent in quiet conversation with a colleague can be thoughtful, provocative, and energizing. We share with each other in these meetings in a way that cannot happen in the course of a busy day, unless we set the time aside and keep it sacred. With time and shared experiences, care, concern, and power become reciprocal (Sernak, 1998). This kind of trusting collaboration forges functional relationships and builds community.

It is evident that individual relationship building is not always possible among all members of a large community, yet an ethic of care can be conveyed with a leadership style that emphasizes collaborative relationships and connections among various stakeholders in the community. I believe my institution strives to foster this sort of environment where the value of individual contributions and concerns is recognized and collaboration is encouraged. Challenge arises in the acknowledgement that not all members of the community operate with of the imperative of student development as their primary concern.

### **Ethical Principles in Action**

Fullan (2001) promulgates a leadership framework that is contingent upon what he labels a “remarkable convergence” (p. 3) of variables, not the least of which is moral purpose. The five components of leadership espoused by Fullan are: understanding change, relationship building, knowledge creation and sharing, coherence making, and

moral purpose. For Fullan (2001), these factors are independent but inherently connected and mutually reinforcing forces for positive change. Together they can provide a platform for leading complex change in more effective ways through increasingly complex times.

According to Fullan, in a successful change initiative, relationships improve and things get better (2001). Leaders must be relationship builders and bring people together to create knowledge and share information. Yet, change brings about ambiguity and anxiety in the culture in which it resides. I have come to see that understanding the non-linear nature of change is imperative, and I am certain that if the College moves toward adopting learning communities as a broader programmatic approach to instruction, there will be dissent and regressive action in the community. As the College defines and develops a comprehensive First Year Experience program, and connects it to learning community initiatives, there is great potential for beneficial change in the institutional culture. Clarifying my ethical principles and harnessing conviction in them can serve as a roadmap for the long and bumpy journey ahead, but it is only experience and confrontation with the dissenters that will bring those ethical principles to bear.

Learning communities have yielded significant results for faculty and other educational professionals involved in their planning and delivery. Faculty who participate in learning communities report high levels of satisfaction with the experience (Minkler, 2000; Moore, 2000; Smartt-Gaither, 1998; Tinto & Love, 1997; Wishner, 1996), and a greater degree of engagement when content is integrated across disciplines (MacGregor et al., 2002). Collaboration among faculty both within and between academic departments, and between faculty and students, fosters greater intellectual involvement and serves to invigorate and rejuvenate the teaching experience. Such a model provides

opportunities for faculty to be both experts and learners in the community and powerful role models for students (Palmer, 1998; Cox, 2004). Indeed, if faculty ask students to join with them and other students as a community, they must build one amongst themselves first (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Faculty who recommit to their profession, their students, and their institution through engagement in a learning community have an impact on the philosophical perspective of the college and serve as catalysts for a shift in the educational process. Shapiro and Levine (1999) note that “when campuses begin to implement learning communities whether they know it or not, they are embarking on a road that leads to a profound change in culture” (jacket notes). Creating a culture of learning provides opportunities that both support and encourage learning not only for students, but for every member of the higher education institution. Student learning communities have the potential to transform colleges and universities into true learning organizations where participants engage in reflective, critical, systems-thinking that fosters an awareness of interrelationships among seemingly disparate disciplines and patterns in the universe (Cox, 2004; O’Banion, 1997; Senge, 2006).

Participation in a learning community provides faculty, staff, and administrators with a different lens through which to view their work (Matthews, 1994). Creating a strong academic culture is a component some find missing from the community college, yet learning communities offer the opportunity to make cross-disciplinary connections for students, while simultaneously providing a supportive, nurturing environment that fosters the kind of learning and introspection that can only be gained when both faculty and students have permission to be vulnerable and learn together (Palmer, 1998). The

institutional change that results from engaging the entire college community in learning is one that can alter the culture and perspective of the organization (O'Banion, 1997). Such change is transformational – change that profoundly affects the very fabric of the organization and is sustained by long-lasting changes in the behavior of the members of the culture (Kotter, 1996).

How learning communities are currently structured at “A” Community College is an example of the organization’s complacency. We give lip service to innovation and assessment aimed at increasing student engagement and supporting new faculty. There are few individuals involved, the administration neither hinders their work nor supports it in a meaningful way. To quote one faculty member involved in the pioneering efforts in learning communities at this college, “No one said, ‘Don’t do it,’ but no one said, ‘Here’s how the college can help either’” (personal communication, 2007). To exemplify the kind of cultural change indicative of transformational organizational change, learning communities at “A” Community College would be adopted as regularly-scheduled, fully-supported, effectively-marketed, curricular structures that are part, not only of an organized First Year Experience program, but also targeted to specific populations or student interests such as honors or athletics.

Transformational change within the institution would mean that all members of the college community would not only be aware of the existence of learning communities, but would also be acquainted with their benefits for students, faculty, and the institution (Kotter, 1996; O'Banion, 1997). Administrators, faculty, and staff would welcome participation in the support and delivery of the efforts, and bring enthusiasm to examining their effectiveness. At “A” Community College, on-line learning also took

time to become a part of the fabric of the institutional culture and followed a path like the one described above. The college moved from a novel approach where a few faculty members experimented with morphing their curriculum into an online course. While the administration did not hinder their work, and even supported professional development efforts, the College did not institutionalize the practice for several years after the early initiatives of a few rogue faculty members. It took persistent effort on the part of faculty, constant communication of the work and its benefits to the college community, the support of those with position power to ultimately create an institutional effort, and finally, external pressure from peers (personal communication, 2008). Distance education is now abundantly offered, institutionally supported, assessed, and sought-after by increasing numbers of students and faculty who desire involvement in this method of course development, delivery, and learning.

I propose that my unique personal characteristics of energy, hopefulness, and enthusiasm (Fullan, 2001) will be a benefit as I promote the voices and experiences of faculty who have led learning communities at “A” Community College. I embrace Fullan’s leadership framework and am focused on building relationships throughout the institution as I support the work of the faculty with whom I have undertaken this study and the pilot project before it. I have been provided with opportunities to showcase the faculty and their learning communities, facilitate discussions with the administration, various faculty groups, as well as a large portion of the teaching faculty, and garner the support of key institutional leaders with the power of position to support and sustain the work. I continue to bring together those who express interest in the initiatives and can be of greatest help to the efforts. The faculty members who have developed and delivered



the linked courses are the greatest assets and advocates for moving the deep change forward as they rally support and enthusiasm among their teaching colleagues and convey the powerful personal and professional impact of the extraordinary experiences they have had in the classroom. Much like the early distance education efforts, together we will continue to educate, communicate, and build support throughout the institution until learning communities become a recognizable feature of “A” Community College’s offerings.

The leadership literature is contradictory: should change be top-down or bottom-up? Much of the advice for instituting change offered by leadership and management theorists is general and unclear. Argyris calls such advice “nonactionable” (1990, p.67). There is no prescription or set of steps to follow, yet change can be led and leadership does make a difference in a change process. Fullan states that leading in a culture of change means creating a culture of change (Fullan, 2001). This is a tall order for educators, even for community college educators and leaders who strive to be responsive and innovative. Fullan’s point is well taken. As leaders in higher education, even if we embrace the chaos and creativity that results from the rapidly changing world in which we live, we spend much of our professional time working around those who resist the change instead of leading them through it.

Fullan acknowledges the fact that leading change is incredibly difficult and requires an enormous amount of reflection and personal work on the part of the leader. My leadership is tentative, but growing in force and physical evidence. I am frequently called upon by my colleagues and the administration to participate in discussions, projects, and work concerning academic policies, student conduct or service issues,

program development, and college-wide procedures, and events. Inherent in my character are the personal qualities of enthusiasm, hope, and energy as described by Fullan (2001, p.4) that contribute to my appeal as a colleague, leader, and member of my professional community. It was heartening to see these in print, as they provided a reinterpretation of the “perky” label I received early in my adult life.

A successful change initiative can be led by individuals who employ a combination of four specific leadership styles and a particular set of social competencies and emotional intelligences as identified by Goleman (2000). To effectively lead change, the leadership styles must combine the following: authoritative, one who mobilizes people toward a vision; affiliative, one who creates harmony and builds emotional bonds; democratic, one who forges consensus through participation; and coaching, one who develops people for the future. In addition, leaders must possess a combination of personal competence, self awareness, empathy, and social skills to motivate others and build relationships that will sustain the organization through a deep, cultural change (Fullan, 2001).

I possess each of these qualities and have had opportunities to explore, develop, and express them while leading institutional initiatives, committees, work groups, and events throughout my professional career. The authoritative characteristic is one that I have had least occasion to develop and have become acutely aware of the limitations that come with position in an organization. Enthusiasm, energy, competence, and even momentum will moves things forward and garner support, but to create systemic change and ground practices in policy that will result in a cultural shift, position power is needed. While I do not possess a position of leadership, I have both seized and been given roles of

leadership. It has been most effective to employ affiliative, democratic, and coaching approaches to accomplish the objectives of my work to date. However, for the purposes of this project and facilitating the shift in how “A” Community College does learning communities, I set about forging relationships and communicating the vision to those with position power. To move the college forward in this institutional change effort, I needed someone to create the conditions that will grow learning community initiatives at “A” Community College in ways that I cannot.

Leaders need the tenacious qualities of energy, enthusiasm, and hope, to withstand the unending tasks of reculturing an organization. They need also to be grounded in moral purpose and become adept at utilizing the swirling mixture of leadership capacities and personal qualities Fullan describes. It is a daunting order, but change is complex, thus the methods to lead it well are equally complex. Moral purpose is to act in service to others for the betterment of society; a value that I embrace and colleagues have recognized with commendations for my professional excellence and service. I am humbled by the recognition, and awestruck by the opportunities to serve my students, college, profession, and community. Opportunities to lead in service have brought me in contact with many talented people and the challenges of navigating a culture that is slow to evolve in a rapidly changing world. It is in such situations however, that I feel most integrated and gratified by my work and its meaning. Working with students and colleagues, within an institution that is committed to offering access and opportunity to all individuals, is an endeavor that satisfies my soul and connects the purpose of my work to my heart (Palmer, 1998).

It is imperative to hold fast to the moral purpose proposed by Fullan (2001) and to embrace this framework as a means of furthering the social justice mission of the community college. In a democratic view of higher education, the individual can envision, if not realize, a “future better condition” (Dewey, 1916 / 1944, p. 95) for oneself and for all. If our objective as educators is to realize the goal of a better condition for our community, both professionals and students must assume an active role in applying academic knowledge, and personal and spiritual development to individual experiences in the world, and we must do this in relationship with each other. Learning communities provide a framework for not only faculty members, but students, and the entire institution to build strong working relationships between individuals, disciplines, and departments within the college. Moreover, with the use of collaborative and cooperative learning strategies, they have the potential to offer a training ground for effective work habits for students and opportunities to build community and relationships that can be emulated elsewhere in their lives (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). As Kotter (1996) writes, the most effective way for a change initiative to take hold in an organization is for the leadership to embrace it and live it in a very public way. “A” Community College has the potential to transform itself into a learning college with the use of the cooperative, collaborative pedagogy employed in the learning community. A learning college is characterized by high levels of engagement and collaboration as well as ongoing assessment and adaptation. It is a dynamic, democratically structured entity that can transform an organization’s culture and promote its success and that of its constituent’s (O’Banion, 1997).

Throughout this action research project, I will document and illustrate my use of Kotter's "Eight Stage Process of Creating Major Change" (1996). As my interest grew, I unknowingly invoked Kotter's framework as I began spreading the word about the potential power of learning communities on student and faculty engagement and satisfaction. I have since come to recognize how my early actions are synchronous with Kotter's first stages of "establishing a sense of urgency" and "creating a guiding coalition" (p. 21). In subsequent cycles I purposefully embraced Kotter's model and note the process of change in myself, the individuals with whom I am working, and the broader institution.

### **Kotter's Eight Stages of Creating Major Change**

**Leading change.** Leading change (1996) is John Kotter's framework for managing change in a complex organization. I was familiar with Kotter's work and found the stepped process appealing and realistic enough to put into practice. It was conceivable to use Kotter's model to initiate curricular offerings and student development approaches that could lead to the kind of cultural shifts and organizational change written about by Argyris (1990). In fact, contrary to Argyris' complaint that much leadership theory is unclear and non-actionable, Kotter's framework provides leaders with a powerful model that is quite "actionable." Kotter's Eight Stage-Process follows:

***Establishing a sense of urgency.*** The process begins with an examination of the issue and establishing the challenge or impediment as something the organization must address.

***Creating the guiding coalition.*** Stakeholders must be cultivated in the culture as those who can champion the urgency to make the change and address the needs of the institution and its community.

***Developing a vision and strategy.*** Lasting change that alters the culture of an organization or institution requires a phased implementation process. The approach must be purposeful and incremental, and consistent with the overarching mission and vision of the institution.

***Communicating the change vision.*** Once the Vision has been fully articulated, it must be strategically communicated throughout the entire institution and beyond. Garnering a place on the regular meeting agenda of key groups and individuals allows opportunity for formal presentation of the Vision to critical stakeholders within the institution and the profession. In addition, informal communication among all members of the community must be ongoing.

***Empowering broad-based action.*** When a cultural shift is afoot, change occurs in many sectors of the institution and operational support is needed to move things ahead. What is imperative is an awareness and respect for the institution's culture and traditions, and a goal of establishing shared responsibility and investment in the organizational change.

***Generating short-term wins.*** Milestones in areas that contribute to the larger change Vision are reasons to celebrate, and need to be communicated to the entire community. When an initiative is supported or a policy or procedure implemented, the community must be informed about it and recognize the incremental progress that is achieved.

*Consolidating gains and producing more change.* Achieving success along the way lends credibility to a change project and creates momentum. If the value of successive gains is apparent, resistance in the organization may lessen and barriers dissipate.

*Anchoring new approaches in the culture.* In order for change to become embedded in an organization's culture, each one of Kotter's steps must be enacted. The community will both expect and respect communication that is transparent, outcomes that are consistent with the broader mission of the institution, and ongoing assessment to determine the long-term viability of the change within the culture.

### **Kotter, O'Banion, and Fullan**

I have found points of convergence in the theories of Kotter, O'Banion, and Fullan as I undertake the work of a change project at my institution. The objective of Kotter's framework is to achieve deep, lasting, organizational change – transformational change (1996). To move the institution to adoption of learning communities as curricular structures that are fully supported by the college, the faculty and I, will need to enlist the endorsement of many stakeholders across the College. As Fullan notes, leading change in a complex organization is an enormously difficult task and requires not only tremendous flexibility and considerable personal insight, but also the assistance of others. Fullan (2001) and Kotter (1996) both promote the importance of transparent communication and building relationships to move the organization forward. It will take the charisma that characterizes Fullan's leadership profile, as well as dedication to a moral purpose, or objectives that reach beyond individual gain.

In O'Banion's learning college, all are engaged in the process of collaborative learning and the development and assessment of meaningful outcomes (O'Banion, 1997). Kotter's framework capitalizes on the organization's capacity to undertake a new way of conceptualizing its work and means of accomplishing its mission. Learning communities at "A" Community College have the capacity to create transformational cultural change in the entire College and subsequently affect how it orients the student body, the faculty, the administration, and the broader community to the business of learning. Such change will promote the potential of the institution to keep pace with the needs of all its constituents, while evolving and thriving into the future.



## Chapter 3

### Findings From the Literature

Community colleges are unique in the national landscape of higher education. It is the heart of the mission of the community college to provide access to quality higher education to all members of the community (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). Therefore, as open enrollment institutions, community colleges are more likely to enroll students who are academically under-prepared and face many barriers to success; lack of time, financial resources, and social support, all play a role in students' persistence and retention. In the United States today, nearly half of all undergraduate college students attend community colleges, and such students typically do not fit the profile of the traditional college student (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). Even if they are of traditional college student age, they typically commute to school, work 20 hours or more outside of school, and may be first generation college students who require one or more remedial classes (Mellow & Heelan, 2008; Wilmer, 2007).

#### Developmental Education

In October, 2004 ACT (American College Testing) published a report entitled, *Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work*. A representative from ACT came to the college at which this action research project will take place to discuss the findings of the report with community college and local high school faculty. The results of ACT's research states, "Most of America's high school students are not ready for either college or work (Crisis at the Core, 2004)." In 2005 the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) found that nationally 100% of public two-year institutions offer developmental coursework and 78% of all colleges with first-year students also

offer such classes. There is an increased risk of attrition in students who need multiple developmental courses without special intervention; only 10% of these students will finish their bachelor's degrees (Boylan, 1999). There is no specific information relative to associate degree students.

When examining the demographics of underprepared students, McCabe (2003) found they share similar characteristics of first generation and minority students. Roueche, Roueche, and Ely (2001) also found that developmental students suffered from a lack of confidence and fear of failure. According to Wilmer (2007), under-prepared students need not only academic preparation, but personal development assistance, as well. Colleges, therefore, must take a holistic approach to developing the whole student, both academically and personally, and help students improve their skill level in a variety of domains. Meeting non-cognitive needs is a precursor to success and persistence in an academic environment.

Developmental education at the community college is charged with more than academically preparing students for college-level instruction. Students' first encounters with faculty, fellow students, and the college as a community typically take place in the first semester, basic skills classroom. In a national qualitative field study designed to understand developmental education in the community college, Perin and Charron (2006) found that many programs had modified their offerings to adopt contextualized instruction. Basic skills courses in reading, English, and mathematics were directly linked with each other or to subject matter in a variety of academic disciplines. A learning community experience of linked courses provides at-risk students with opportunities for social and academic integration and support that they do not receive in stand-alone

courses, and which are critical for their retention (Perin & Charron, 2006; Tinto, 1997, Tinto, & Love, 1997).

### **The College Success Course**

Developmental education was originally designed to achieve these ends as well as develop academic basic skills, but there has been a growing recognition in higher education nationally that colleges and universities must meet the psycho-social, and adjustment needs of all first-year students, regardless of their level of academic preparation (Wilmer, 2007). The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition was founded in 1982 at the University of South Carolina and claims as its mission the support and advancement of “efforts to improve student learning and transition into and through higher education” (National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition Mission Statement). In the intervening twenty years, the Center has chronicled the adoption of First-Year Seminar courses in colleges and universities throughout the country and provided resources and professional development opportunities to educators in the field.

Descriptive data from the National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition (2000, 2006) demonstrate a growing trend in how colleges and universities offer students ways to connect to our institutions, each other, and the academic content. When the National Survey on First-Year Seminar Planning was conducted in 2000, of the 1013 schools that responded, more than 60% reported having a First Year Experience, College Success Course, or Freshman Seminar in place for students. The figure grew to nearly 85% percent of respondents in 2006. Responding institutions that perform formal evaluations of college success courses report high rates of

increased persistence, improved peer connections, and student self-reported satisfaction with the institution (Summary of Results, 2006 National Survey on First Year Seminars). In addition, approximately 25% of responding institutions in 2000 also said their course was linked to one or more courses in a learning community, a figure that grew to more than 35% in 2006.

The national explosion of First-Year Seminar offerings is indicative of higher education's desire to aid students' transition into the college environment and provide a means for early connection to peers, professors, and the college itself. Such courses typically address topics in time management, study skills, navigating institutional resources, setting goals, and developing adult relationships and citizenship skills (Siegel, 2003). Time is a precious commodity for the community college student who juggles numerous demands and responsibilities and spends minimal time on campus. Students come to campus for class, and in order to meet their academic and personal developmental needs, colleges must structure supportive services and programming in ways that are not "add-ons" to their already over-committed lives. Instead, we must build such programming into the predictable schedule of offerings and link content in ways that maximize students' resources and efforts (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Community college students work, sometimes at multiple jobs; have family responsibilities; are frequently academically underprepared; and, often, are first-generation students with little knowledge of navigating the higher education experience (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). We must bring critical survival skills and tools to them, and help them to not only acquire such skills and knowledge, but also learn how to use and apply them in a variety of settings. Linking a First Year Seminar with a basic

skills course in a learning community purposefully restructures the learning environment and blends the content, information, and experiences students need from the First-Year course, with the skills they must develop in English, reading or math that will promote their future success in college-level courses.

### **Learning Communities**

A review of the educational literature indicates that learning communities have existed in many forms and have evolved over time in the community of higher education. In general they all have two things in common: shared knowledge and shared knowing (Minkler, 2002; Tinto, 1998). By organizing students' enrollment in courses around a theme or a broad topic, learning communities create a society of learners engaged in a meaningful, coherent first year college experience where content is shared and relationship and citizenship skills are built. As democracy's college, the community college is charged with providing quality, affordable, higher education to the residents of its geographic region. Learning communities offer the community college another mode of meeting the mission of promoting democracy through access and equity and, subsequently, shaping an effective citizenry (Maxwell, 1998; Rendon, 2000). Opportunities for increased interaction between faculty and students and student-to-student interaction, also affects students retention and persistence toward degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The community college adopted learning community theory for use in the late 1970s, with the LaGuardia Community College initiative in New York (Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Minkler, 2002; Tinto & Love, 1997). The most successful program outcomes have been found in institutions that involve as many members of the educating community as

possible (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Nowhere is diversity of student body and ability more apparent, and attrition higher than the open admission community college. Particularly relevant to first year students in basic skills courses Tinto and Love (1997) note the theme of consistency and continuity of student and faculty interaction in the learning community structure that leads to students' experience of high levels of social and academic support. By improving the quality of the learning process, not just the content or outcomes, the learning community experience helps students make the transition from secondary to higher education (MacGregor, et al., 2002; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Experts contend that learning community initiatives are better able to reap significant rewards if they are part of an institution's strategic planning matrix and tied to specific learning outcomes and budgetary allocations (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). An approach that utilizes a coordinating team of faculty, administrators, and student affairs personnel, is likely to meet with the greatest success in student satisfaction, retention and success (Minkler, 2002; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). This model is similar to that of Boylan's (2004) recommendation in the assessment, interpretation, and placement of students in basic skills education.

Developmental education researchers further indicate that exemplary models of integration are strongly influenced by executive and operational levels of administration (Boylan, Bonham, Clark-Keefe, Drewes, & Saxon, 2004). Executive leadership can provide verbal support and resources in the allocation of facilities and personnel, but can also promote policy decisions that encourage a collaborative campus in the delivery of

services at the operational level (Boylan et al., 2004); the same is true for institutions that adopt a comprehensive First-Year Program (Cuseo, 2009).

Historically learning communities, even in the community college, have not included academically “at-risk” students (Moore, 2000; Tinto & Love, 1997; Wishner, 1996). More recent efforts have been targeted toward under-prepared populations and have echoed the positive results of previous studies with broader scope (Kisker & Oulcalt, 2005; McPhail et al., 2006; Moore, 2000; Raftery, 2005; Rasmussen & Skinner, 1998; Smartt-Gaither, 1998). In their final report to the Lumina Foundation for Education, Catherine Engstrom and Vincent Tinto (2008) provide the results of their mixed methods study on 19 two- and four-year higher education institutions that were determined to have outstanding learning community models. They found that to address the success of academically under-prepared students who are disproportionately of low-income and underserved backgrounds, colleges must adopt efforts that intentionally restructure the learning environment instead of simply adding a tutoring component or support course that they refer to as the “add-on approach to institutional innovation” (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008, p. 9).

Engstrom and Tinto maintain that to reach students and involve or engage them, especially students who work while in college, the classroom is the place where students meet each other and faculty. Enrollment in a basic skills English class that is linked to a first-year course provides students with a number of intentional opportunities for engagement and connection to the new environment, peers, and faculty. The collaborative methods of developmental education, the goals of a college success course, and the philosophy of learning communities share the common purpose of involving students in

their own learning and development, and aid the cognitive and affective growth of the whole individual (Reynolds-Sundet, 2007). Community colleges who undertake learning community initiatives should hope to improve not only student success outcomes, but faculty rejuvenation, and institutional renewal.

Tinto and Love (1997) note the theme of consistency and continuity of student and faculty interaction in the learning community structure that leads to students' experience of high levels of social and academic support. By focusing on improving the quality of the learning process, not just the content or outcomes, learning community experiences help students make the transition from secondary to higher education (MacGregor et al, 2002; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Dewey (1916 / 1944) saw the interaction and subsequent relationship between learners and between teacher and student as critical in the formation of an educated citizenry. For Dewey and others, education is a social enterprise in which all must have an opportunity to contribute to the process and share in the responsibility of the product (Minkler, 2002; Parker, 1998). It is the experiential component of collaborative learning that allows students to practice the necessary skills for democratic citizenship (Minkler, 2002).

My pilot study research indicated that in many ways, the learning community experience hinges on the relationship between faculty members engaged in such an initiative. If faculty members invest time and effort into building a cohesive, functional relationship and model their commitment to each other and their students, it is likely to have a positive impact on students. Moreover, students will seek to replicate the relationship they see modeled by the faculty and thus, it becomes even more critical for



faculty to be guided by moral purpose when they join together in a learning community and set in motion institutional and cultural change (Fullan, 2001).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Methods**

This chapter provides an overview of the design and methodology of this action research project that examines the learning community experience for students, faculty, and the institution. Included are the role of context, a review of the courses that are linked and an examination of their respective departments, a description of the participants, and the rationale for the methodological approach.

My goal is to initiate and refine an improvement process of supporting faculty who undertake learning community initiatives and thereby effect significant change within my institution. I am doing this work in collaboration with others who already have vested interest in these initiatives at “A” Community College. It is my hope to spread the interest and investment throughout the institution, in the faculty, the administration and the student body (Biello, 2005; Herr & Anderson, 2005). Learning communities have demonstrated significant outcomes for the benefit of students, faculty, and the institution as a whole. As I undertake this project, I am aware of the limitations of my position in the College, as well as how it may assist me as I work with faculty as a peer advocating and supporting their work. I will examine and discuss both the benefits and liabilities of being an insider in the community throughout the paper.

I am undertaking this work with an emancipatory objective. It is my hope to free faculty to expand their work with students and each other beyond the confines of prescribed curriculum and the classroom, and relinquish some of “what is taught” in the interest of “how it is taught” (Swing, 2002). Student and faculty report greater satisfaction, closer connections to each other and their peers, and positive feelings about

the institution as a result of participating in a learning community. This project seeks to effect change in the culture of the institution by growing the number and variety of linked classes in learning community offerings at “A” Community College and thus yield an emancipatory outcome for the institution as well.

### **Research Questions**

This action research project is an examination of the impact of linking a basic skills English course and a college success seminar in a learning community of co-enrolled students at a community college. Throughout the cycles of research, I will seek answers to the following questions:

1. How do students describe their experiences of participating in the ENGL 095 / HUDV 107 learning community?
2. How do faculty members describe their experiences of teaching the ENGL 095 / HUDV 107 learning community?
3. What impact does the relationship between the faculty members have on the learning community experience for students and faculty?
4. What impact does linking the basic skills ENGL 095 and College Success Seminar HUDV 107 have on the curricula and faculty of both courses and what suggestions or recommendations may be offered to “A” Community College with regard to Learning Communities initiatives?
5. What evidence is there throughout the project that my personal characteristics and stated perspectives on leadership and institutional change impact the study and/or its participants?

### **Why Case Study Action Research?**

Action research is conducted by those inside a community who are the experts on the experience, environment, or phenomena being studied. Its goal is to better understand the environment and those impacted by it, and to find methods of improving the experience or set of circumstances to bring about positive, lasting, systemic change (Hinchey, 2008). The iterative cycles of action research are a process of systematic inquiry which include information gathering, analysis, and reflection. This phased approach generates an action plan and subsequent opportunities to clarify issues and work to effect change (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The inquiry-reflection-action cycles provide a framework to assess my leadership in the context of my professional community and also examine the impact of power relationships and position in the College.

Action research dissertations by design augment local knowledge in the setting in which they take place. The work is specific to the culture, the policies, and the populations that are being examined and improved, or altered by the project (Herr & Anderson, 2005). At “A” Community College, learning community initiatives have been attempted by just a few faculty members who spontaneously linked their courses with the objective of enlivening their curriculum, bridging skills and knowledge from one discipline to the other, and reaching students in novel ways. My work on this project reveals numerous benefits for faculty and students engaged in learning communities, and includes not only an examination of the experience, but also the formation of an institutional ad-hoc committee designed to expand learning community offerings at “A” Community College and implement institutional practices to support the efforts.

Learning communities in the community college setting are not only designed to assist students and faculty as they build relationships and community in the classroom, but may increase the benefit to the greater community because of the citizenship skills and democratic underpinnings of cooperative and collaborative education that take place when curriculum and pedagogy are truly linked. I am hopeful that by leading several members of the College in this project and recruiting a senior academic leader in the effort, the institution will ultimately see gains in student engagement, satisfaction, and retention and faculty engagement and satisfaction as have other community colleges who implement learning community programs.

There is potential for public knowledge to emerge from this action research dissertation that is applicable to other settings (Herr & Anderson, 2005). While community colleges throughout “A” Community College’s state differ dramatically in political, leadership, and organizational structure, the mission of the comprehensive community college, to provide access and opportunity to higher education in a specific geographic region, is one that is fairly consistent nationally. The principles of learning communities and the benefits for faculty, students, and the institution are applicable from one setting to another. The structure and process for scheduling, marketing, and enrolling learning community courses, and for supporting the faculty and students which commit to them, varies from one community college to the next. Yet, certain human elements transcend the context of this project: building relationship; supporting one another’s personal and professional development; and helping students, especially first generation, disadvantaged, or underprepared students, transition successfully into higher education; all that is implicated is, in fact, tied to the mission of our institutions.

**Legitimacy of action research.** The quality of an action research project is supported by the trustworthiness of the project's design, the data collected, and its analysis (Hinchey, 2008). In this project I employ triangulation to lend strength to my findings with the use of multiple sources of data: field notes, personal journal entries and reflections, and correspondence logs, along with faculty interviews, and student questionnaires and survey instruments. I examine my journal entries and reflections for personal biases, and share my transcribed interviews with the individuals whose words and perceptions I record. A powerful component of action research is the ongoing analysis of each cycle and how subsequent cycles are shaped or altered given the findings of previous work. The deep reflective nature of action research requires a willingness to validate the experiences of all those involved in the project and potentially change direction if the results of any of the cycles indicate.

**Case study.** Case studies have been employed by educational researchers to examine the efficacy and impact of basic skills learning communities at community colleges. A case study is an in-depth exploration of a phenomena based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2003). The researcher is charged with thoroughly exploring a program, activity, or process by using a variety of data and collection procedures. Case studies can provide the researcher a more intimate viewpoint of the participants as the phenomena is examined from multiple perspectives and the participants are involved in the direction of the work. In this case study, I examine and reflect on my experiences and those of the students enrolled in linked courses, the faculty members who teach them, and other members of the college invested in learning community initiatives.

This case study is deemed instrumental as it examines both the students' and faculty members' views of their experiences in a paired, basic skills, learning community (Creswell, 2002; Faga, 2006). In examining the specific context, individuals, and set of circumstances in an action research case study, all participants including me, the primary researcher, are encouraged to reflect on their experience, tell their story, and share their insight to bring about change that will improve their own and other's future condition (Herr & Anderson, 2005, Hinchey, 2008). This action research case study is intended to effect change "for me, for us, and for them" (Reason & Marshall, 2001, as quoted in Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 69). These qualities of the change project are consistent with the social justice mission of the community college, and my personal platform of servant leadership.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The literature indicates that both quantitative and qualitative methods have been utilized in learning community case study research from seminal projects to contemporary, national studies (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Ketcheson & Levine, 1999; Tinto, 1987; Tinto & Love, 1987). Quantitative methods can be used in determining retention rates and academic achievement, but to unearth students' perceptions, attitudes, and affective impressions of their experience, qualitative methods are most effective. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) used quantitative survey instruments to determine to what degree participation in a learning community enhanced student success and the qualitative case study approach to shed light on why it is that such communities enhance student success. Though distinct, the methodologies were used in tandem to produce a comprehensive picture of, not only the success of students, but also the experiences that

contribute to the students' success. An array of assessment techniques have been used to discover whether or not participation in a learning community affects retention, success, student and faculty engagement, and satisfaction.

Comparative survey methods for students in linked and non-linked courses along with qualitative interviews and classroom observations yield a better understanding of student to faculty, student to student, and faculty to faculty interactions. The quantitative results provide a summative explanation of student success, but the heart of any learning community program is in the collection and analysis of qualitative data (Moore, 2000).

Analysis of qualitative data is the primary source of support for the direction of future cycles in this project. Insight into my evolving leadership and the recommendations that are made to the institution at the conclusion of the research will be sought in data gleaned from interviews, field notes, journaling, and informal surveys and discussions. Such methods offer a window into student and faculty perceptions of their linked-class experiences, changes in the broader institution, and the role of positional power at "A" Community College. Further, it is more likely that qualitative data will either support or refute if my objectives of social justice and personal platform of servant leadership, are evidenced through fostering inclusion and support for the work of others.

### **Study Site**

"A" Community College has prided itself on a long history of innovation in student development and student-centered pedagogy, yet has actually failed to keep pace with current trends in student engagement and retention. "A" Community College develops a strategic planning matrix annually, and also in three-year cycles, that articulates and prioritizes the College's goals and objectives across a number of domains,



including managing growth, instructional and support initiatives, leadership development, and community involvement. The College typically grants greater consideration to budget requests from departments that include Matrix items in their annual plans, and states in this public document, a commitment to the support of initiatives that are tied to

**Matrix objectives.** The current strategic planning matrix (“A” Community College, Strategic Planning Matrix, 2008 – 2010) positions two areas of student development and retention as top institutional priorities: the College Success Seminar, and learning communities. Moreover, the institution is examining its student development model as it struggles with issues of physical and instructional capacity, and the dissonance between the rhetoric and the reality of student services and student needs. In order to meet the demands of a growing first-time, full-time, traditional-aged student body, “A” Community College needs to find more effective ways of delivering a first-year experience like the College Success course (HUDV 107), or a complementary array of offerings designed to meet similar goals. The research I undertake in this project may help to shape the future curriculum or instructional design of the College Success class to better meet the needs of the student population and institute learning communities as part of the academic culture at “A” Community College.

**The branch campus.** One of “A” Community College’s locations was granted branch campus status by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in 2009. In preparation for that designation, the senior academic leadership team began assigning new faculty hires in the preceding years to the branch campus on a full time basis. Such an assignment can be an isolating experience for a junior faculty member; they are separated from their department, isolated from colleagues, and cutoff from the activity

and opportunity that exist in the broader community of the campus. It is difficult for new faculty to become part of the culture, known to the community, and involved in life beyond the classroom when they teach their full load at a remote location. Promotion is often reliant on visibility and establishing a presence and connections within the institution: attendance at campus meetings and events, service on college-wide committees and in the collegial governance structure, and forming relationships with peers, colleagues, and mentors, all promote the new hire's retention in the College.

The branch campus of "A" Community College is located in a region of the county that is polarized economically. The borough of the region is the older, somewhat more urban and depressed, lower-socioeconomic hub. There is a significant immigrant population from Central and South America, and Mexico, and many non-native, English-speaking residents. The township on the other hand, is suburban and characterized by material wealth, which in some cases is significant. The portion of the population that sends its students to the branch campus of "A" Community College largely hails from the township. While this demographic has economic means, my experience in working with the students and their families is that the family typically has little social or cultural capital, and limited understanding of the value of higher education except for the resultant career path it may yield over not having a college degree. It is largely a White community, with mostly central or eastern European ethnic roots, and their residency in the region is recent. Most families have migrated south from the boroughs of New York City over the past 20 years.

My impressions of the student demographics were confirmed in data collected by the Director of Student Services for the Higher Education Centers and the Branch

Campus, and in the anecdotal information shared by the Student Services Generalist at the branch campus, who works closely with the population (personal electronic correspondence, March 2010 and personal journals, December, 2008, December 2009). My perceptions were gleaned in the collection of data from the ENGL 095 / HUDV 107 learning community at the branch campus, as well as counseling students and their families from the region in sessions at both the branch campus and in my main campus office (classroom observations, fall 2009; personal correspondence, March 2010; faculty interviews, fall 2008, fall 2009; various journal entries, 2008 – 2010).

This student body is largely a traditional-aged, full-time, day-time population, who would prefer to take all of their classes at the Branch Campus, and many do (personal communication, Director of Student Services, Higher Education Centers and Branch Campus, March 2010). They are “high need” students developmentally, not just in academic preparedness, but emotionally, requiring regular, consistent student support services and direction. They are typically not autonomous and are often first-generation college students, whose families readily admit a lack of knowledge and sophistication about higher education and its requirements (personal correspondence, March 2010; journal entries, fall 2008, fall 2009, spring 2010). While the main campus is little more than twenty minutes from the branch campus, and has a wide array of supportive services and activities, these students prefer the intimacy, size, and immediate access to attention afforded in the branch campus setting.

“A” Community College holds group registration sessions each spring in which the county’s high school students come to the main campus on a day designated exclusively for their school. Students are given a brief introduction to the College,

receive their basic skills test scores, and then select fall term classes in the company of their high school friends. Parents are not permitted to join them for the day and the students are separated into groups by academic major, however many choose to stay with friends even if their majors differ. The convergence of the dominant student characteristics (dependent and a desire to remain close to home) and the conditions under which they register for their first semester, promote the likelihood of replicating the high school experience and creating homogenous groups in the classroom environment at the branch campus.

### **Participants**

The sample construction is a sample of convenience, and a purposeful choice. My initial focus on student satisfaction and success made the sections at the branch campus a manageable and contained sample to track. The branch campus that is home to the ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 learning community studied in cycles I and II provided a smaller, contained environment through which to structure the project initially. There is a full range of student services offered at the campus, and because of its size (approximately 1,700 students each semester) and the intimacy of staffing, registration efforts such as enrolling a set of linked courses, are more controllable than at the main campus where there are over 16,000 students, and thousand plus course sections in which they enroll. The learning community sections were not filled to capacity during the early registration efforts with the area high school, but were fully enrolled at sixteen students before the beginning of both the fall 2008 and 2009 terms.

As the project has evolved beyond the branch campus learning community sections, the participants include not only the linked and non-linked classes of students in

ENGL 095 in the fall 2008 and fall 2009 terms, and the three faculty members who taught the linked classes, but also the cohort of faculty members who will be teaching a learning community in fall 2010, the academic division dean who has become a campus advocate for the initiatives, and me.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

This study involves minimal risk to participants. All possible measures were taken to assure participants of confidentiality and anonymity. I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearance from “A” Community College. Because aggregate grade data were used in Cycle I, students’ identities were unknown and I did not obtain any information that linked individual students to their grades. Student survey instruments were anonymous as students were not required to provide their name or any personally identifying information. A statement of confidentiality accompanied the instrument and participants acknowledged their consent to participate in the study by completing the survey.

I provided faculty participants with a statement of confidentiality and consent forms which they signed at a private meeting. The interviewees were also provided with a statement of confidentiality and acknowledged their consent to participate by answering the interview questions. Data will be maintained in a secure, locked cabinet in my personal residence, and the faculty members who participated in interviews took part in a member-checking process to assure accuracy of information and the protection of their personal privacy.

## **Components of the Action Research Study**

The following is a schedule of intended research cycles from fall 2008 through fall 2010:

**Cycle I.** In the fall of Fall 2008 I administered a questionnaire to linked and non-linked cohorts of students on their perceptions of engagement in the ENGL 095 course; I compared results using descriptive statistics methods and statistical software. I also entering scores on the writing portion of the college's basic skills assessment and then examined end-of- semester grades in ENGL 095 for the cohorts. I compared both sets of data for linked versus non-linked sections of ENGL 095 using descriptive statistics and statistical software. I then coded and analyzed a faculty-constructed instrument that was administered by faculty to learning community students at end of term.

Early in the spring of 2009 I interviewed the ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 faculty to explore the faculty experience, perceptions of their own and their students' engagement and satisfaction in the linked courses. I also scheduled and observed meetings for learning community faculty as they discussed the experience from the fall term and changes to the curriculum design for the next academic year, as well as the change in faculty assignment. I transcribed, coded, and analyzed the field observations using qualitative research methods.

I reflected on the results and processes of the research in Cycle I to determine additional or altered action in the next cycles of research. I assessed institutional factors connected to the project to date and examined correspondence, journal entries, and meeting notes for indicators of my leadership.

**Cycle II.** During the spring 2009, while we were not running basic skills and college success seminars, I formed an ad hoc committee comprised of many members of the college community to address procedural challenges faced by faculty and students in the scheduling, registration, and enrollment of learning communities. These challenges were discovered initially in my pilot research and had persisted in Cycle I. I involved a senior academic leader with positional power to assist in expanding the initiatives, lend credibility to the effort, and champion learning communities among the College's senior-level leadership.

In summer of 2009 I attended a 2-day regional learning community workshop with a team of individuals, from various departments at "A" Community College, to gather tools, information, and energy for growing and developing learning communities at our institution. I recorded reflections of my personal experience at the conference, and with my colleagues who attended, which led to an increased awareness of positional power and its value.

**Cycle III.** In Fall 2009 I turned my attention back to the faculty relationship as a new partnership was in place at the branch campus. I observed faculty meetings as they discussed their cohort and noted communication and engagement. I assisted faculty in planning and implementing a campus visit for their students, and participated in some of the day's events. I recorded field notes that day and reflected on the faculty interaction and student interaction, and coded and analyzed the results.

Given the impact of the previous faculty members' on students and their satisfaction with the learning community experience, I was most interested in discovering this cohort of students' perception of the learning community, and the faculty's thoughts

at the end of the semester. I conducted a group discussion in the ENGL 095 class at the end of the fall 2009 term, interviewed the two faculty members, and an individual student. All field notes, interviews, personal communication, and journal entries were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Reflections and communication related to my leadership was also coded and analyzed.

**Cycle IV.** Early in the spring term of 2010 I met with learning community faculty pairs from previous fall terms (2007, 2008, and 2009) to request their participation in a large-scale workshop for the “A” Community College faculty (modeled after the regional conference attended in summer 2009). I sought their thinking and input on the structure of the program we would present to our colleagues. I recorded field notes of the meetings, and journal entries of my reflections on these discussions. We presented the how and why of learning communities; spotlighted the work of those who taught linked sections; and elicited interest and enthusiasm in the broader college. I recorded field notes from this large-scale meeting and reflected on the event and subsequent debriefing, in journal entries. All field notes and reflections were coded and analyzed. The process provided a window into the institutional culture of “A” community college, and the event was designed to grow interest in the broader college community for additional learning community links and faculty partnerships.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Background of “A” Community College and Learning Communities**

#### **Pilot Study: The Beginnings of Change**

Learning communities as linked courses in which students enroll as a cohort and faculty work collaboratively on merging content and assessment of learning outcomes, originated in the English department of “A” Community College. My pilot cycles of research examined the link between an English composition class and an environmental science course that has been offered successfully each semester for the past three years. The concept had been spoken about in the College-wide basic skills committee during my tenure as co-chair from 2005 – 2007. Faculty members from various academic disciplines were invited by my co-chair and I to express the gaps they saw in students’ preparation for their courses. The faculty indicated concern for students’ inability to make connections between disparate content and apply skills from one class to another (journal reflections, spring, 2009; fall, 2010). Yet to date, only one English faculty member had elected to try this technique, as she had done years earlier with online learning and course delivery.

The idea was beginning to gather attention among the faculty and administration and in the spring of 2007, I wrote and received an institutional grant to research learning community initiatives in the community college setting. The initial inquiries prompted further exploration of the linked English and environmental science course that at the time was in its second semester of enrollment, a literature review on the topic, and a desire to educate the college faculty and administration on the value of these initiatives. The student outcomes of satisfaction, retention, and academic achievement that result

from participation in a learning community were appealing and I was certain they would capture the interest of senior administration. I began my campaign to create a sense of urgency and to make learning communities a part of the culture at “A” Community College and to build a coalition of stakeholders to help spread the word (Kotter, 1996).

For the spring 2008 faculty day assembly, I was invited by the then-Chair of the College-wide Basic Skills Committee to be part of a panel discussion on characteristics of basic skills students and to address the benefits of learning communities that I had garnered from my research. I presented the information in an entertaining “top-10 list” style, much like a well-known, late-night television program and recaptured the audience’s waning attention. In addition, the English professor S, who took the lead in linking her course with the environmental science class, presented a breakout session later in the day on her experience and the student retention and success outcomes in her class. Her science partner was on-location in Belize and participated in the session remotely. It was well-attended and elicited excitement. Comments from colleagues over the next several days indicated not only enjoyment of the presentations, but interest in the topic for their own work with students.

### **HUDV 107: The College Success Seminar and the Student Development Division**

The HUDV 107 course has been listed in “A” Community College’s catalog since the mid-1970s as a 1-credit offering entitled “Introduction to Personal Growth” (“A” Community College, 1974 – 1976 Catalog). From the course description, its goals were akin to the contemporary “College Success Seminar” of the same course code: values clarification, goal setting, time management, learning styles, study skills and test-taking, establishing adult relationships, etc. In 2000, the course title changed to Freshman

Seminar (“A” Community College, 2000 Catalog), but retained the course code, credit value, and a similar description. In 2005, the title changed to the present “College Success Seminar” (“A” Community College, 2005 – 2006 Catalog). At that time the Student Development Division, whose faculty are counselors, pushed for mandating the course and raising the credit value from one to three.

Two counseling colleagues and I presented our proposed changes to the course along with trends and research from the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition to the Academic Standards Committee of the collegial governance system, from whom all course revisions must be approved. Strong opposition was voiced by a small group of faculty who rallied a contingent of students to support their platform and demonstrate with placards at a College-wide governance forum. Photos were taken for the student newspaper, students claimed mandated tuition and fees were prohibitive and exploitive, and the issue died with a defeated vote. The course name, syllabus, structure, and learning outcomes were changed, the credit value remained at one, and the HUDV 107 continues to be strongly recommended by counselors for first-time, full-time students, but not required. In fact, as the student population has grown exponentially in recent years, mandating the class for all first-time, full-time students creates a host of scheduling and staffing challenges for the Student Development Division and the College.

Since 2005 there has been growing appreciation among the faculty for the College Success Seminar and its value for the student population and the broader college community (personal journal entry, April 2008). Faculty members note the deficits they see in their students’ academic and life skills, particularly time management and critical

thinking (pilot study field notes, June, 2008). They recognize the growing gap between a student's expectation of their college experience and the college's expectation of that student. They remark on students' enculturation as a result of taking the course, and the perceived impact it has on classroom behavior and preparedness. However, the counseling faculty has also expressed concern about the course being viewed as a panacea – expected to address all manner of student need in just an hour and a half each week, for ten weeks.

The Division has managed to increase the number of sections offered each academic year and currently enrolls approximately one third of the annual incoming class of first-time, full-time students. The Division has relied on interested, committed, enthusiastic faculty members to deliver the course and does not require all Student Development faculty members to teach it. Instead it has recruited and trained faculty and student affairs administrators from other departments in the college as adjuncts. Student Affairs and Academic Affairs leaders have both verbalized support for the potential outcomes and impact the HUDV 107 course may have on the student body and the institution, yet have not committed the resources necessary to make the promise of the course's deliverables a reality. Each fall faculty members teaching back-to-back sections scramble from one end of campus to another to meet classes that have been scheduled in different buildings 15-minutes apart. They advocate for access to adequate computer labs to introduce students to the online resources needed to register, access grades, plan their academic program, and find information about transfer and career planning. Neither the leadership of the Division nor the leadership of the College has demonstrated a true commitment to the value of the course, its faculty, or ultimately, its students.

The incoming traditional student population has not embraced the value of the College Success Seminar either. The Student Development Division consistently fills over 35 sections of the HUDV 107 class each fall term, yet the attrition rate has been higher than the college average, with students dropping in the initial weeks of the term (“A” Community College, Office of Planning Assessment and Research, personal communication). The FYE listserv recounts numerous experiences of instructors who grapple with student attrition because the First Year Experience course is not taken seriously by students (National Resource Center for The First Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2008). Scholars in the First Year Experience literature indicate that students are more likely to take the course seriously if it is assigned a higher credit value (three is better than two, two is better than one), and if it is linked to another course as part of a learning community, or connected to the students’ program of study (Swing, 2002; J. Gardner, personal communication, March, 2010).

In 2008, the President of “A” Community College wrote a white paper that called for an examination of the Student Development model and how its implementation has evolved over time to meet changing student demographics. He then formed the Commission on Student Development (COSD) and appointed members of the administration and faculty to research the history and evolution of the Student Development model and Division, define deficits, and develop recommendations for programmatic and policy changes. I served on the COSD and with my colleagues, formulated recommendations to move the College forward in efficient and effective ways of meeting students’ developmental academic, career, transfer, and personal needs. The time was right to review not only the HUDV 107, College Success Seminar course, but to

develop and implement a comprehensive model of First-Year programming that would support students' transition into college, and also lend greater validity to the course by linking it with academic content classes.

### **ENGL 095: Fundamentals of Writing and the English and Reading Division**

At "A" Community College, nearly 80% of incoming students need some basic skills coursework in reading, writing or mathematics ("A" Community College, Office of Planning Assessment and Research). There are nearly one hundred sections of ENGL 095 scheduled for the fall term 2010, a figure that has grown nearly 20% since 2005 ("A" community college master schedules fall 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). The course is designed to improve students' mechanics, organization, and focus of written expression. It is assigned a 4-credit value and is delivered in a face-to-face classroom environment. Students register for this course based on their scores on the basic skills placement test they take when they first apply to the College. Students are given a diagnostic essay the first class meeting to confirm their placement; it is rare that a student is moved into a college-level class based on the in-class essay.

Writing courses at "A" Community College are typically offered in a three-hour time block once a week. Students are expected to schedule time in the writing lab on their own to proofread, edit, and refine their writing. It is part of the department's philosophy to schedule the classes in a block so that students have time to engage in the writing process in class, and then gather in small groups to review each other's work. This 'work-shopping' technique is a cornerstone of the department's approach and faculty members use it in ways that fit their own personality and teaching style (personal communication, English Department Chairperson, spring 2010). For example, some have students read

each other's work in a group of three or four and offer constructive criticism and suggestions to the writer. Others have students read each other's work and not comment, but make internal comparisons to their own work while they note differences in focus, mechanics, and organization.

At least one faculty member who embraces this method indicated the fragility of the basic skills English student (personal communication, spring, 2010), a sentiment voiced by other English faculty members I encountered while serving on the College's Basic Skills Committee from 2001 – 2006. Community college students whose test scores indicate a need for basic skills writing coursework may feel insecure about their abilities and reticent to share their work. Faculty members support these students as they express ideas and experiences in written form, and customize their own responses to students' work so that the student is encouraged to write more and write better. Peer criticism can hamper an anxious student and reinforce their reticence in writing. However, being with peers in a small group and reading one another's work can also create intimacy and the potential for vulnerability; if the experience is a positive and reinforcing one, students report increased comfort in the company of their peers and greater confidence in their work (student self-reports, December, 2008).

Unlike reading and mathematics, which have multiple levels of remediation based upon a range of placement scores, there is only one level of basic skills English at "A" Community College. Students' test scores that are not sufficient to take a college composition class, take ENGL 095 regardless of where their scores are in the range. There is tremendous variability in skill level in the English 095 classroom. Classes that are offered at a remote location tend to draw students from the immediate region and are

further influenced by socioeconomic and cultural factors. Moreover, for traditional-aged students who elect to take classes closer to home, there is the danger of replicating high school dynamics in a facility that may prove far more homogenous than the main campus which attracts students from a broader geographic area and all walks of life. The danger exists for both students who delay the opportunity to remake themselves as college students and develop a new group of friends and classmates, as well as for faculty who may be battling against entrenched patterns of behavior and preexisting group dynamics.

### **ENGL 095 / HUDV 107: The First Link**

The idea for linking sections of ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 arose from two junior faculty members who were hired specifically for assignment to the branch campus. The English instructor and the Student Development Specialist (counselor) are both natives of the county, mothers of young children, vibrant, energetic, and attractive women in their early thirties. They share many physical and personal characteristics. The two found a close connection in their early days at the branch campus and shared anecdotes and frustrations from their classes with each other. The English instructor, M, related that she could not find topics that would engage her students in the writing process. She didn't feel like they 'cared' for anything about which they wrote. Similarly, G who taught the HUDV 107 course lamented the lack of value students assigned to the class, how difficult it was to maintain their interest and complete the assignments when they thought they knew everything they needed to know about being a student. Separation from their own academic divisions supported this connection between the faculty members, as they did not have colleagues from their own department on hand to whom they could turn for support.



When the two began to discuss the content of the HUDV course, M grew excited and enthused about the topics as writing prompts for her students (faculty interviews, 2008; faculty meetings, spring 2010). G similarly felt that tying her course's content to assignments students were required to produce for their English class, would lend it more value and credibility in the eyes of the student and they would have the opportunity to spend more time reflecting on the resources, and ideas that formed the basis of the College Success Course. The two pitched their plan to their respective divisions, brought me into the conversation because of my known interest and prior work on learning communities, and scheduled the first linked sections of ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 at the branch campus in the fall of 2008.

The primary mode of data collection and analysis for Cycle I was qualitative, and included faculty interviews and observations, student survey responses, correspondence, course syllabi, and my journal entries. In addition, student placement scores and subsequent final grade data were analyzed using quantitative methods to potentially lend more power to the impact of learning communities on student retention, success, and satisfaction. The nature of action research involves an evolution of approaches to studying the phenomena of interest (Creswell, 2003). Similar methods were employed in other cycles of this project, as the faculty members in the learning community and I determined how best to analyze, examine, and plan the work we carried out. Each cycle of research had its own design, methods of analysis, and implications.

## Chapter 6

### The First Cycle and the Power of the Pairing

In this first cycle of research I was most interested in how the participants were experiencing the learning community. How did faculty members describe the experience of teaching in a learning community, and what indicators of student engagement and satisfaction did they note in linked classes? How did students in a linked course rate their own engagement and connection to students, faculty, and other college personnel when compared to those in non-linked sections of ENGL 095? Were students more successful in a section of ENGL 095 that is linked with HUDV 107 than those enrolled in a non-linked section of ENGL 095? Finally, what evidence of my leadership was there in this project?

Basic skills students at community colleges are frequently first generation college students with limited social capital and occasionally, even fewer social supports and life skills (Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001). In the learning community they build relationships with each other as they work on reaching mutual goals and persisting in their educational endeavors. For some, the commitments of time and energy are neither supported nor understood by family, friends, and loved ones who have not attended college. Students provide each other with needed academic, social, and emotional resources. Faculty shared illustrative examples of the relationships students built among their peers in the learning community classrooms and spoke of the growing sophistication of students' engagement with the content in their courses. Such testimonials resonate deeply with my view of the community college mission and are supported in the literature as students are known to be better able to make intellectual connections, embrace

complexity, and learn collaboratively as a result of their learning community experience (Gabelnick, et. al., 1990).

The participants in Cycle I were best equipped to answer the questions asked. The two faculty members whose primary assignment is to the branch campus of “A” Community College became the principal participants in the study. They are each untenured and in their third year at the College; both taught linked and non-linked sections of their respective courses in the fall 2008. As G, M, and I worked together the following spring term (2009) to discuss the experience of the learning community and make changes for the fall 2009 link, we were joined by F who planned to teach the linked HUDV 107 class in fall 2009 while G is on maternity leave. M will remain the instructor for the ENGL 095 class. F will be tenured at the end of the spring term and will assume G’s full-time assignment at the branch campus by providing counseling services and teaching additional sections there. The site is geographically desirable for F as he lives in a region that is distant and west of the main campus. F is also in his early thirties, a native of the county, and single. The relationship between F and G who are colleagues in the same department as me, is easy, companionable and close, yet professional. M and F had little contact before this project, as have M and I.

The participants also included two cohorts of first-semester students, enrolled in linked and non-linked sections of ENGL 095. The course has a capacity of sixteen students who are typically first-time, full-time, recent high school graduates from surrounding communities. The students in the learning community received correspondence about how the courses will connect with each other and how faculty will work as a team with them. The students in non-linked sections of the ENGL 095 received

the standard syllabus for the course and no integration or collaboration with counseling. Finally, my participation in the research included observation of the faculty in their planning and collaboration meetings, interviewing them with regard to their experiences and relationships in the learning community, and assessment of student perceptions of their own success and satisfaction in their ENGL 095 class. I further reflected on the change in myself, my position within the college community, my relationships with these faculty members, and the administrators and staff with whom I work.

The procedures and methods for gathering data for this cycle stem from my pilot study of the only other learning community at “A” Community College in which an environmental science course (ENVR 105) was linked with a college-level English course (ENGL 122). I developed the faculty interview protocol for this project (Appendix A) from prompts that I field-tested with those faculty members. The classroom observations from that fieldwork also informed the student survey questions (Appendix B), as did Engstrom and Tinto’s instrument (2008) which was modeled on the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The CCSSE offers reference to national data on community college students’ perceptions of engagement with their classmates, faculty, the college, and support personnel.

The community college in this study scored lower than its peers on the active and collaborative learning and students’ engagement section of the CCSSE. “A” Community College’s faculty and administration have a high regard for the innovative and student development practices that take place within the institution. This self-perception stems from the College’s early years as a leader in emergent practices on the community college scene. It is possible that data from this project may supply evidence to develop

strategies for improving the college's CCSSE score, provide support for additional learning community initiatives, and suggest changes to the HUDV 107, College Success Seminar curriculum. Student engagement is linked to retention and success, and for the busy and fractured community college student in particular, engagement must occur in the classroom as we have limited opportunities to connect students to the College, the faculty, and each other elsewhere (Astin, 1999; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto & Love, 1997).

The linked sections of ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 at the branch campus were fully enrolled at the capacity of 16 students in fall 2008. Enrollment of a true student cohort in the link proved a challenge as "A" Community College's registration system was not programmed to prohibit a student from dropping one course but not the other. The learning community was well-enrolled during the early registration efforts for the high school students in the spring, but problems ensued when a few students dropped the HUDV course, but not the ENGL 095 course or tested out of ENGL 095 and remained in the HUDV course. Over the summer, after numerous electronic communications between me, the teaching faculty, administrators in the English and Reading division, the Counseling division, and the Registrar's office, we were finally able to ensure the enrollment of a single cohort of students in both sections.

M checked the enrollment numbers regularly in both classes and although we had addressed some of the registration issues by tightening up the co-requisite system which compelled students to register for both sections, we had the uneven drop issue. On occasion, M's frustration was evident when she emailed her Dean, me, and her Division Administrator, "Urrggh! We have uneven enrollment again! How is this happening? This

kind of issue makes the process so much more stressful than teaching a regular class” (personal communication, summer 2008). Late in the summer when we finally got it right, both M and G compared their rosters for a single cohort in their sections, and sent a letter to the students in their learning community introducing themselves, explaining the concept of a learning community, and how the courses would be structured (Appendix D).

The retention rate was 100% for the semester (institutional data reporting, spring 2009). The faculty members, M and G spent many hours throughout the semester blending their assignments and communicating about individual student’s progress and needs (field notes, January, 2009). They regularly met in the branch campus Student Success Center, a common gathering place for students to study, access computers, and work with professional learning assistants and other campus personnel (field notes, January, 2009; faculty interviews, May, 2009). The faculty members and I did not meet together during the semester and had little contact once the sections were fully enrolled and underway. At that point, my focus was on student outcomes; their retention, success, and engagement. I saw my involvement with faculty as limited to helping them navigate the institutional waters as they were enrolling an appropriate cohort of students in their classes and then assessing the impact of the learning community when the semester was over.

### **Student Ratings of Engagement**

At the conclusion of the fall term 2008, I was interested in how the students in the learning community felt and performed as compared to students in non-linked sections of ENGL 095. Specifically, I wanted to know if they felt more connected to their peers, their

professors, and the College itself in their English class than they felt in other classes that first semester. I also wanted to know if they completed the class and what grade they received. Students successfully completed if they earned a grade of “C” or better. According to Hinchey, “the assumed relationship between grades and engagement is hardly reliable” (2008, p.75), yet students who passed the course with a grade of “C” have been retained to the course completion, and have had more opportunities for engagement with fellow students and faculty than those who withdrew. Moreover, a grade of “F” in a first-semester basic skills class can also be indicative of a student who ceased to attend but not complete the appropriate actions to receive a withdrawal (“W”) instead.

When the fall 2008 academic term was drawing to a close, I asked M to administer a survey (Appendix B) to students in two sections of her ENGL 095 class. M gave surveys to students in her linked section at the branch campus and a non-linked section at the main campus. Another English faculty member administered the survey to her non-linked section at the branch campus as well. Students in the non-linked sections may have been simultaneously enrolled in an HUDV 107 course, but it was not intentionally linked with their ENGL 095 course.

The survey was administered two weeks before the end of the term, but after the withdrawal date. More student instruments were returned from the learning communities section of ENGL 095 than were returned from either of the other two sections of ENGL 095 (13 from 069RF, the linked section, 10 from 065RL, the section M taught at the main campus, and 8 from 054RF, taught by a colleague of M at the branch campus). Persistence rates are difficult to measure without directly questioning the faculty

regarding student attendance. Students fail to complete the necessary procedure to withdraw but instead stop attending and earning a grade of “F.” That more students were present to complete the survey at the end of the term is indicative of the higher retention rate for the learning community section of ENGL 095 and possibly worth further exploration. Moreover, G and M reported a 100% retention rate, meaning each student continued attending both classes until the end of the term.

I developed the survey from my pilot study to compare students’ perceived level of engagement in this course. I calculated an independent sample *t* test comparing the mean response of students in the linked section of ENGL 095 to the mean response of students in non-linked sections of ENGL 095. Students were asked to rate their level of engagement, on a seven-point scale, with classmates, other students in the college, their ENGL faculty member, and support staff. No significant difference between the groups was found for any of the variables between student levels of engagement with classmates ( $t(19) = .194, p > .05$ ), instructors ( $t(19) = 1.478, p > .05$ ), support staff ( $t(19) = 1.159, p > .05$ ) and other students in the College ( $t(19) = .630, p > .05$ ).



Table 1

*Student Ratings of Relationships in Linked ENGL 095 / HUDV 107 Classes*

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Class - mates	Equal variances assumed	6.514	.019	.194	19	.848	.09615	.49646	-0.94296	1.13527
	Equal variances not assumed			.168	9.540	.870	.09615	.57105	-1.18459	1.37690
Others	Equal variances assumed	3.933	.062	.630	19	.536	.57692	.91584	-1.33995	2.49379
	Equal variances not assumed			.556	9.958	.591	.57692	1.03839	-1.73807	2.89192
Instructors	Equal variances assumed	.047	.831	-1.478	19	.156	-.47115	.31887	-1.13855	.19624
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.449	14.050	.169	-.47115	.32509	-1.16818	.22587
Support	Equal variances assumed	8.993	.007	1.159	19	.261	1.00000	.86251	-.80526	2.80526
	Equal variances not assumed			.979	8.769	.354	1.00000	1.02174	-1.32067	3.32067

Faculty developed and administered their own assessment instrument to students in the learning community to seek feedback on their work and the course content, and to examine students' satisfaction with the experience. Questions were open-ended and the

majority of students wrote a line or two for each inquiry. As I read the students' responses I was struck by the importance of relationship in the students' comments (journal entry, spring, 2009). Students indicated that they liked seeing the faculty members in each other's company outside of class, they enjoyed how people in the class looked out for one another, and they were under the impression that they were doing one assignment for two courses. One student remarked: "I got to know my classmates better; HUDV helped all of us A LOT" (faculty-developed student survey, fall 2008). A pattern pertaining to getting to know classmates and developing a degree of comfort with them emerged as another student is quoted with the following observation: "You had a chance to conversate [sic] and get to know the other students better" (faculty-developed student survey, fall 2008).

M and G validated the students' comments and have frequently told the following story during our subsequent promotional work with other faculty members and the administration. Mid-way through the semester as the ENGL 095 class was ending and just before the beginning of the HUDV class (which were scheduled back-to-back with a 15-minute break in between), the students began to discuss what classes they were going to take in the next semester. The assignment for the HUDV class that week was to produce an academic plan and determine specific courses for future semesters. A male student said casually to the group that he was not returning to college next semester – he was going to join the armed services instead. His classmates responded with expressed concern for his well-being as they tried to convince him to stay in school and get a degree. At the time, the United States was regularly deploying tens of thousands of soldiers to areas of unrest. The students' reactions and concern were valid. Several made

pleas for their classmate's safety and related how they had a brother, or a sister, or an aunt, or neighbor, or cousin, or some acquaintance or another, who was in combat, had seen action, or had lost his or her life (field notes, spring 2009; summer 2009, fall 2009; spring 2010).

Great emotion was shared by the faculty as they spoke about individual students and how classmates would rally around one or another to help whoever needed support on a particular day (field notes, spring 2009; faculty interviews, 2009; journal entries, spring, 2009). As diverse as the group of students in the learning community was, both G and M concurred that the students formed bonds, really took care of one another, and encouraged each other to persist (faculty interviews, May 2009). They noted that class scheduling and the relationships students formed contributed to students' persistence and success (field notes, spring 2009; faculty interviews, May 2009). Back-to-back time blocks for the schedule of the classes made it easier for students to come to attend both and not miss one or the other class. Faculty related another anecdote from their class in which a group of students were chatting about one who was missing on a particular day. After witnessing a few students texting, the faculty member saw the missing student come breathlessly through the door (field notes, spring 2009). This example of active, demonstrated, concern for a classmate is illustrative of the mutual support students developed in the learning community. That type of behavior is not typically noted in non-linked sections of these classes (faculty interview, May 2009).

Student comments indicated a perception that the work load in the learning community was lighter than it would have been had the classes not been combined. One student summed it up this way: "Less work, great teachers, moves at a good speed"

(faculty-developed, student survey, fall 2008). While faculty recognize this perception of their students, they actually indicated the opposite, and saw students in the learning community interacting with the curriculum and material in more sophisticated ways than the stand-alone sections of each course: “I get a lot more out of the learning community students, than the stand-alone sections” and, “I see students developing their thoughts more fully and thinking critically about the topic from different perspectives” (faculty interviews, May 2009). However, student comments speak to their view of receiving 2-for-1 coursework: “One thing that was beneficial was the assignments being combined; one assignment that you worked on in both classes” (faculty-developed student survey, fall 2008).

While true that faculty coordinated the curriculum to align the content covered in each class, and on occasion students completed one assignment for both classes, students were typically required to perform different tasks with the material (field notes, spring 2009). For example, students completed a personality-type assessment and an interest inventory for their College Success Course, and then needed to research and present information on a career or field of interest that they discovered from taking the assessments for that course. Using the same results from these instruments, students had to both write an essay discussing their personal characteristics and strengths, and then interview an individual employed in the field they were researching for their English course.

Another student noted in a synopsis statement of the critical thinking skills that are gleaned from a learning community experience, “we saw connections between assignments and it made them easier” (faculty-developed survey, fall 2008). M remarked

above on the sophistication in expression and synthesis of ideas she saw between her linked and non-linked sections of ENGL 095 at the end of the semester (field notes, spring 2009; summer 2009, fall, 2009). One of the goals of learning communities, particularly for basic skills students, is the intentional restructuring of curriculum to introduce the connections between disparate disciplines and foster students' ability to make those connections independently in future courses (MacGregor, et al., 2002; Tinto & Love, 1997). This is the very issue that had piqued my interest in learning communities as I served on the College's basic skills coordinators group, and spoke with faculty about the major issues they encounter in the basic skills student population (journal entries, spring 2009; fall 2009). I found it particularly gratifying to see students acquiring the skills learning communities had been proclaimed to deliver.

I examined mean scores for three ENGL 095 sections on the "Sentence Sense" portion of the Accuplacer basic skills test which is used for placement into either college-level or basic skills level English classes. Section 069RF is the learning community section that was linked with the HUDV 107 course; section 054RF is also taught at the branch campus, but by a different instructor; and section 065RL is taught at the College's main campus by M, who teaches the linked section of ENGL 095 at the branch campus. These are the same classes of students who completed my student engagement survey. This was not an experimental design, thus it is by chance that the mean placement test scores of the learning community group was lower than the other two sections of ENGL 095. I then performed a quantitative data analysis of comparative grade reports using SPSS statistical software for students in the linked versus non-linked sections of ENGL 095 to assess successful completion rates.

Table 2

*Mean Writing Scores for Linked Versus Nonlinked ENGL 095 Classes*

Section	Mean	<i>N</i>	Standard Deviation
069RF	51.8125	16	13.70751
054RF	64.4375	16	8.70991
065RL	65.5625	16	11.90501
Total	60.6042	48	13.00366

Table 3

*Mean Final Grades for Linked Versus Nonlinked ENGL 095 Classes*

Section	Mean	<i>N</i>	Standard Deviation
069RF	2.8125	16	1.32759
054RF	2.0625	16	1.65202
065RL	2.7500	16	1.39044
Total	2.5417	48	1.47256

My examination of mean final grades for students in the three sections of ENGL 095 revealed that, despite having lower average placement test scores, students in the learning community section have final grades with a higher mean than the other two sections. However, an independent-sample t test was also calculated comparing “M’s” linked and non-linked students’ final grades in ENGL 095. No significant difference was found ( $t(30) = .130, p > .05$ ). Though slightly higher, the mean of the learning community section’s final grades ( $m = 2.81, sd = 1.327$ ) was not significantly different

from the mean of the non-learning community section, taught by the same instructor ( $m = 2.75$ ,  $sd = 1.39$ ).

Table 4

*Comparison of Final Grades for Linked Versus Nonlinked ENGL 095 classes*

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Grade	Equal variances assumed	.111	.741	.130	30	.897	.06250	.48061	-.91904	1.04404
	Equal variances not assumed			.130	29.936	.897	.06250	.48061	-.91913	1.04413

Measures of student success in this learning community as defined by a grade of “C” or better in ENGL 095, did not yield significant results when compared to non linked ENGL 095 students. Yet, of interest were the mean entering Accuplacer Sentence Skills test scores for students in the linked section and the mean of those students’ final grades. While there were no statistically significant results, students in the linked section of ENGL 095 began with lower average test scores, but ended the term with higher average

final grades. Participation in the learning community may have been the contributing factor to these students surpassing their peers in final average grades even though their placement test scores were lower.

### **Faculty Experience**

To understand faculty perceptions of student success and their personal engagement in the linked courses, I observed faculty meetings in the spring 2009 term as they reflected on the integration of their curriculum, and what changes they were considering for the fall 2009 based on their findings and experiences from their first learning community. I also conducted unstructured interviews with the M and G using a protocol that I field-tested during my pilot study (Appendix A). This portion of the research spanned from the early spring 2009 term through the summer of 2009.

The meetings to discuss the learning community took place at the main campus of the College and were attended by me, G, M, and F, who will be taking over G's section of HUDV in the fall 2009. The College Success Seminar is mostly offered in the fall term of each academic year, and there are no sections at the branch campus scheduled in the spring terms. We typically met after the College-wide Governance forums that many faculty members attend. Junior faculty members are especially encouraged to attend to learn about the operations of the College beyond their own academic departments, but not encouraged to publically participate. Faculty members in their pre-tenure period are expected to devote their time and energy to their academic department and colleagues. I have had vehement disagreements with a senior administrator who believes that junior faculty should be "seen and not heard" (journal entry, spring, 2009). It is generally thought by those whom have spent their professional careers at "A" Community College,



that newcomers have “no business opening their mouths” at a Governance Forum (journal entry, spring 2009), even though in recent years it has been a challenge to fill both membership and leadership positions on the various committees. I see this perspective as an example of the political power structure operating within the College’s culture and I believe it will have an impact on my future cycles of research as I promote learning communities, and the efforts of these and potentially other, junior faculty members (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

G and M are very animated as they interact with one another and exchange information about specific students from the learning community. G told M:

“Student X has come to see me about four times for counseling since last semester. He is sad to not still be with everyone else in class. Even though he hangs out with \_\_\_ and \_\_\_, he misses the group and wishes he had something else like it this semester” (field notes, spring, 2009).

To which M responds, “So many of them were not ready to be off on their own in college; they just weren’t mature enough” (field notes, spring, 2009). Although she encouraged the learning community students to enroll in their next English class with a different faculty member (to gain a new perspective and have a different experience), some are taking ENGL 121, the first college-level writing course, with her in the spring 2009 semester. She says: “Even though I didn’t want \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_ to take my 121 class, I’m glad they did. I can see how far they’ve come – not just in their writing, but in their behavior and attitudes about school” (field notes, spring 2009).

When M and G speak about the students from this cohort, they speak from the intimacy and immediacy of a shared emotional experience. The room is charged with

their energy; it is something that can be felt and evokes a visceral reaction in me (journal entries, spring, 2009). In my journal writings I struggle with my interpretation of the dynamic between G and M and the relationships they developed with the students in their learning community. My own work with community college students continually satisfies me in the same ways I think I am seeing in them; I am energized, emotional, and deeply moved by sharing in the experience of students' self-discovery. I am cognizant of the potential for me to project my sentiments onto M and G and their experiences (journal entries, spring 2009). I too am aware that I see this work in a spiritual domain and marvel at how connected I feel to something greater than myself as I witness moments of epiphany in others (Palmer, 1998).

G provided information, suggestions, training, and support in these meetings to F who would be taking her place in the learning community for fall 2009. M, as the English instructor, will maintain her position and will teach the learning community and several others courses at the branch campus. At one meeting in particular, G and M went through the syllabus week-by-week and recapped and reflected on what worked well. When they spoke about the career interviews that were assigned for English but connected to the culminating presentation of the HUDV class, they reminisced about a female student who felt much better about her liberal arts major because her interview with someone in public relations confirmed her written and oral communications skills (field notes, spring 2009). Their enthusiasm was contagious and F looked interested and animated as he joined in the conversation. He asked questions that were procedural rather than experiential. For example, F asked about using the online course management system, participation from other departments like career services, and the library, and whether or not G and M had

brought the students to the main campus. When M and G spoke about the experience, they focused on the students with whom they worked and their relationships with each other. F, not having had the experience of teaching a learning community yet, stuck to what he knew about the courses and the College.

As I noted before, G and F had a relationship and were easy and comfortable with each other. M and F were just getting acquainted, and while there was joking and friendly banter, both remained professional and more reserved with one another than either was with G. I knew each of the three, but did not know M as well as the other two. I also limited my interactions with the group in those meetings and tried to stay out of the way of their conversation. At the time, I saw my role as more observer than participant, and I did not want to interfere with their process unless my input was requested. My field notes reflect what I witnessed about the exchange, but in journal entries, I speculated about whether the ease and energy between G and M resulted from their personality traits and shared characteristics, or if there were some gender differences in the dynamics in the meetings. “G and M literally gush about the students and what they did in the lc.” (journal entry, spring 2009) They were very expressive, emotional, and personally involved with the students with whom they worked.

“I don’t know F to be at all like that, as passionate as he is about his work, he is typically detached and dispassionate when speaking about students. I’ve always attributed this to his training, but maybe it’s because he is a man and although a generalization, men are typically less verbally expressive and use fewer words than women in conversation and communication” (journal entry, spring, 2009).

F was less expressive and less enthused, but is also new to the process that was being discussed by M and G (journal entries, spring 2009). These are qualities and dynamics that I will need to be aware of, and watch for in the next learning community scheduled for fall 2009, which is the next cycle of research.

Late in the spring 2009 term, I interviewed both G and M, on their experience in the fall 2008 learning community at the branch campus. The transcriptions of the interviews, along with the student comments on the faculty-constructed instrument, and my journal entries, pointed to the emotional tenor of the faculty members' voices, their connection with each other, and the significance of the experience. "Our temperaments are similar and our approach is similar. Students responded to the verbalized care and concern and really saw us as one" (faculty interview, May 2009) and, "I'll never teach 095 again without it (HUDV 107). It is really a disservice to teach it without it. There are just so many benefits" (faculty interview, May 2009). "It can be scary and isolating in the classroom sometimes . . . having a partner who can address some of the social and emotional issues . . . the support makes it that much better" (faculty interview, May 2009).

My own reflections note how the two faculty members interacted in our meetings and the emotional bonds that were evident: "M and G are animated in the meetings as they discuss the students and how they have remained in contact with them in the next semester, beyond the learning community" (journal entry, February, 2009). Also, M and G are my friends on a social-networking site and I see the correspondence that regularly occurs between them. They are mutually supportive and enthusiastic in all manner of things professional and personal.

During the interviews, both M and G commented on the survey they had given to their students and what students had written about their (M and G's) relationship with each other, and the impact of students' witnessing the time they spent in each other's company. They each expressed surprise that students noticed them working together and were struck by the importance students assigned to their relationship. This from M: "Students really noticed that we worked together and I think they found that to be reassuring" (faculty interview, spring 2009). G, as a counselor, had more to say about the affective impact on students: "They liked seeing us together and I think they thought of us as 'moms.' I feel like they put both of us in a parenting role and for some of our students, they don't have the support at home and they need it from somewhere" (faculty interview, May, 2009).

One student wrote, "Both teachers are friends," and another, "It was amazing because my English teacher and HUDV teacher were best friends" (faculty-developed survey, fall 2008). In my pilot study, that paired ENGL 122 and ENVR 105, the English professor noted that "the students have to see that you are together . . . they are making their community together but we are the role models. . . I think they feel taken care of by both of us" (journal entry, spring 2008). Relationships are a key indicator of engagement and success in the learning community experience (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008) and faculty provide a very powerful role model for the students in their community. When asked what advice she would offer a colleague contemplating embarking on a learning community initiative, M said, "This is a marriage, pick your partner very carefully, and always be flexible" (faculty interview, May, 2009).

As we met and communicated through the spring 2009 semester, it became clear that the impact on faculty as a result of the experience was significant. M remarked, “I was so frustrated teaching (ENGL) 095. I just didn’t feel like my students were connecting with any of the material. With the HUDV class, they have things to write about that they want to explore. Most of them see, ‘hey, this is my future, I need to think about this stuff.’ I never want to teach 095 again without it (HUDV 107). It is really a disservice to students; they get so much more out of the link” (faculty interview, May 2009).

She further described the relationship with, and support from her colleague as the end of isolation in the classroom. M reinforced the value of having a counseling professional available for students: “Basic Skills students have a lot to work through . . . It can be scary and isolating in the classroom sometimes . . . having a partner who can address some of the social and emotional issues . . . the support makes it that much better” (personal communication, March 16, 2009).

G and I are both members of the same academic department and although she was assigned to the branch campus, she regularly attended department meetings and other college-wide forums and functions throughout the semester. During our many conversations, G remarked, “I am so lucky to have found M! She is so great and the students love her and we have this connection, and it’s such an amazing group of students; I’m so glad I did this” (journal entries, October, November, December, 2008). Both faculty members related high levels of interaction, and a quality of engagement and communication that subsequently led to a relationship they deem enjoyable, supportive, and positive (journal entry, spring 2009).

The literature indicates, the heart of any learning community lies in the qualitative data; the experiences of the participants and the telling of their stories. The link between ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 at the branch campus of “A” Community College in fall 2008, yielded rich qualitative data that echo results of previous studies examining student and faculty satisfaction, interaction, and relationship, as a result of participation in such experiences (Minkler, 2000, Tinto & Love, 1997; Wilmer, 2007). Students reported positive aspects of their work in the learning community that included connection to their classmates, engagement with the content of both courses, and positive interactions with and between the faculty members. Yet, my interest in the faculty experience and how their work together affects students was reignited as I went through this cycle with them and reflected on my role in the project.

As I have indicated, M and G share many personal characteristics besides their status as junior faculty members at a branch campus: they are both young professionals who have young children, and have grown up in the region themselves. Moreover, they share philosophical similarities regarding their expectations of students and the educational process that includes a respect and concern for the individual, providing appropriate support, and maintaining a high standard of expectations for students (field notes, journal entries, spring, 2009). The resoundingly positive responses from the two about the learning community experience, the feeling of mutual support from their colleague, and the benefits of the relationship for students, are indicative of the need for further examination of the faculty relationship and its role in the learning community experience.

The academic culture of learning communities calls for new, collaborative relationships among faculty and the opportunity to build “colleagueship by creating community among faculty” (Matthews, 1994, p. 187). Community college faculty are a natural cohort with whom to develop a learning community model because they are expert at engaging students in collaborative learning strategies and fostering a sense of community in the classroom. However, for the greatest chances of success, faculty members who elect to participate in learning community initiatives should receive institutional support and sustained training (Tinto & Love, 1997). Such resources are not yet provided for these projects at “A” Community College. While the College responds to individually expressed need, there is no institutional structure or support in place for learning community initiatives.

Participation in a learning community provides faculty with a “different lens through which to view their work” (Matthews, 1994, p.189). Creating a strong academic culture is a component some find missing from the community college, yet learning communities offer faculty the opportunity to make cross-disciplinary connections for students, while simultaneously providing a supportive, nurturing environment that fosters the kind of learning and introspection that can only be gained when both faculty and students have permission to be vulnerable and learn together (Palmer, 1998). M and G found each other and struck out on their own to make this learning community happen. They had no institutional support or direction, received no additional compensation or release time from other duties, and admit to not knowing what they were doing or how to do it when they first began. Their motivation was led by a desire to make a more meaningful and enjoyable experience for their students and themselves.



In the spring of 2008, M and G each approached their department heads and supervisors about their idea of linking their courses at the branch campus for the coming fall term. During our work together in the subsequent spring of 2009, I heard from them what I had heard from the other English faculty member in my pilot project, “No one stood in our way. We were told it was a great idea, but no one said, ‘Here’s how to make it happen.’ or ‘This is what you do.’ We really didn’t know how to do this.” M and G were each referred by their supervisors to me and the English professor who had pioneered earlier efforts at our College. The administration was aware of my interest in learning communities through my institutional grant activity and presentation at faculty day in spring of 2008; within the College community I was developing a reputation for expertise on the topic. The faculty members were looking for support and assistance in making their vision a reality.

### **Assessing My Leadership**

At the beginning of this project, I felt very much an outsider in the faculty members’ partnership and process of building their learning community, scheduling it, filling it with registered students, and developing their methods of engagement and assessment. When G first approached me I was delighted, but not sure what I could actually do for her and M. My first response was to throw resources at her. I provided books, articles, and my pilot research on the ENGL and ENVR link at “A” Community College. We carved out as much conversation as we could during our busy days as G was only on the main campus for short periods of time. Most of our communication took place via email in the summer of 2008. The enrollment for the linked sections at the branch campus was strong at the end of the early registration effort for local high school

students, and the courses were close to capacity with registered students. In the weeks that followed however, M and G began to check their sections and noticed uneven numbers of students registered for the courses.

One of the key components in a linked-course learning community is enrollment of a single cohort of students. Uneven numbers of registrants in the two sections meant that some were registered in one section, but not in the other. M and G did not know where to go with this information or what to do. I was able to assist them by first aligning communication among the Division Administrators for the Counseling Division and the Reading and English Division, who are responsible for posting course sections and their details to the registrations system. At first, students were registered for the classes by having the counselor with whom they were working sign them into the sections, but the courses were not actually linked in the registration system. Thus, if a student chose to drop one of the courses at a later date they remained enrolled in all other courses.

It was the HUDV course that students were most likely to drop. They registered for it because it was recommended, but when they got home or talked to friends who were not taking it, they decided to drop; especially if they were enrolled as a full-time student without it. Although successful completion of such courses is known to have a positive impact on students' persistence, success, and satisfaction (National Clearing House on the First Year and Students in Transition, 2007), colleges across the county find College Success Seminars a hard sell to incoming students. Students often believe they have all the skills they need to be successful college students. Many colleges have therefore mandated enrollment in First Year Experience courses for new students. Experts contend that increasing the credit value, linking-it with another course, and

involving peer instructors, mentors, or tutors, lend validity to the courses in the eyes of the student (National Clearing House on the First Year and Students in Transition, 2007).

The Division Administrators were able to help G and M make comparisons of their class lists and discern who was enrolled in one course, but not in the other. In addition, I contacted the Registrar who worked with the Division Administrators to make the courses co-requisites in the registration system. Thus, a student could not register for one class, without registering for the other. Logic would hold then that students could not drop one section without dropping the other linked section as well. That turned out to not be the case and continues to be a confounding variable today. As the link for fall 2009 was being planned, this information was brought to the Registrar's attention. Her email response to M said, "the system does not provide a message to the student indicating they must also drop the linked co-requisite course; it will be important to assign someone to monitor the sections for this scenario" (personal correspondence, fall, 2008). In other words, "this is your effort you better keep an eye on it – because no one else is."

Although this situation again highlighted the fact that the College had no designated administration, staff, or procedures to officially support these efforts, the involvement of the Registrar was seen as a tremendous boost to the effort, and a comfort to the faculty members. She had not previously been called into the conversation by either the Division Dean of English and Reading or the Director of Student Development. In fact neither of these administrators has been involved in the efforts beyond allowing them to take place. The Division Dean of English and Reading however, once convinced of their value soon became an advocate for learning communities, and has become a person with position power who can move the initiatives forward.

While the enrollment of students in the course was somewhat under the control of G as the counselor working with students directly at this location, the faculty felt unease with the process once they discovered the discrepancy in enrollment (personal communication, summer 2008). For me, obtaining intimacy with the process of enrolling a pure cohort and the concern that issue engendered in the faculty, illuminated some of what I had learned in my pilot study with faculty in the ENGL and ENVR learning community. “A” Community College has no system-wide procedures for scheduling, marketing, enrolling, or delivering learning community initiatives, and no designated personnel to manage them. The verbalized support, but lack of leadership, management, or direction coming from the administration leaves the full planning and implementation to the faculty. Teaching faculty frequently lack the knowledge and connections to negotiate the College’s many departments and personnel that must come together to support such initiatives.

I have had the opportunity to serve on many college-wide committees, play numerous roles within my academic division, and enjoy a wide circle of personal and professional acquaintances within “A” Community College. I saw my role in this early part of the process as a helper. I knew who to call to rectify the situation; I also knew that the individuals would be responsive to me given my amiable relationships and prior work with each of them. As I reflect back on this time, I was enacting my servant leadership by being who I am; I wanted to make things happen for the faculty to make their project a reality. I enjoy getting things done for others or for the good of the organization and in retrospect, I suppose I hoped that the faculty would feel supported and cared for too (journal entries, 2008 – 2009). I did not feel compelled to insert myself into their work

other than to do what was needed at the moment; work to remove the barriers, and help them enroll the right cohort of students.

I felt more a part of the learning community project in the months to come as I spent time meeting with M, G, and F as a group, and then individually for interviews. We interacted more frequently with each other in the spring term of 2009 after the first cohort of students completed their semester; exchanging emails, phone calls, and messages on a social networking site about the experience, the students, the College, and the relationships that had been forged. As a community college leader who espouses a social justice and servant-leadership perspective, I frequently found myself being stirred emotionally, especially during the faculty interview process. M and G both spoke eloquently about the deep change this experience had on their approach to their craft, and their feelings of support and unity with their teaching partner. The regular, face-to-face communication they shared with each other in Cycle I allowed them to continuously reflect on their experience and gauge how to best support each other and the students in the community (faculty interviews, May 2009; journal entries, spring, 2009).

One of the richest sources of data was the faculty-developed instrument, which yielded more compelling information than the likert scale instrument I developed. The students' words captured the essence of the experience and the impact of the relationships that developed in the group. As G, M, and I reviewed the responses, we came to see and appreciate the impact of the learning community experience on ourselves and the students. Our stories and experiences have since been shared with the faculty at a College-wide workshop that the senior academic administration asked me to facilitate on learning communities. I will further articulate this event in a subsequent cycle of the

research, and will also share my realization of the applicability of Kotter's (1996) change theory to the project. I came to understand that developing this core group of faculty, supporting their interests, and spreading the word of their work within the institution, is consistent with the earliest of Kotter's eight stage theory. Kotter promotes building a guiding coalition, establishing a sense of urgency, and celebrating small victories, as critical foundations for instituting change in an organization.

As one of the coordinators for the College Success Seminar, I have a vested interest in the course's continued success and meaningful contribution to students' development. In addition, my conversations with faculty from a variety of academic departments have made it clear that students have difficulty creating the cross-disciplinary connections we expect of college-educated individuals. While unrelated to my current professional role at "A" Community College, I have undertaken efforts to support faculty who are committed to delivering learning community initiatives and to garner attention and support from a broad base within the college. This project and the pilot study before it, confirmed findings from the literature on faculty and student engagement with each other and the academic content of both courses. My professed servant and social justice leadership philosophies underscore my efforts in helping others with these initiatives, and building the institutional resources to sustain and grow them.

### **Future Cycles in the Action Research Project**

**Cycle I.** I entered into this first cycle of research with the goal that my project would focus on the examination of student perceptions of satisfaction and engagement in a learning community, and student retention and success in linked versus non-linked sections of ENGL 095. My pilot research led me to believe that student engagement and

retention were greater in linked classes. In my classroom observations of the pilot link between the ENVR 105 and ENGL 122 classes, it appeared that students had comfort with each other and were very participatory in both classes. At the end of the term, students had higher retention rates in both classes than those in non-linked sections of each class. However, it was the interviews I conducted and the relationships I developed with the two faculty members J and S, who taught ENVR 105 and ENGL 122 that actually piqued my continued interest in learning communities.

I wanted to pursue the topic of faculty relationships and faculty development in learning communities for my dissertation research, but was discouraged from doing so by a senior academic officer at “A” community college who believed the topic would be too difficult to quantify and would not yield useful results for the institution. I was told: “Study student outcomes, they are easier to assess, it’s what we need to look at, and what people are most interested in” (journal entry, summer 2008). There were faculty members in my doctoral program who also recommended that I focus on the student data I gleaned from my pilot studies. The faculty members to whom I refer were adjuncts in the program and community college presidents in my state. Their interests were also in the retention and success data of student outcomes as a result of enrollment in a learning community. Neither the senior administrator at my institution, nor these adjunct faculty members, were familiar with action research either; they were focused on quantitative, objective, outcomes. Thus, while I remained interested in the faculty experience, I began the first cycle focused on student perceptions of engagement and quantifying success in the way of retention and end of term grade data.

The goal of action research is to institute organizational change in a way that reflects an understanding of the culture, its population, and the variables that influence and shape behavior (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Action research relies upon exploration and reflection of previous cycles to chart subsequent iterations of research. The results of Cycle I point to the impact of the quality of the relationship between faculty members on students' and the individual faculty member's experience. Specifically, the open-ended faculty-developed instrument that asked students to share their impressions of the learning community experience yielded more information, and more useful information than the objective, likert-scale questionnaire that I developed. Subsequent cycles will continue to examine how that relationship affects engagement and satisfaction for students and faculty.

Faculty interviews also yielded rich information about the quality of the faculty – to – faculty relationship and its impact on the experience for faculty and students alike. Moreover, the faculty experiences of navigating the process of scheduling, enrolling, promoting and delivering a learning community, echo those of the faculty in my pilot research and highlight the need for the College to develop formalized institutional support if it is indeed committed to increasing student access to learning community initiatives.

**Cycle II.** In Cycle II, I undertook initiatives that further develop interest in learning communities throughout the College, and garner greater support across the community, and in the administration. Specifically, I formed an ad hoc team of individuals connected to the initiatives, either by role or by interest. We worked on the development of procedures to streamline learning community offerings. I also led a team



of various members of the College community in attendance at a regional learning community conference. We gathered tools, information, and motivation to share with the faculty and administration of “A” Community College as we seek to increase the number of learning communities and develop policies to implement them.

**Cycle III.** In Cycle III, I returned to the faculty relationship and continued to explore how this dynamic impacts the student and faculty experience. I noted differences in student and faculty experience with regard to the relationship between M and F who delivered a learning community of ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 again in the fall term of 2009. G was on maternity leave and F took over the instruction of the HUDV 107 course and the counseling load at the branch campus. The relationship between M and F is more of a pairing of convenience than the spontaneous collaboration that arose initially between M and G. As indicated previously, F lives west of the main campus and the branch campus is a more convenient site for him to work as both a counselor and to teach his classes. He has volunteered to take over the assignment to that location while G is out on leave. M remains assigned to the branch campus and teaches her entire semester load of English classes there.

**Cycle IV.** In Cycle IV, with more support from key members of the administration, I promoted an understanding of the impact of learning communities in the larger faculty body. I provided a forum to showcase the work of those faculty members who have taught learning community sections, and offered the faculty community an opportunity to network with colleagues, as they contemplated a potential learning community for their own discipline. I sought confirmation of the institution’s commitment to learning community initiatives by garnering support to promote,

schedule, and enroll additional basic skills course and College Success Seminar links for the fall 2010. I also provided meetings for the faculty who teach learning communities to gather, communicate, and plan their linked curriculum, and develop their relationships.

My leadership was assessed throughout the cycles of research as I collaborated with faculty on the goals of the learning community for themselves and their students. I sought to help the faculty members clarify their needs, articulate their hopes, and determine personal, professional, and student outcomes as a result of participation in the learning community and our work together. We accomplished this through formal and informal face-to-face meetings, electronic correspondence, and semi-structured interviews. In addition, a senior Academic Administrator with whom I have been working closely evaluated my leadership by completing an adapted version of “A” Community College’s Administrator’s performance outcome evaluation instrument that focuses on leadership and management. I regularly included reflections and information from my journal entries to maintain an awareness of my biases and chronicle change in me and my leadership through the project.

### **Fostering Institutional Change:**

#### **Learning Communities and the Learning Organization**

The community college is charged with providing that intersection of spiritually-centered community that leads to social transformation (Capper et al., 2002). Concern for the individual may translate into power that makes possible the realization of justice in society outside the institution. However, for the community college to offer a pathway to break the constraints of socioeconomic class barriers, and opportunities to form new communities, it must provide a healthy model and encourage a culture of safety while

allowing for conflict (Capper et al, 2002; Mawhinney, 2002). The learning community model is such a haven for students. It is intentional in its efforts to foster cooperative learning and communication between and among students and faculty. In a learning community, students are charged with practicing the skills of democracy and bearing witness to the community of professionals in which their professors are engaged.

Bringing about greater social change requires courageous moral leadership to ultimately develop policy to address societal injustices and barriers. For this to be possible, the college must operate from what Foster (1986) calls a critical humanist perspective. An institution that strives to develop, challenge, and liberate the individual while refusing to become complacent, will grow the democratic citizens of tomorrow. Thus administration and faculty are called to actively reflect on their own underlying assumptions, limitations, and personal philosophy, to make better informed decisions and ultimately improve their institution and the experiences of their students.

O'Banion's paradigm of the learning college provides the contemporary community college with a model for shaping its work in the coming era (O'Banion, 1997). It challenges the institution to share the responsibility for learning more fully with the student and to respond with pedagogy that is driven by the needs of the learner, not the limitations of the facilitator. Faculty members are liberated as they join with students in learning in the classroom. The learning college paradigm relies on collaborative, learner-initiated activities and engages all involved in the endeavor of teaching and learning with meaningful, measurable outcomes. The characteristics of effective learning communities share many of those same qualities and offer a structure for the community college to evolve as a learning institution.

Tisdell's (2007) work studies the role of spirituality in developing pedagogy for social justice. She highlights the fact that spirituality, reason, and objectivity are not mutually exclusive and implores educators to consider the intersections of spirituality and issues of diversity and equity. However, this work underscores the role of spirituality in the development of identity and construction of meaning and knowledge. The College Success Seminar at "A" Community College is intentionally structured to assist students in clarifying their values, defining their goals, and exploring their "fit," not only in the College community, but in society as well. As educators we are tasked with providing young people opportunities for self-discovery as they encounter the "great things" (Palmer, 1998) of the universe.

We are charged with supporting and caring for our students in the ongoing development of their identity, (Astin, 1969; Tisdell, 2007) and forming an intimate connection to the "Secret that sits in the middle and knows" (Palmer, 1998, p. 110). An encounter with the presence of the divine in all things allows students to embark on their futures with greater assurance in their values and their personal power. This truly is the work of a teaching and learning institution, which has student development as its founding principle. O'Banion's concept of a learning college (1997) and Senge's learning organization (2006) are immensely appealing to me. I strive to foster change that assists the institution and its members in marrying its philosophy and action. Individuals are not discouraged from trying new things, yet they are not often supported in ways that make initiatives a reality. As an emerging leader on my campus and in my profession, I hope to have an impact on altering the future course of not only my academic division, but concomitantly the greater college community.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Growing the Group and Discovering the Essential Bond**

The success of G and M's experience in their initial learning community further motivated me to maintain the momentum by gathering interest in learning communities throughout the college community. The frustrations they discovered in scheduling and enrolling their linked-course-cohort echoed those experienced by the faculty members in my pilot study. For this cycle of research, I chronicled my efforts to bring about greater support and interest in learning communities among the faculty and the administration by promoting and supporting the work of my colleagues whom have already found personal and professional satisfaction and success in linking their courses. It is with this that I begin the chapter as I provide an account of the collaborative work that was necessary to streamline learning community scheduling and registration procedures, and my leadership in these institutional changes.

#### **A Gathering Energy: Growing the Guiding Coalition**

Cycle I's work yielded the discovery of the importance of integrating and connecting numerous resources across the College to make learning communities possible and functional. In Cycle II, I brought together members of the College community from various departments to plan, support, schedule, market, and teach learning communities at "A" Community College. The literature indicates that a critical component in successful learning community initiatives is support and investment from a broad base of influence within the college or university (MacGregor, et al, 2002; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). I developed an ad hoc committee that brought together the faculty whom had taught learning communities along with other members of the college who

were involved in marketing, registration, academic affairs, and recruitment. Our objectives were to find ways of streamlining the scheduling and registration procedures for linked courses for both academic departments and students, to develop greater interest and energy in the faculty and administration to support the initiatives, and to make the College's strategic planning matrix item of offering access to learning communities a reality.

### **A Sense of Urgency**

At the final College-wide Governance Forum for the 2007-08 academic year, the Institutional Planning Committee shared the Strategic Goals Matrix for 2010 (Appendix E). Section B was entitled "Curriculum Development for a Changing Student Body" ("A" Community College Strategic Goals Matrix, 2010). Item 2 called for an expansion of HUDV (The College Success Seminar) to the majority of first-time, full-time students. Item 5 concerned increasing learning community experiences for students. This document was presented again for review and discussion in the fall of 2008 at the start of the next academic year. Other than the President's Commission on Student Development, which charged an institution-wide group with the examination of student development practices and procedures, no administrative direction or initiative was provided to meet these Matrix goals. It was the Commission's role to expand access to the College Success Seminar, as the HUDV course is the purview of the Student Development Division, specifically, the counseling faculty.

Given the research I did through the institutional grant I received, and the presentation I made at faculty day in the spring of 2008, I appeared to be the only member of the College community spearheading efforts to expand learning communities.

This was a role outside the scope of my position duties and responsibilities; there was no committee in place; there was no directive from the administration; this was not an effort that had been assigned or adopted by any academic or student affairs department. I had an interest and I saw a need. I also knew that others in the College responded to my requests for assistance as I helped M and G in Cycle I. Interest and energy were building and it was time to capitalize on the buzz in the College community (Kotter, 1996).

### **Tapping Resources**

Early in the spring term of 2009, I called together a group of faculty, staff, and administrators whom had either been involved in a learning community initiative, had expressed interest in teaching a learning community, had assisted in negotiating registration of a previous learning community, or who by definition of their role in the College were a valuable asset to the effort. My intent was to create the guiding coalition in a work group, or ad hoc committee, to move the project forward. The literature indicates that broad-based investment from many areas in an institution can have a significant impact (Kotter, 1996; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Tinto, 1997). I also copied the Executive Vice President (EVP) of Educational Services, the Dean of Academic Affairs, the Dean of the Branch Campus and higher education centers, and my Dean – the Dean of Enrollment Development and Student Affairs (personal correspondence records, January, 2009).

The ad hoc committee included M and G, and two faculty members who taught English and environmental science in “A” Community College’s first successful learning community and my earliest pilot study, as well as four other interested professors from a variety of disciplines. I included the academic division administrators for the Student

Development, English and Reading, and Social Science Divisions, who are responsible for submitting schedule details and requests to the Dean of Academic Affairs and the Executive Vice President for Educational Services (EVP) and her staff, an Administrator for the Dean of Academic Affairs who is responsible for the print content of the master schedule and the college catalog, the College Registrar, an Account Manager for Marketing and College Relations, and a representative from Recruitment Services (field notes, spring 2009).

The meeting was well attended by all but three of the faculty members and one of the division administrators. I set an agenda designed to foster introductions and address the interests and needs of all the stakeholders present. The student affairs personnel did not know the faculty members and vice-versa. The Registrar was unable to attend and so sent the Assistant Registrar in her place, who became the regular committee member in her stead. The most pressing concerns topped the agenda and included defining learning communities for “A” Community College, marketing strategies and products, and issues related to registration and technology that would support the linked cohort course model. We met for an hour and a half, and only reached the second item on a seven-item agenda (field notes, spring 2009).

After introductions I led a discussion on the overall goal for the group which was to make recommendations to the senior academic leaders on the scheduling, marketing, enrollment, and delivery of learning communities. As S, the pioneering English faculty member from the original learning community at “A” Community College stated, “No one *owns* these initiatives. We will continue to struggle with them and faculty who want to teach them will have to deal with the frustration of managing them, because the



College has not taken any responsibility” (field notes, spring 2009). S was passionate when she spoke because she had lived the challenge of marketing her own classes by creating countless flyers, visiting the counseling department to promote her learning community, sending direct mailings to students, and working tirelessly with registration to remedy the unequal enrollment issues that plagued every effort for the past two years. Her English colleague M shared her frustration as she lived the same scenario with her learning community. Another colleague from English whom had attempted to run a link with the College Success Seminar and ENGL 095 specifically for health science students was also displeased with the lack of support and management he encountered (field notes, spring, 2009).

Those who had been directly involved were the most vocal about their experiences. The administrators from recruitment, registration, and academic affairs were largely unaware of the extent of the issues. Upon hearing them, they agreed with the need for clear processes throughout the institution if the College intended to adopt learning communities as regularly scheduled offerings. There was consensus from the group about our goal of making recommendations to the senior academic administration (field notes, spring 2009). The rest of our time was devoted to ideas about an institutional definition of learning communities for the college catalog and other promotional materials. We began brainstorming ideas but ran out of time that day. We agreed to meet again on Friday mornings for the next several weeks (field notes, spring 2009; journal entry, spring 2009).

### **The Low-Credibility Committee**

According to Kotter (1996), when the biggest champion of change is someone without high position power, the likelihood of an institutional effort taking hold in the

culture has limited chances for success. As one who embodies Fullan's (2001) enthusiastic, energetic, and hopeful leadership traits, I worked to develop relationships with the individuals on the committee. I hoped to instill trust in the work we were undertaking and investment in the change for the good of our students and the institution. However, each member of the committee had many other responsibilities and we were all fractured and pulled in multiple directions: from our regular duties and assignments, to involvement and leadership in College Governance, to institutional hiring committees or other division or department duties, or professional projects within our academic disciplines.

Kotter's (1996) summation of what happens when a group has an enthusiastic head with limited organizational power and influence foretells the events faced by the ad hoc committee for learning communities at "A" Community College. Even though expanding access to learning communities was one of the College's strategic goals specified on a public document, without mandate or underwriting from the College's highest level of administration, we began to lose steam. We met for a few weeks and then entered a busy point in the academic year when teaching faculty grow consumed with students' completion of the term. Recruitment Services personnel are making daily visits to local high schools, and the Office of Registration is busy with enrollment for the coming summer and fall semesters. We began with eleven members and were down to five sometimes six. Those who remained on the committee shared a sense of the issues and a commitment to both grow the initiatives and implement processes and support to make running them more accessible for all stakeholders (Kotter, 1996).

Those who remained on the committee were directly connected to the learning community effort due to either their personal investment in teaching one of the links and experiencing the frustration first-hand, or because the duties of their job were specifically tied to marketing and managing them (email communication, spring 2009; journal entries, spring, 2009; field notes, spring, 2009). For example, M continued to be involved as was S, the English professor from the first learning community link. G began her maternity leave. F would have continued regular involvement but was positioned full-time at the branch campus. It was difficult for him to attend the meetings mid-morning and too great a disruption in service to students at the branch campus. The College's Assistant Registrar remained regularly involved, as did the Administrative Associate for the Dean of Academic Affairs, the Recruitment Services representative, and the College Relations account manager (field notes, spring, 2009). I continued to copy the Dean of Enrollment Development, the Dean of Academic Affairs, and the Executive Vice President of Educational Services on emails with the agendas and notes for each meeting (electronic correspondence, spring 2009).

### **Celebrating Small Victories in a Complex Environment**

With each attempt of running a learning community, registering a clean cohort had been the most challenging feature by far. Invariably, there were uneven numbers of students registered for each section; some registered for one class, but not for the other. The process was complex and required effective communication and constant monitoring to ensure equal enrollment between the two courses. Through its work in the spring 2009, the ad hoc committee discerned that it was necessary to put co-requisites in place for courses from different academic areas when they are linked in a learning community. We

determined that this procedure, clearly communicated to all personnel involved in the process, would further the standardization for learning community scheduling and registration. One of the goals of the ad hoc committee was to deliver the recommendation that M made to me and her Dean when she indicated, “It would be nice to have a compiled list of who needs to be contacted and for what purpose.”

Initially, the ad hoc committee’s greatest accomplishment in the spring term of 2009 was to implement the adoption of a code on the College’s registration system that identified a learning community section as such (field notes, spring, 2009; journal entries, spring 2009). Course section codes at “A” Community College include not only a number, but two letters. The first letter denotes the method of instructional delivery and the second is the sections’ location. “A” Community College offers classes at multiple locations throughout the community as well as online, and offers coursework that is denoted as honors, English as a second language, blended (alternating face-to-face classes with distance education classes), distance education, interactive television, and now learning community.

Prior to the identifier, students, faculty, and staff had no way of distinguishing a learning community section from a non-linked section if they were using the online registration system. This has become especially important in the past few years as the College has moved toward use of online registration for all students. The printed schedule has an italicized statement that indicates the section has a co-requisite and also lists the linked course with its mate in the alphabetical directory of classes. In addition, there is a blurb about the learning community and how it is structured. In the printed schedule, students, counselors, and the rest of the community can easily determine that if a student

chooses a learning community section, they must register for its linked class. The information is printed in the schedule in a way that the reader passively receives it.

The issue that faculty faced in their learning community enrollment was unequal registration; students registered for one course, but not its linked counterpart. If students registered on line (and more and more of our students do), they had no way of knowing they were registering for a learning community, and that they were supposed to register for another class that was linked. Unless the student actively clicked on the hotlink for the course description and read about the learning community, there was no other way to find the information. In the online registration system, the community had become accustomed to discerning the meaning of the section codes which orient the student body to recognizing the differences between the many sections of classes offered each academic term. Even if each code was not known or recognizable, the fact that it was something other than an “R” (“regular” or a face-to-face, traditional, academic experience) prompted the individual to click on the hotlink of the course to read a description and obtain other pertinent information about the section.

In my early pilot work with the English and environmental science link, the faculty members indicated that registration of students in the appropriate sections of both courses proved most challenging. S raised this issue again in the ad hoc committee as she stated:

Who else was looking at this stuff? It was up to us to make sure that we had the right students in our classes. We sent out the correspondence, we made the phone calls, we checked our enrollment numbers and compared our class lists every couple of days (field notes, spring, 2009).

Students frequently changed their schedules prior to the start of classes or within the first days of the term. The registration system had no provision to compel a student to maintain enrollment in both learning community sections. Requiring a student to drop both linked classes if they dropped one was an issue that had not been considered, but that resulted in unequal enrollment. G and M encountered the same issues as S and her colleague, and all expressed considerable frustration with the time-consuming and management of class rosters enrollment comparisons to keep the cohort clean. Faculty did not know to whom they could turn for assistance with these functions. As M wrote in the process of scheduling her learning community, “I would email one person and they would tell me to email another person. It was exhausting and time consuming.”

After the ad hoc committee had been meeting for many weeks, M wrote to me and her dean. She sent us a chain of emails between herself, the Director of the Higher Education Center where the courses were scheduled, the Registrar, and the Division Administrators for both English, and Student Development. She unleashed a torrent of frustration over the confusion in the processes:

(what follows is) . . . evidence of the cumbersome process that is currently in place in trying to get a learning community together. Although we thought everything was set for the fall, we seem to be back at square one in trying to get the schedule organized. Again, there are tons of emails (and confusion) flying back and forth (personal correspondence, spring, 2009).

This correspondence was sent before registration had actually begun for the fall term and raised concerns at the outset regarding how the courses were being listed in the

master schedule. M indicated the layers of administration were more complex because her learning community was scheduled at a higher education center: “there are many people involved, and when an LC is held at an extension site, there are even MORE people involved.” (personal correspondence, spring, 2009).

As the ad hoc committee mined the layers of people and their respective roles in the scheduling and registration process, we discovered that in order to make the courses truly linked in the registration system, they needed to be made co-requisites for each other. So, while the new section code served as a point of information that the course was linked with another, the co-requisite rule forces registration of the two linked classes. Establishing the co-requisite procedure was a more substantial victory for the ad hoc committee. It effectively removed the burden from registration personnel of taking note that the student selected both linked courses when registering for a learning community section of anything. It was a process that can be automated, much the same as the course prerequisite system, which was designed to prevent a student from registering a course for which they have not met the stated prerequisite. It also supported the online registration efforts of the college community.

In establishing the co-requisite script, the Registrar followed instructions from the EVP of Educational Services office, which received information from the Division Administrators to create co-requisite requirements for each learning community course. It was the department chairs in consultation with the teaching faculty and the Academic Division Deans, who initiated the process by offering and scheduling linked classes in a learning community (personal correspondence, spring 2009; journal entries, spring, 2009). M made a plea for a list of ‘who does what’ and slowly, with lots of

communication and input from each office involved in the process, the committee was unearthing just that.

### **Whose Job Is It?**

“A” Community College’s hands off approach to learning communities left the faculty members responsible for the administration and management of their linked courses. As the ad hoc group discussed procedures, we concluded that when faculty members expressed interest in teaching a learning community, they and their partner should be responsible for identifying the link between classes to their respective department chairs, possibly present their combined syllabi, and identify preferred time blocks and locations for their classes (whether a satellite location or a specific room). It was then the department chair who worked with the division administrator to ensure that not only the proper section codes are recorded for the learning community, but that the co-requisite requirements were implemented in the registration system. The process does not differ greatly from regular scheduling procedures with the exception of ensuring appropriate section codes and co-requisites. The Registrar and the Director of Educational Services provided clarification of the roles and responsibilities, and the go ahead to implement the accommodations for learning communities.

However the act of clarifying a staff member’s role does not imply that the role will be acknowledged or satisfied. There are many members of the community at “A” Community College who love their work, regularly go above and beyond assigned duties, and look for ways to make positive contributions. There are others who have a hard time fulfilling the responsibilities for their role and balk even when their supervisor directs them to perform tasks in accordance with their job duties. A faculty member may request



assistance from a division administrator and department clerical staff but has no line authority over such individuals and is occasionally left scrambling to accomplish things that were the responsibility of others. As registration for M and F's fall 2009 learning community got underway in early May of 2009, M began checking the enrollment figures and notified me of a discrepancy she discovered. Once again, M entered into the fray by also notifying the Registrar to determine why this was happening, what should be done about it, and who should be doing it. There were 7 out of 17 seats taken in the HUDV 107 course, but only 4 taken in the ENGL 095 class. Both courses were coded with the "L" section code in the proper place (personal correspondence, spring 2009).

The email I received from M pointed out the disparity in enrollment and asked who should be contacted. I emailed my Division Director, my Division Administrator, and the Registrar. The Registrar responded quickly to all recipients and said that it was not enough to simply have the section coded with a learning community code, but to make sure that the co-requisite was in place as well. The section of HUDV 107 did not list the section of ENGL 095 as a co-requisite for M and F's learning community at the branch campus in the fall term. The English class did have the proper co-requisite of the HUDV class in place. M answered to thank her and ask if she needed to do anything to correct the situation and "if not now, is there anything I need to do in the future to make sure it's being listed correctly" (personal correspondence, spring, 2009). The Registrar's response indicates that the lack of ownership of these initiatives is at issue. She stated: "It is important for whoever is in charge of a learning community to communicate this information to the Division Administrators responsible for entering the respective course sections" (personal correspondence, spring, 2009).

Not only does this statement attest to the known issue that no one has been designated “in charge” of learning communities at “A” Community College, but it illuminates the fact that known challenges with personnel are exacerbated in a situation when no one is in a position of leadership, management, or authority. The Division Administrator for M’s division was supportive, professional, and thorough in her efforts toward the success of this learning community, and had provided the same support to the English with Environmental Science learning community. That support was not only a product of the individual’s professionalism, but also the endorsement of the dean at the helm of the English and Reading Division, who through his verbalized endorsement of learning communities throughout the institution, assigned a high value to these efforts. Conversely, the Division Administrator for Student Development consistently looks to deflect responsibility, is surly, uncooperative, and works for a Division Director who does not play an active role the academic offerings of the Division (journal entries, spring 2009, spring, 2010; personal correspondence, spring 2010). It was she who failed to put the proper co-requisite in place.

M, upon receiving the email from the Registrar again wrote to me to say, “I’m sending you this email because I’m not sure what she (the Registrar) means by this. . . Is she saying it’s my responsibility?” The Registrar was not implying that it was M’s responsibility, but instead was underscoring that someone needs to assume responsibility for this role. M’s Division Administrator took it upon herself to work with the Division Administrator from Student Development to explain how to list the ENGL 095 course as a co-requisite course for the specific section of HUDV 107. She then compared the class lists. She wrote to M, but copied me, my Division Director, Division Administrator, F,

and M's Department Chair, and Division Dean. The tone of her communication was matter-of-fact, professional, but warm and cooperative as well.

I just spoke to \_\_\_\_\_ (the Division Administrator for Student Development). The HUDV section now lists M's ENGL 095 section as a required co-requisite, so no one can register for one and not the other. \_\_\_\_\_ has called all the students in the HUDV that are not in the ENGL and is working on getting them either in the ENGL or switched to another HUDV section. Hopefully, the rosters will match soon. (personal correspondence, spring, 2009).

English composition classes at "A" Community College are skill-building classes. They focus on the acquisition of writing techniques and style. The instructor imbues them with content, such that students are writing about topics that are interesting, but not necessarily connected to anything else in their program of study. They make a perfect template for a learning community and can be linked with any academic discipline. The faculty members in the English and Reading Division have recognized this as has their Dean. He has supported the efforts of the faculty in his division by promoting their work among his administrative peers and speaking publically about the innovation of learning communities, but the balance was not tipped to support in action until he began to get behind the movement to invigorate a full honors program at "A" Community College.

### **Institutional Resources: Who Gets What And Why?**

There has been a college-wide honors committee of faculty, administrators, and staff that coordinates singular courses constructed as seminars. Students can receive an 'honors designation' on their transcript if they take so many honors courses, and a multidisciplinary seminar course. In fall of 2008, the Executive Vice President of

Educational Services formed a task force and to work in concert with the college-wide honors committee to redefine honors at “A” Community College. A junior faculty member from the history department was the new chair of the college-wide committee. She made a presentation at a Governance Forum early in the spring 2009 term outlining changes to the program as envisioned by the task force for the coming academic year. Their objective was to recruit academically-eligible incoming students and structure their first-year program of study in a thematic cohort, such that students would enroll together in all of their courses, and the courses would be thematically linked. Not once did she mention the phrase, “learning community” (journal entry, spring 2009).

As is the case in Governance Forums, the presentation is made and then the floor is open for questions or comments. I asked if the committee had done any reading or research on learning communities, and suggested that if they had not, they become familiar with the literature, as what the chair had described was a learning community. I offered to be of assistance in any way I could help. There were many comments and concerns raised as members of the community bristled at the notion of exclusivity the changes to the program conveyed; they seemed counter to the mission of the community college and the democratic ideals we hold (journal entry, 2009). Immediately after the forum, the Dean of English and Reading approached me to talk about involvement in the ad hoc committee. He agreed with my perspective on learning communities and wanted to speak more about honors and learning community initiatives (journal entry, spring, 2009). He had been copied on all of the ad hoc meeting announcements and minutes as a number of his faculty members and his Division Administrator were actively involved.

He indicated he was pleased the committee was meeting and vowed to join us on Friday of that week.

### **Harnessing Position Power**

The Dean of English and Reading, C, attended the next meeting of the Ad Hoc Learning Community group. He spoke about the Honors Committee and how he now understood it as a learning community. While C had previously expressed interest and vocalized support for learning communities mainly because of his division faculty who were at the forefront of the efforts, he was prepared to lend his support as a Dean because of the connection to Honors. C appeared to be the only Dean involved and invested in the honors programs, which may have been because of a directive from the Executive Vice President who took up the cause of honors as something that would bring prestige to the college and its faculty (personal correspondence, honors committee member, spring 2009). C was clear that he represented the interest of the honors committee and prospective honors students at that ad hoc learning community committee meeting (field notes, spring, 2009). An English faculty member who was interested in learning communities from the perspective of benefits to basic skills students made a point of saying “honors serves and will serve such a small percentage of our student body, is that really where we should be concentrating our efforts? (field notes, spring 2009).”

I agreed with the faculty member, but also recognized that having C on board could be a tremendous benefit to moving the initiatives forward. I wrote as I reflected on the exchange that took place in the meeting, “I have resentment about the honors efforts and wish the college would allocate similar or equal resources to learning communities, which have the potential to reach so many more students, especially those who need the

support and structure they offer. How can the administration not endorse the efforts in a real way? Why is it all just lip-service?" (journal entry, spring, 2009). C acknowledged that his role and position could be an asset to the efforts, and indicated that he was happy to use it toward that end. He was ready to demonstrate his commitment to learning communities by "walking the talk" among the academic and student affairs leaders of the institution (Senge, 2006). A change project that wishes to impact the culture of the organization needs an advocate with positional power to be a steward for the future good of the institution (Kotter, 1996; Senge, 2006). C was investing in the role of learning communities in "A" Community College's future and he was best employed at the top levels of the administration, not in the trenches, where the ad hoc committee and I were making progress on the procedures.

During that spring term of 2009, I frequently encountered C at the campus fitness center. In this neutral environment, and with the catalyst of our shared interest in learning communities, we began to build a relationship that extended beyond the confines of the project. We had casual conversations on a variety of topics from our personal exercise routines to news within the college community, until we finally got around to chatting about learning communities. Often, we spoke about faculty assignments and speculated about who might be interested or well-suited to teach in a learning community. We speculated about the potential for alignment of learning communities with the recommended First Year Experience initiative that grew out of the President's Commission on Student Development Through these conversations, casual though they were, I felt a greater comfort in C's presence and grew to respect and admire his passion for his faculty, our students, and "A" Community College. Leaders create relationships

(Fullan, 2001) and what is said to separate effective ones from ineffective one's is a genuine care and concern for the people they lead (Kouzes & Posner, 1998). M and S both spoke warmly of C and his encouragement for their efforts (field notes, spring, 2009; journal entries, spring, 2009). I noted that C possessed these qualities and I felt his interest and care. As I did so however, I realized that so do I possess those same qualities of building relationship and expressing genuine care (journal entry, spring, 2009).

C had also begun reading the literature, and was ready to invest his energy in learning community initiatives beyond the honors program by using his role to schedule more sections of linked classes in his academic division and to continually promote them and rally interest in Academic Leadership Team meetings. We chatted about the impact linked basic skills and college success classes can have on students' retention and satisfaction, how faculty seem to have rewarding experiences teaching in a learning community, and the potential for these efforts to have a broader impact on retention and satisfaction in the College if we could grow the number of links (journal entries, spring, 2009).

We were forming what Kotter calls the "guiding coalition" (Kotter, 1996). Our group now had the combination necessary to lead and manage an effective change project. It was comprised of individuals who are institutionally recognized and reputable as experts in their knowledge niche; the Registrar knows how to manage the course registration system; the academic affairs and division administrators know how to schedule the courses in concert with various institutional offices; the faculty have experience teaching linked classes and blending pedagogy; and the recruitment representative and college relations manager know how to market efforts to incoming

students. Most importantly, C had the position power to really move the efforts forward in concrete ways that would result in having more learning communities on the institution's schedule for the 2010 – 2011 academic year. Finally, there was evidence that I was seen as an effective manager of large-scale institutional efforts by those I gathered for the committee, as they responded and committed their expertise and time to the project and participated in ways that helped us make progress. Further, given the commendations I have received for running the college-wide open house events and the basic skills annual conference, those in senior leadership positions also recognized that I am a competent professional and have subsequently invited me to serve on various college-wide committees, lead other groups, and lead aspects of the Commission on Student Development.

Kotter underscores the need to have both management and leadership in place on the guiding coalition (1996). Not only did C possess the position power to have learning communities added to the institutional schedule, but he had the ear of the senior academic leadership team and the EVP of Educational Services. He had been a part of the fabric of "A" Community College for decades, and was a charismatic figure, known to all members of the community. He had the ability to communicate and rally support around a cultural change in the form of learning communities. He was respected, he was outspoken, and he commanded people's attention. Quite unintentionally, the guiding coalition we were constructing followed Kotter's prescription and included, "strong position power, broad expertise, and high credibility" and "both leadership and management skills to make change happen" (Kotter, 1998, p. 66).



## **Faltering Momentum**

Our committee met regularly for several months in the spring 2009 term and made significant progress in structuring institutional protocols for scheduling and registering students in learning communities sections. We articulated a definition of learning communities and editorial copy for college publications like the catalog and master schedule (“A Community College” Catalog, 2009 – 2010; “A Community College” Master Schedule of Classes, fall, 2009), we instituted along with the registrar’s office the specific section code for learning communities courses, we developed the co-requisite coding in the registration system, and began to articulate responsibility of “who does what” to get a learning community on the institutional schedule when faculty express interest in linking their courses (field notes, spring, 2009; journal entries, spring, 2009). The definition that now appears in the “A” Community College catalog reads:

In higher education Learning Communities are classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and enroll a common cohort of students. A variety of approaches are used to build learning communities, with all intended to restructure the student’s time, credit, and learning experiences to build community among students, between students and their teachers, and among faculty members and disciplines.

Students in Learning Communities enroll in more than one class with the same group of students. Relationships with faculty and classmates are enriched by connecting content and assignments between courses. Learning Communities improve students’ success and help ease the transition to college.

By April, many on the committee were consumed by various responsibilities, and we were no longer meeting regularly. However, before we suspended our meetings, I informed the group of a regional learning community conference that was to take place in June at a community college in a neighboring state and encouraged participation among as many members of the group as possible. Attendance at this conference could provide members of the committee with a different lens through which to see our work at “A” Community College. It had been encouraging and motivating for me to see what colleagues across the country are doing, not only by reading about their work in the literature, but by meeting others and speaking with them about their experiences.

In addition to those regularly attending the meetings, I also sent the conference information via email to the Executive Vice President of Educational Services, the Dean of Academic Affairs, the Dean of Enrollment Management, the Registrar, the College-wide Basic Skills Coordinators from the reading, English, mathematics, and counseling departments, and any other faculty members whom had expressed interest in teaching a linked course in the past (personal correspondence). I received support in the form of funding commitments from the Deans of Academic Affairs, Enrollment Management, and English and Reading, for registration and travel expenses for me and three others from the committee. None of the senior administrators responded with interest in attending, but encouraged participation among their staff members. The learning community literature affirms the investment and involvement of a broad base of institutional stakeholders and holds that successful efforts bridge academic and support services (Shapiro & Levine, 2001).

I met the organizers of this conference at the National Learning Community Conference in Kansas City, Missouri in the fall of 2008. Their institution had received a large grant from MDRC (formerly, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation) to support their learning community initiatives, and had since adopted them as an institutional effort with executive endorsement. When our proximity was discovered they offered to invite me and a team from “A Community College” to the conference. They also offered their assistance as resources for the efforts I was undertaking at “A” Community College. Their two-day conference in June asked for team registration, to promote the commitment of the participating college, and ensuring a body of participants serious about implementing learning communities at their native institutions. While many on my committee expressed interest in attending when we discussed it in March, it proved challenging to muster the resources and enthusiasm for the conference when it was time to register in May, after most faculty had left campus for the summer ( journal entry, late spring, 2009).

I gathered a group of four, including me: M, my steadfast faculty member; a recruitment representative; and the administrator from the Dean of Academic Affairs office. We were an unusual group. While they had each met at our meetings in the spring term, their interactions were limited to those meetings and their professional roles did not intersect in any other capacity; I was the only one who connected them to each other. I drove the group to the conference each day. M was able to join us only for the first day but could not attend on day two. The conference was not a large gathering, attended by less than 100 people, but with representation from colleges and universities from several states. However, there were schools from the mid-west region of the country, and there

were presenters on the agenda from the Washington Center, the National Learning Communities Resource Center at Evergreen State College (journal entry, early summer, 2009).

The hosting college's president welcomed the attendees and had the groups introduce themselves. Each institution provided their school name, a quick introduction of who was present, and what their role was in the college or university. It was striking that we were the smallest group and the only group that did not have someone with position power in attendance. Every other institution had at least one provost, vice president, dean, or other senior-level administrator present. We immediately noticed the level of commitment of the other colleges present. It was a powerful illustration of where our own institution was in comparison to other colleges that had already made the institutional effort and commitment to offer learning communities on their campuses. These other colleges and universities had already invested serious institutional resources simply by sending so many members of their faculty, staff, and administration to the conference. There was only one other college which had travelled by car or van, all the others had flown and were staying overnight (journal entry, spring, 2009).

Our little group looked at one another after the introductions and each remarked about our own state of affairs. M wished that her dean, C, had accompanied us. The administrator from the Dean of Academic Affairs office said she felt she did not belong, and her boss should be there. I seconded her remark regarding her Dean's attendance, although validated her presence. I would have liked our EVP present, the Dean of Academic Affairs, or my boss, the Dean of Enrollment Development and Student Affairs to be present. The recruitment staff member also thought we were seriously

underrepresented, and said he would have liked the Registrar at the conference. We concurred that the lack of senior leadership made us feel inadequately prepared in comparison to our conference-going peers (field notes, early summer, 2009).

My journal entry for the conference notes a feeling of despondency and almost betrayal. I felt like my interests were being indulged, but not fully supported by those in power. I did not personally encourage the senior administrations' attendance beyond sending the email to them, and failed to recognize the importance of their presence at the conference. It was not only the committee members who could benefit from collaboration with colleagues from across the country, but also the senior leadership who needed to see and hear what their peers were doing and accomplishing in their own institutions.

C was supportive of sending faculty from his Division, but did not express interest in attending himself. I did not pursue the issue. He committed to traveling to the national conference with M in the fall and I was mollified by that. Our summer conference experience did not accomplish what I had hoped, which was to build more energy and momentum in the institution. With the exception of M, the others who attended were most likely not the right individuals at the right time (journal entry, early summer, 2009). The early implementation phase in which we found ourselves, required attendance at the conference by those with more influence and institutional commitment. C was the only individual with position power that had begun to demonstrate commitment with regard to growing the number of learning community pairings between basic skills English and reading classes and the college success seminar. He was also encouraging his peers to consider doing the same and to think about the ways they could link classes in their own academic divisions.

Upon reflection I see that one of my failings was in not helping those who did attend to see their role more broadly, and articulate and access their sphere of influence. That would also require garnering the endorsement and commitment of their supervisors to the learning community effort. I might have also more emphatically encouraged the attendance of those with position power, but I do not believe I understood the importance of their presence at the time. While the conference registration materials encouraged teams of representatives from colleges, it provided a lengthy list of those who would benefit from attendance. Certainly there were titles of senior administrators included but in my experience thus far, those leaders had not yet undertaken any responsibility in the creation of the learning community effort.

### **The Role of Power: Planning for Expansion**

Our communication as a group ceased over the remaining summer months. I was in sporadic contact with C regarding enrollment of not only M and F's learning community scheduled for the coming fall, but also on another effort of linked classes for future health science students. Enrollment was dangerously low and the EVP wanted to cancel the classes. This learning community also linked ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 but included an introductory psychology course and the curriculum was to be infused with healthcare topics. At the insistence of the EVP, the Dean of Social Science who oversees the psychology department, opened the enrollment in the introductory psychology course by removing the co-requisites that made it part of the learning community. Unlike the ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 classes, which are capped with smaller numbers of students, PSYC 106 has a capacity of 35 and is a much-sought-after course for first year students. The Dean of Social Science succumbed and open the section, but the 7 students enrolled

in the learning community remained in the course and at the 11<sup>th</sup>-hour, the EVP allowed the ENGL and HUDV courses to run with very low enrollment for the fall term (personal correspondence, late summer 2009; journal entries, late summer, 2009).

I was buoyed somewhat by this display of support for learning communities and acknowledged it with an email to the EVP (personal correspondence, early fall, 2009). C and I began to speak about recruiting faculty to teach linked ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 sections for the fall 2010 term. He reached out to the department chair of counseling and several of his faculty members in English and reading and copied me on all correspondence. Those who responded were interested, but most recipients were just getting into their fall 2009 term classes and the communication via email was not sustained. The academic division deans and the department chairs are concerned with the scheduling of classes a year in advance, but faculty assignments are typically not worked out that far ahead. The community had no knowledge of the importance of faculty assignment in a learning community; haphazard pairings are not likely to yield beneficial results. If we as an institution are going to proceed with learning communities, the early assignment of faculty must become a priority. Faculty teams need to have time to become acquainted with one another, develop a relationship, and bridge their curriculum in meaningful ways for students and themselves (Cox, 2004; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Matthews, 1994).

While it was critical to have things in place for the late spring Early Bird students who register in May for the fall term, and who are the most likely candidates for the learning communities, I left the scheduling of classes to those who are responsible for it, and removed myself from the process for the semester. I recognized that I needed an

advocate with power to take the reins of some of this work. Given what I experienced with the conference, I had the sense that I needed someone else rallying support and enthusiasm among the senior leadership. The literature on learning community initiatives and organizational change makes clear that endorsement of new initiatives must be widespread and supported by those in senior leadership positions of power in order to truly take hold in the culture of the institution or organization and create lasting change (Kotter, 1996; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). While I had felt some support and momentum in the community, I recognized that in order to move learning communities from a couple of offerings scattered in the schedule to more predictable curricular structures, I needed someone who was in a position of power to create them and make it happen.

C was the person who was able to do this. In his role of Dean of English and Reading, he had the ability to schedule more sections of English and Reading basic skills courses to be linked with HUDV 107 courses. The word power in its Latin derivation is to be able. It is “the ability to do or affect something or anything or to act upon a person or thing” (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 56). In its elemental form, there is an absence of domination or control in this exercise of power, and instead concern with “achieving or experiencing effectiveness” (p. 57) in concert with others. C recognized the opportunity inherent in his position to affect this kind of action and move the initiative forward. Domination or influence over anyone in C’s department was not at issue; C was not exercising power over anyone at this point in the project. Preliminary discussions had taken place with the department chairs of English and Counseling, C, and me regarding potential faculty members from the English and Reading department and from Counseling, to teach the linked courses scheduled.



C had displayed what Kreisberg (1992) terms, a “power with” approach to the learning community work early in the efforts. He met the faculty members from his division (S and M) whom had independently undertaken the initiatives, with open inquiry, a desire to learn about the experience, and a pledge of support and administrative action on their behalf to serve their needs and those of their students. He did not manage, control, or influence how they went about their work. Instead, he recommended communication among offices in the college for faculty to obtain what they needed to market and enroll their courses when they were threatened by low enrollment. He provided them with information and the go ahead to make use of the college’s marketing department to create professional grade posters and flyers. He suggested they contact the Registrar to also gather data for direct marketing to students to fill their classes (faculty interviews, fall 2008, spring, 2009). He did not do the work for them or provide other resources, but he was encouraging and enthusiastic about their efforts and verbalized support throughout the division.

The tone of cooperation in C’s division was manifest in the actions undertaken by his Division Administrator as she assisted M and F in their struggles with a clean cohort of students enrolled in their fall 2009 learning community (personal correspondence, spring and summer 2009). Further, M’s frank remarks to both C and me in which she expressed her frustration with the challenges of working with a variety of offices and individuals throughout the college to bring the initiative to fruition, also points to the control and power she felt in developing and undertaking the project without the dominance or interference of a supervisor, even though she later met obstacles and barriers in the form of people and procedures.

C acknowledged, validated, and applauded M's efforts and work (journal entries, fall, 2009; person communication, summer and fall 2009). Yet, even as she struggled with the enrollment of the cohort, and responses or inaction from others in the colleges, he did not interfere or influence the actions of others. Instead, the members of his division and I navigated the currents of the college community to enroll a clean cohort in the fall 2009 linked sections of ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 at the branch campus. C may have been able to make things easier for her and all of us at those moments, but his distance from the work in the trenches provided M with opportunities to negotiate and lead her initiative, and for me to act on her behalf as I came to the fore as the institutional resource and face of learning communities. He instead turned his attention and power to the scheduling of additional linked sections of basic skills reading and writing courses with college success seminars for the fall 2010 term. My emotions were mixed as I simultaneously experienced more support from C as he listened to the concerns, made recommendations, and demonstrated commitment for the future efforts, but frustration in the slow adoption in the institution. I refocused my efforts on the relationship between M and F in their learning community experience, and its benefits for them, their students, and future learning communities at "A" Community College.

### **The Complexity of Change**

Effecting change in a complex organization is a messy affair. "A" Community College is an institution that prides itself on its perceived culture of collegiality and innovation. There are vestiges of that history in many members of the community, and C embodies the spirit of the institution's early beginnings where faculty members did not issue letter grades and learning was collaborative and interdisciplinary. He cares deeply

for students, the faculty, and institution and encourages innovation in those in his division. However, the human resources and political frames under which the college operates are sometimes at odds with one another (Bolman & Deal, 2003). While the pet projects of faculty may be encouraged or even supported with some resources, moving such initiatives from limited offering to institutional effort is a daunting process.

The political environment dominates the current climate as external forces in local, state, and national politics and policies influence educational programming and expenditures. While innovation is still encouraged and individuals valued, there must be a measurable outcome tied to any effort that the college chooses to undertake. Further, systemic approaches like the advent of the “L” section code and the pre-requisite requirement must be implemented to standardize the offerings (Dougherty & Hong, 2005). It will take time to demonstrate that learning communities can yield results in retention, satisfaction, and engagement for students and faculty alike at “A” Community College. Imparting the theory and literature to the college community has only gotten me so far in this effort. I must continue to examine the faculty relationship and find avenues for them to share their experiences with their colleagues if we are to continue the campaign. My efforts going forward will seek to marry the human resources and political frames as we value the work of our colleagues, but provide meaningful outcomes and systems to support them.

## Chapter 8

### **Faculty Development and Engagement: Modeling the Relationship**

Faculty who participate in learning communities consistently report high levels of satisfaction with the experience (LaVine & Mitchell, 2006; Minkler, 2000; Moore, 2000; Smartt-Gaither, 1998; Tinto & Love, 1997; Wishner, 1996). My pilot study experiences with the ENGL and ENVR faculty and with M and G in Cycle I, illustrated the importance of having a partner in whom one has both confidence and a shared vision of the structure and anticipated outcomes of the linked courses. Each of these partnerships developed spontaneously and was motivated by the faculty members' desire to reach students in novel ways and share their experience in the classroom with a colleague. The relationships were personal and professional, and extended beyond the borders of the classroom. Students' remarks pointed to the friendship of their professors and how it set the stage for their relationships with each other (student survey responses, fall 2008). When faculty members find a partner with whom to work on a learning community, it both enlivens their own interest in the content, and enriches their personal and professional experience in their practice (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

I established that the visible quality of the faculty relationship had a positive impact on students' experience in their learning community in both the English and Environmental Science link and the basic skills English and College Success Seminar link. Relationships are a key indicator of engagement and success in the learning community experience and faculty provide a very powerful role model for the students in their community (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 1997). Further, the faculty members' satisfaction with the relationship had a positive impact on the experience of teaching a

linked course. M and F were not spontaneous partners in the next link of HUDV 107 and ENGL 095 in the fall of 2009. I was curious to work with them in their “marriage of convenience.”

### **Finding the Thread**

For this cycle of research, my focus shifted from the systemic challenges in creating institutional change and the role of positional support in effecting such change to the faculty experience. The powerful connection between M and G and how it influenced the students in Cycle I, drove my interest to examine how M and F worked together and how students responded to their relationship. I observed and participated in meetings between M and F and interviewed them and an individual student in their learning community in the late fall 2009 at the branch campus of “A” Community College. In addition, I had a number of interactions with the students as a group both in their ENGL 095 classroom and during the campus tour when the group came to the main campus early in the fall 2009 semester.

I learned in Cycle I that the student survey I developed did not yield particularly meaningful information, although the interviews with the faculty members and the voices of the students did. I followed up with individual interviews again in the early spring term of 2010, as M and F reflected on their experience in the fall term, and contemplated the next link in fall 2010. The faculty members were beginning to plan the next learning community links at the branch campus in which M will once again be paired with G, who will be back from her maternity leave. F will stay on at the location and offer a second learning community of College Success Seminar linked with ENGL 095. The English section will be taught by the other English faculty member who administered student

questionnaires for me at the branch campus when I was examining M and G's learning community in Cycle I in fall 2008.

### **Faculty Development**

How faculty members accomplish the goals of the learning community is predicated upon their philosophical orientation and prior experiences in the classroom. Community college professors prioritize the practice of teaching and learning over scholarly pursuits (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). As such, they are expert at engaging students in collaborative learning strategies and fostering a sense of community in the classroom. They are a natural cohort with whom to develop a learning community model (Cox, 2004). Tinto and Love (1997) indicate that all faculty members engaged in a learning community require further training and support in collaborative and cooperative teaching techniques. Faculty teams must encourage a culture of safety, support, and mutual respect so that they can freely observe, try new teaching techniques, and assess student learning (Moore, 2000). A rich sense of faculty development can be gained in the learning community experience by moving beyond traditional content boundaries and discovering broader patterns among disciplines (Minkler, 2000, Palmer, 1998). If this is what we expect of our students, we must first discover it for ourselves.

Faculty members are more engaged in their learning community experience when content is integrated across disciplines. Collaboration among faculty both within and between academic departments, and between faculty and students, fosters greater intellectual involvement and serves to invigorate and rejuvenate the teaching experience (MacGregor et al., 2002). Such a model provides opportunities for faculty to be both experts and learners in the community. It would appear that for faculty to integrate their

curriculum, they have to trust that the colleague with whom they are working will be a responsible teammate and will share their learning outcomes and goals for their course or content. M remarked in her interview that she thought the learning community relationship is a critical element and that trust was essential: “this is a marriage, pick your partner carefully!” (Faculty interview, spring 2009).

It is therefore not surprising that junior faculty members may be more willing to engage in learning community initiatives than their senior colleagues (Cox, 2004; pilot study survey, summer 2008). While many educators regardless of their tenure or time teaching continue to augment their skills and materials, junior faculty members are still developing their repertoire of techniques and methods of content delivery. As they build their professional portfolio, they actively seek additional tools and means of engaging students, and thus may be more open to collaboration with, and support of, their colleagues. When an organic relationship emerges among faculty colleagues, they are less likely to resist losing any of the content that they believe they must cover, for the sake of engaging students in meaningful ways of learning the skills and lessons of both disciplines.

### **Faculty Pairings**

The issue of trust and compatibility again arises as the professor struggles with the compulsion to cover the content of their academic discipline. Speaking on the topic of integrating content at the 2008 National Learning Communities Conference, Jean MacGregor, one of the founding members of the Washington Center, the National Learning Communities Resource Center at Evergreen State College, said to all assembled, “is it more important for you to say it, or for your students to learn it?”

(journal entry, fall 2008). Personal relationships and the trust they engender, make for safer platforms from which faculty can both explore, and lead students into the cross-disciplinary journey of their learning community (Fullan, 2001; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

F is a Student Development Specialist; a counselor. He spends the majority of his professional time in one-on-one sessions with students discussing their goals, plans, and life circumstances. He works with individual students to develop action plans and utilize resources so that they may make good decisions independently. He has taught the College Success Seminar a number of times and expressed enthusiasm for participating in a learning community to enhance the experience for his students, but also to learn new ways of doing things from a teaching colleague (personal communication, summer, 2009). I recorded in my field notes from an early meeting with M, G, and F: “F has very definitive boundaries in his professional life and is a well-trained clinician in mental-health counseling. He is less comfortable in the classroom and has more experience counseling than teaching” (field notes, faculty meeting, spring, 2009; journal entry, spring, 2009). His approach and personality are very different from M’s and those differences were somewhat more evident on our first meeting of the semester without the presence of G who had been the catalyst for their work together (journal entry, fall, 2009).

Our meeting with G before she commenced her maternity leave in the spring term 2009 had an effortless feel to it. G was the link between M and F; she had professional and personal relationships with both colleagues (journal entry, spring 2009). As F, M, and I met in the early part of their semester together, things felt more formal, and a little uneasy. While they had appeared in each other’s classrooms once, F and M had not had



an opportunity to meet before our time together, and indicated difficulty scheduling time to see one another or even to chat informally at the branch campus. The reasons cited included conflicting schedules and the relentless flow of students F faced every day in his primary role of counselor. It was the beginning of the third week of the term, and the two were speaking about individual students. M used many physical descriptors and was excited and animated as she attempted to identify students for F, whom seemed detached in comparison (field notes, fall, 2009). He listened to M, acknowledged what she was saying, and participated in the conversation by responding to her questions and providing his observations of the students during his class meetings.

F's contributions to the rest of the meeting were largely confined to the content of his course, how he was covering it, and how the two courses were intersecting. F was not any less enthused than M, he simply related to the experience in a way that was measured and tempered by professionalism, his personal boundaries, and his personality. In comparison, M and G are both expressive and exuberant in their personal presentation. They speak of their students, their characteristics, and their own experiences with transparent passion. F is more even in his temperament, and while I have witnessed his passionate expression about his work, his personal qualities tend toward reticence more than exuberance. M peppered him with questions about the students: "how much are they talking in class and participating? Is our group talking more than your other class?" (field notes, fall, 2009). She also asked if F could guess how some of them might or might not perform. I noted the impression that she seemed to want to provoke more from him; more information, more response, more enthusiasm (journal entry, fall, 2009).

Even in that early exchange between M and F, I observed a struggle for energy and connection between the two as individuals. While I recorded details of the meeting and the communication that took place, my journal entry tells of a transactional exchange that pointed to limited chemistry between M and F (journal entry, fall, 2009). They were exchanging information, but I had the feeling that M especially felt something missing in the relationship. I tempered the impression with internal statements of it being early in the term, a new experience for F, and an adjustment for M who has formed her way of “doing” a learning community based on her work with G (journal entry, fall, 2009). My investment in the initiative drove my desire for them to succeed, and for the students to have a positive experience in a rich environment. I was imagining how the dynamic would be in the classroom if I was feeling their uneasy communication. I was concerned, and asked about plans to spend more time in each others classes and outside of class to check in and catch up. Given the effortless nature of M and G’s relationship, who sought each other’s company, F and M had to find the time and make the time to meet; they could not grow a relationship without that investment. They agreed they had to find the time, but I am not sure if any of us were fully cognizant of the impact that could have on their dynamics in the classroom.

M and F wrapped up this meeting with a conversation about the campus tour that is part of the HUDV class (field notes, fall, 2009). It is often impossible for College Success Seminar classes that meet at the branch campus, or any of the other higher education centers of “A” Community College to take students on a tour of the main campus. Learning community sections can be an exception, particularly when the classes are scheduled back-to-back on the same day; there is then adequate time to transport the

group to and from their location, and to enjoy time together on the main campus while acquainting students with the facilities, resources, and services. I recommended that we make the time special for the students by doing something beyond a tour and suggested having a college official greet them, serve breakfast, and put together some giveaway items for the students (field notes, fall, 2009).

M and F were enthusiastic and liked the idea of acknowledging that the students were engaged in something special, that the learning community experience was unique, and they were an extraordinary group for being a part of it (field notes, fall, 2009). I offered to contact Student Life and Activities about food, College Relations about “A” Community College items to provide to the students on the day of the visit, and an administrator or two to greet the group (field notes, fall, 2009). M and F were excited. M and G had not brought their group to campus, so this was a different initiative. I noted that it was positive for M and F to share this experience as one that was solely theirs; out of the shadow of M’s relationship with G (journal entry, fall, 2009).

Like any exceptional experience, subsequent relationships are measured against that to which nothing can compare. Without a significant experience of their own, M and F were almost doomed given the close nature of M’s relationship with G. The suggestion to make their campus visit something special and unique was very important to this faculty pair. It was a way to cement the community and their relationship. While I was not fully cognizant of it at the time, I believed it was my role in our work together to help them make this happen, and the way I went about it demonstrates my servant approach to leadership. It was my goal to pave the way for the two faculty members to bring their students to the main campus and be welcomed by the College in a way that made the

students feel honored and valued, but also publically acknowledge the College's support for the professors, and their work (Fullan, 2001; journal entry, spring, 2010). It was a celebration and recognition of the progress the College was making with learning community initiatives as well. The act of publically connecting other members of the College community and a senior leader or two to learning communities could also serve to anchor the effort in the culture (Kotter, 2000).

### **The Student Group**

My first encounter with the cohort of students occurred about two weeks after my meeting with M and F, and took place on the day the learning community came to the main campus for their tour. The faculty and I had succeeded in all of our plans for the day with the exception of having a college official to greet the students. Our time conflicted with the President's Cabinet meeting and all senior officials were already engaged for the morning. However, the Director of Student Life and Activities ordered a lovely breakfast, and was present to bring greetings on behalf of the administration. He also provided the students with a schedule of Student Life and Activities programming at the branch campus for the semester where the majority of this group took all of their classes. I obtained backpacks and water-bottles imprinted with the college logo along with a variety of other useful items for students. The group was animated when I entered the room. I was the last to arrive that morning as I taught a class that met at the same time, and had quickly gone to greet them and get them launched with their guest presenter before joining the learning community group.

The students separated themselves by gender around the u-shaped configuration in the room. I remembered M's comments from the meeting between she, F, and I a few

weeks earlier. She indicated that there were more male students than female students in this group and her impression so far was that the male students were immature and had a negative impact on how the group was coalescing (field notes, fall, 2009). Everyone was finishing breakfast and the instructors thought it was time to get started. M and F were seated next to each other and I overheard snippets of casual conversation between them while everyone was finishing breakfast. Their ease with one another was noticeably greater than it had been even two weeks before during our meeting (field notes, fall, 2009). They stood up together in front of the group, welcomed them officially to the main campus, and then introduced the Director of Student Life and Activities. The students were fairly attentive, and respectful, but not particularly participatory or engaged. The Director of Student Life and Activities is no stranger to student development theory and asked the students a number of questions about their experiences so far as first-semester students. The students were quiet and unresponsive.

Indeed, after I was introduced to them and M told the students of my interest in their work together and with their faculty members as a learning community, they were silent when I asked how the classes were going or what their impressions were so far. F and M both prompted the students and one eventually spoke up and said that so far things were “good and it’s helpful to have both of them together. We do a lot of the same stuff in both classes.” He also said: “I never been here (main campus) and I’m glad I got to come and breakfast was good” (field notes, fall, 2009). I thanked him for his comments and asked if anyone else wanted to say anything.

There was a fair degree of tension in the room when the students were unresponsive. I recalled part of the conversation that took place in my meeting with M

and F, when M asked if the students were talking more in F's class and asked for a comparison between his non-linked class and their community. F responded that there were more females in his non-linked section and they were more involved in class discussions. M found the group less engaged than her other classes and thought they were uncertain as to how they should behave in her class. From her perspective, the preponderance of young, male, underprepared, and less-mature students perpetuated a mentality in the room that undermined the effectiveness of the environment (field notes, fall, 2009). I was left with the impression as well that the level of maturity of the students had something to do with their lack of participation.

The students proceeded with the tour of campus after breakfast and I parted company to teach a class. I was not feeling positive about the chemistry of the class even though M and F appeared more comfortable with each other (journal entry, fall, 2009). I saw F early the following week at one of our division meetings. He reported success with the events of the campus visit. His class was scheduled to meet the next day, but he could tell me that the students were more animated on the van ride back to the branch campus than they were earlier in the morning. He and M spent more time together on that day than they had previously and planned to get together after M's class the next day. I was concerned about how infrequently they were meeting and communicating. I was physically distant from their environment and also felt removed from their partnership. We did not debrief as a group; being on different campuses made this difficult although we could have conference called. I felt as if I was walking a tenuous line between supporting and managing their partnership and was concerned about how I would be perceived if I tried to orchestrate their relationship. I did not wish to impose and push for

more time together, and thus I found myself spending more time individually with each of them (journal entries, fall, 2009, spring, 2010). I told myself that M and F were finding their way and would have let me know if it was that difficult or they were really dissatisfied (journal entry, spring, 2010).

### **The Faculty Dyad and its Impact**

In a learning community students are expected to work together, to build relationships, and to create pathways between the content and their collaborators (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The faculty members in Cycle I and my pilot study have heretofore modeled the relationship for the students. Each of the other two partnerships was a genuine, spontaneous link in which the faculty already had a relationship with their partner. Up until the day of the tour, the indications were that while F and M spent some time in one another's classroom, they had not spent time together outside of class or formed a cohesive, easy relationship. Things appeared to be on an upswing on the day of the tour, and I observed a greater ease between them, although students did not seem particularly connected or aligned with either faculty member at that point (journal entry, fall 2009).

Follow-up emails with both M and F after their day on campus were positive.

From F:

Some of the students really got a lot out of their time on the main campus. They didn't realize how much was there for them and how like a 'real college' the campus is. I know that's funny to say, but many of them still have the perception that "A" Community College is like high school; you know, the 13<sup>th</sup> grade.

Taking classes at the branch campus can perpetuate that belief and actualize it (personal communication, fall, 2009).

M indicated that the students were happy to receive the attention and exposure to services and resources on the main campus. Even though some were taking classes at both locations, they had not yet discovered many of the facilities they learned about the day of the tour (personal communication, fall, 2009). I commended M and F for making it happen. They had met at the main campus very early on the day of the tour to check out two college vans to drive to the branch campus, pick up the students, and drive them to the main campus. They had to bring the students back to the branch campus by van and then return the vans to the main campus and retrieve their personal vehicles. It was a lot of time and work for M and F; recognizing and encouraging their dedication and commitment was important to the health of their relationship and their learning community (journal entry, fall, 2009).

It was early October when the tour took place and two months went quickly by before I again had contact with M and F; this time to schedule interviews with each of them individually at the branch campus. The fall term in particular brings much demand to my regular duties. I admit feeling disconnected from them and the students in their community throughout the semester. In retrospect, I think I should have been more involved in my efforts to check in on M and F and offer support, suggestions, or direction to help them secure and maintain the link between them and their courses, and consequently their students (journal entry, fall, 2010). As I reflected on the experience I wondered if my concern about meddling in their relationship was really rationalizing my disconnected busyness (journal entry, spring, 2010). The lack of support I have felt from



the leadership in the college community may well have been experienced by M and F in their community, though neither one expressed disappointment nor frustration to me (interviews, fall, 2009). What I heard from both of them was frustration with scheduling and room assignments; lack of administrative support not emotional support (interviews, fall, 2009). Not having had that on a sustained basis however, they may not have realized what they were missing (journal entry, spring, 2010).

### **A Fresh Perspective**

F has taught the College Success Seminar for a few semesters. His primary role is that of Student Development Specialist who came to “A” Community College from a small, private, senior institution where he taught a similar course. He typically teaches a section or two of the College Success Seminar on the college’s main campus and attends teaching support sessions for the course and its faculty whenever they are offered. As a junior faculty member, and one whose primary role is not in the classroom, F acknowledges and appreciates his need for additional skills and experience in teaching. He viewed the learning community as a prime opportunity to gain such techniques and experiences alongside a teaching colleague who had more classroom time and a broader range of skills from which to draw (personal communication, summer, 2009). F was excited and looking forward to learning and growing through the work in the learning community, especially given the positive priming from G as she shared information about the course and working with M (journal entry, summer, 2009).

My interview with him took place during the first week of December. F’s class meetings ended two weeks before we met in his office at the branch campus. I scheduled a meeting with M for the same day, but she had to leave early due to illness. The office

was very busy with students trying to register for classes in the coming semester; F and I met over a quick lunch. We share a personal and professional relationship, so interviewing him was both easy and awkward. It was easy in that we are comfortable with one another and spend time discussing a variety of topics on a regular basis. Conversely, it was awkward because it was an interview and not just a casual conversation. I used an unstructured approach and did not follow the protocol I used previously. (The protocol was appropriate for gathering initial impressions of the structure of the learning community in Cycle I as well as asking the faculty what worked and didn't work from their vantage point) This time, I was more interested in F's affective reflections on the learning community experience, having just finished it. I planned to speak with him again in the following term as I had in Cycle I with M and G, and to use a similar semi-structured protocol (Appendix A).

Reviewing the notes from our first-post-class exchange, I was struck by F's emotional detachment from the experience. His description of the learning community focused on the structure of the HUDV course, not on the affective responses or relationships I had hoped. He told me about the use of an online video series that encouraged students to participate via a discussion board. F found that many of the students participated regularly in the discussion board, a tool effective for new college students or those who have difficulty participating face-to-face in class. He spoke about the classroom and its configuration; he spoke about the schedule. Other than how the assignments connected between the two courses, and the continuation of discussions in English that grew out of the video series for the HUDV, there was no mention of a

relationship between him and M. It was her absence in his remarks, comments, and reflections that was most noticeable (journal entry, fall, 2009).

My journal entry and recollections of the exchange indicate surprise because F's initial enthusiasm was in part motivated by learning from M whom he considers a classroom professor with greater experience. He did say:

I felt more empowered about the curriculum and what I wanted to cover, what I wanted to add, delete or tweak . . . because we were combining the curriculum, and needed to hit certain targets for both classes. There was more of a structure, but at the same time, I almost felt like my time and methods were expanded because I had M's curriculum to meet some of the objectives of (our) content.

When asked if he went to her class or if she went to his, F indicated that they did each spend a bit of time in one another's classes. Mostly because of scheduling, he went to her class. They did not team teach or both lead sessions or content lessons.

Again, when I reviewed this interview, I was surprised at how little of the exchange related to F's partnership with M. Unlike previous work with faculty pairings in learning communities, I did not hear any anecdotes about specific student issues or examples from F about how he and M dealt with a student, or a student issue. F did speak for a while about two particular students, one whom both F and M had mentioned on our very first day working together. She was a non-traditional student, had a child, and very low skill levels. Both instructors voiced concern for her and her ability to benefit or succeed at "A" Community College. F said that she attended class sporadically for the

first half of the semester, but had ceased coming to his class several weeks ago and to his knowledge sporadically attended M's class.

The other student was a young man, who was quiet in class, yet embraced the video series F was using. The student wrote volumes about each episode for F's class and spoke about how the video's vignettes and the College Success course were helping him to adjust to college life and make decisions about his future (faculty interview, fall, 2009). F spoke about his interactions with the students in and out of class as he answered their questions about how to manage their college experience, when they needed to register or drop classes, what to do if they were having trouble in a class, and what to do if they were having trouble in their personal lives. He did not speak about connections with M with regard to the students, or a team approach to working with them.

F's perceptions of the experience were positive, however. He indicated he saw growth in the cohort of students. From his perspective they matured over the semester and most were retained to the end of the College Success Seminar at the tenth week. F spoke positively about the link with the ENGL 095 course and the access to the curriculum to meet the objectives of the HUDV 107 course. For F, having assignments in the ENGL 095 class that required students to reflect on the content of the HUDV course was enormously helpful. For example, students took a career assessment with F, and then had to write a reflective paper on one potential career path for M's class, which they discussed in F's class. As F saw it, students were spending more time with the content and reflecting at a deeper level by engaging with it in multiple ways (interview, fall, 2009).

My interview with F was the first concrete indicator of what I perceived to be the missing chemistry between the faculty members in this learning community. While there is a body of literature that points to gender differences in communication and relationships between men and women (Gilligan, 1982; Gray, 1992), I was basing my perceptions on not only the relationship between M and G, but also between S and her partner, who was male. In that relationship however, there were significant differences in age and position in the college that may have been contributing factors. S was a full professor with significant experience and a reputation worthy of great respect. Her partner was junior not just in position, but also in age. When I worked with them, it was clear that he had enormous amounts of respect for her and her experience and contributions to the community (field notes, spring, 2008; journal entries, fall, 2008). However, the lack of detail about the relationship between F and M was striking. I was curious to hear what M had to say and to gauge the student perceptions and reflections on the experience.

### **Expectations for Good or for Ill**

M and I met in the faculty offices at the branch campus. It is a large space with many desks and some moveable cubicles that denote territory. There is no privacy in this office and there were others present when we met. While the others were professionals going about their own duties, I had concerns about M's willingness to share plainly about her experiences during the semester. I was ultimately impressed by her forthcoming demeanor and the transparency with which she addressed her feelings and impressions of the learning community in the fall 2009 term (journal entry, fall, 2009). She began by indicating that her expectations didn't play out for the semester.

The motivation for the curriculum wasn't there for the students. There was a grade 13 attitude that was never overcome and the students fed off of each other. They didn't hand in work, they didn't hold themselves or each other accountable, and they were just a very immature group (faculty interview, fall, 2009).

M said that F indicated he saw growth among the students throughout the semester, but she did not:

Students, who were ready, maintained their motivation and did well. Those who weren't exhibited no growth. There are a few with personal issues that are definitely getting in the way of them being ready for college and what we expect of them here (faculty interview, fall, 2009).

Expectations figure prominently in this cycle of research. M indicated that the students in this learning community had expectations for college that were inconsistent with her expectations of them. Further, the students were not prepared for the serious repercussions of their failure to meet faculty members' expectations: they do not expect to fail the class, even when they fail to produce the work (journal entry, fall, 2009). M had hopes for the learning community that did not materialize as well, and began our conversation with her expectations of the students in terms of their maturation and work ethic. M is realistic; she knows students in her class are underprepared academically:

I teach basic skills English. I know that our (community college) developmental students come to us with limited skills and experience in writing. I also expect that they need a lot of support to feel good about what they do produce, but I do expect them to produce and to work for their grade. There is no social promotion

here and many are taken by surprise when they fail even if they come to every class and are 'nice' to me and their classmates (faculty interview, fall, 2009).

M's expectations of her work with F were also unrealized. The role of the counselor in the College Success Seminar, and as part of the learning community team was filled by G in ways that differed from F's approach. M said she did not experience the same kind of intimacy or teamwork that she had with G.

F provided more advisement than counseling and the whole reason we (she and G) started the LC was because of the issues students have. G is a counselor and approached her work in the community from a whole-person perspective. F is an advisor, and did not offer the students the same kind of connection (faculty interview, fall, 2009).

M admitted a bit sheepishly that she thought F would present the course material the same way G had; do the same exercises; cover the same content. She said it did not even occur to her to review some things with him because she made assumptions about the curriculum and how it would be covered. "We didn't connect as often to discuss our plans or strategies or even the students. Our styles are pretty different from each other and when we were together in the classroom, it made me anxious" (faculty interview, fall, 2009).

When asked about the tour experience from her perspective, M said it was "flat." She equivocated about the reasons. "I don't know if it was the dynamics of the group, which are not great as you know, or if it was a lack of energy in the instruction" (faculty interview, fall, 2009). The tour is a standard session of the College Success Seminar and

F led it. There was no connection of the tour or the day on campus to M's ENGL 095 content. The faculty did not discuss finding a link to have the students write about it and reinforce the relationship between the two classes and faculty members. M and G did not bring their link to campus and therefore had no assignment mapped out from their semester together. I speculated to myself about the amount of time F and M spent in collaboration and how the connection faltered from lack of time and attention. I assumed the two would find a way to tie the outing to the curriculum of both classes, and perhaps each one thought the other would take the initiative to recommend a mutual assignment linking the experience for the students (journal entry, fall, 2009).

M concluded the interview by saying she was disappointed with the learning community this semester and missed G. It was such a different experience from the first time, and she hoped she could work with her old partner again to see if a new group of students would be as good with G as it was with their prior cohort (faculty interview, fall, 2009; journal entry, fall, 2009). M and G are slated to work together again in the fall 2010. M's disappointment and the apparent disconnect between the faculty members and subsequently their classes, is an indicator that this link suffered from a lack of attention and time for planning and collaboration. Faculty members engaged in learning communities need regular contact and time to collaborate, share, and plan. Faculty members in a learning community are engaged in a highly supportive teaching environment; one that allows for greater risk-taking, but also requires co-planning as an important characteristic (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).



## **The Student Perspective**

I went to one of the semester's last meetings of the ENGL 095 class to speak with the students as a group. When I arrived, M left the room to allow the students more freedom to talk with me about their experiences. Ten students were present; six were not. The capacity in the class is sixteen and M indicated that there were two others who were expected and had been attending regularly. The remaining four had stopped attending consistently and were in grave jeopardy of failing if they had not already withdrawn (field notes, fall, 2009). It was the twelfth week of the semester: "A" Community College's deadline to withdraw from a course. First semester students frequently neglect to officially withdraw from classes because they are unaware of the procedures to withdraw and the ramifications of not withdrawing when failing or no longer attending. The missing students in this group should have known about both had they attended F's College Success Seminar's Boot Camp session, a regular part of the course where policies and procedures governing such things are discussed (field notes, fall, 2009). Faculty tend to stress the importance of attendance at this session and attendance weighs heavily in grade composition for the College Success Seminar.

The room was a computer lab with rows of long tables that held individual monitors occluding both the students' view and the instructor's view of the students. It was not an ideal arrangement for a class discussion or for group work as F indicated in his interview (faculty interview, fall, 2009). The prescribed College Success Seminar curriculum relies heavily on both pedagogies. It can be helpful to have access to individual computers for career and transfer research, as well as acquainting students with web-based institutional resources. However, rows of computer monitors without a

space for facing one another or working together imposes a barrier on the relationship-building that is not only synonymous with learning community theory (Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Tinto & Love, 1997), but a stated learning outcome on the College Success Seminar's syllabus (field notes, fall, 2009). The first learning community that linked ENGL 095 with the College Success Seminar was not housed in a computer lab, but in a traditional classroom with individual desks (field notes, spring, 2009).

I had not seen the group since the tour on the main campus two months earlier and reintroduced myself to them. Those present were traditional-aged students. The group was chattier than it was the day of the tour. They seemed more at ease with each other and in this environment, which had been their home together for the semester (field notes, fall, 2009). I began by asking if they would tell me about their experiences with the linked classes; how they were connected and what they thought about them. One of the first-row male students responded immediately and with some sarcasm: "There *was* no connection between them (student group interview, fall, 2009)." One of his row-mates chimed-in before I could say anything: "Wait, there was that paper. That paper that we had to write about how we learn and what we like from those tests that we took (student group interview, fall, 2009)." This was the student I noted was most outspoken and participatory on the day of the campus tour (field notes, fall, 2009).

I asked if they took the career tests in the HUDV class which sparked more discussion. One of the two young women sitting together remarked:

Oh yeah . . . we had to write about our test results. There was a compare and contrast paper, remember; about our learning style and high school and college?

Then we had to interview someone who works in a field we're interested in or one that came up on our test (student group interview, fall 2009).

A female student across the aisle said: "Yeah, I liked that. That was pretty good." I said to the group that it seemed like there might have been connections between the classes after all. The male student who initially spoke up said: "I guess, but the HUDV class was so boring. I couldn't wait for it to end" (student group interview, fall, 2009). There was some murmuring of assent. Then, one of the female students who sat alone in another row chimed up: "[F] was really nice, but it did move slow. I think I got stuff out of it though. I learned things I didn't know about college" (student group interview, fall, 2009). There were more mumbles of agreement, but no one else spoke (field notes, fall, 2009).

I asked about the tour and several students began speaking at once. I recognized the other female student from the second row who hadn't said anything yet:

I take classes in \_\_\_\_ (the town in which the main campus is located), and have no reason to go into most of the places we went like the art gallery, the theater, the fitness center. I also didn't know there were all these people in every department to help you. Now I know where so many things are and where to get help (student group interview, fall, 2009).

I raised the topic of student fees and how making the most out of their tuition and fees meant accessing the services, and participating in the activities offered by the College, whether at a branch campus or at the main campus. I implored them to not only be good students, but to be good consumers and get the help they need when they need it.

Finally, I asked the group about the scheduling of these two classes. This learning community was scheduled entirely on one day with ENGL from 8 – 10:45AM, and HUDV from 11:00AM to 12:15PM. The students overwhelmingly responded that it was too long to sit still. “I felt like a prisoner in this room” said one; “like I said before, ‘I couldn’t wait for that class to end,’” said another (student group interview, fall, 2009). They were in the same classroom for four hours with a short break (field notes, fall, 2009). I asked if they thought this might have something to do with their feelings about the HUDV course. The students looked thoughtful (field notes, fall, 2009) and there was silence for a minute or two. The student from the front row who countered his friend by being the first to point out the connection between the two classes, said:

I think so. In high school classes were what? Forty-five, fifty minutes? It killed me to sit here for so long in this room. When we were doing stuff it was ok, better. But most of the time it was just talking, you know? (student group interview, fall, 2009).

I identified this young man as a potential leader in the class when the group came to the main campus on the tour. As the other students listened to him, I noticed nods of agreement (field notes, fall, 2009).

One of the female students from the second row said, “I love [M] though and want to take her for my next English class. She told us not to because she thinks we should try someone else, but I already registered for her class (student group interview, fall, 2009).” “Me too” came a few voices from the group, both male and female (student group interview, fall, 2009). As if on cue, M returned to the room and I thanked the students for their time, invited them to come see me in the counseling department if they

needed anything at the main campus, and extended an invitation for them to speak with me privately after class if there were things they did not wish to say in the group (field notes, fall, 2009).

I remained at the branch campus for the rest of the day in the counseling office seeing students for advisement. I had mixed feelings after the class meeting. The student group had more comfort with one another over the intervening weeks between the campus tour and the end of the term, which I noticed in their cross-talking and banter. However, I also understood the concerns about maturity level that the faculty noted (especially M). Some of the students' initial negative perception of the experience was indicative of that immaturity and it took some prompting from students who were more measured and mature in their responses to jar those who were indifferent, or brashly outspoken into seeing the positive connections between the classes and their content (field notes, fall, 2009).

I felt sympathy for M and F with this group; if they had come a long way it had indeed been a difficult semester, but I could see where having a partner with who to share the experience would have been helpful. I was sad for M that she did not feel the kind of support she needed in this semester and guilty that I did not provide more to her. In her interview this fall and last spring, she stated that having a counselor present to help students with personal and adjustment issues was a critical component in the learning community with basic skills students; she expected a more involved presence like she had with G, and perhaps needed more personal support as she dealt with the students week after week, though she did not say (interview, spring, 2009; interview, fall, 2009; journal entry, fall, 2009).

When class was over, I greeted the male student whom had been the most engaged, or at least the most verbal, in my interactions with the group. He had not yet committed his classes for the coming spring semester, even though early registration is a primary objective of the College Success Seminar, which ended three weeks prior. His expressed reason for visiting me was to accomplish the goal of registering for classes. However, he agreed to speak some more about his experience in the learning community.

The student, M.G., is from the immediate geographic area and fits the demographic of students who typically attend the branch campus. He is a traditional first-year student, a first-generation college student, and is not sure of his major. M.G. has interest in both automotive technology and criminal justice and would like to take one of each introductory class for the coming semester. This semester he is enrolled entirely in basic skills courses, with the exception of the College Success Seminar; English, reading, and mathematics. His classes currently meet at the branch campus. He will have to take the automotive course at the main campus and feels ready to do that. He found the tour helpful:

I had been there with my dad before and walked around outside on the campus. Going with the class was good because we went into the buildings and got to see classrooms and where the departments were. I didn't do that before (student interview, fall, 2009).

Of the learning community and its connections, M.G. said, "I thought the assignments in both classes were connected. It was helpful to have two different teachings on the same subject (student interview, fall, 2009)." When asked about how the students got along and what his relationship with the faculty was like, M.G. indicated

that he felt he could talk to M and F much easier than he could his reading or math professor. However, he said the students participated about the same as they did in his other classes and they didn't do a lot of group work or anything.

There is one other guy from English and HUDV that is in my reading class and we hang out, but I don't feel like I know anyone else really well or anything. We don't hang out, anyone else in the class (student interview, fall, 2009).

M.G.'s comments reinforce much of what F indicated in his interview regarding the structure of his class and the limitations of the environment on group work and discussion (faculty interview, fall, 2009). Further, M.G., also like F, said nothing of the relationship between F and M and how that impacted the experience (journal entry, fall, 2009). He acknowledged that they were each more approachable than other faculty members whom he had during the term. However unlike previous learning community students, he made no mention of the relationship between the faculty members or any sense of community that arose in the group due to the link or from the connection between the faculty (journal entry, fall, 2009). The sensation I experienced earlier in the term returned, and I was struck by the feeling that the "community" of this learning community never coalesced for any of the participants (journal entry, fall 2009).

### **Moving Forward With Lessons Learned**

The ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 learning community led by F and M at the branch campus of "A" Community College in the fall 2009 did not fare as well as its predecessor in fall of 2008. Students cast the link as tenuous, and did not express the feelings of support, connection, engagement, and enthusiasm as they had in the previous learning community (student group interview, fall, 2009; student interview, fall, 2009). They

spoke little of the relationship between the faculty members and amongst themselves as a cohort (student group interview, fall, 2009). How much of this is due to the characteristics and chemistry of the student group and how much is due to the faculty relationship is speculative. However, student and faculty reports of prior learning community experiences indicated that the quality of the faculty relationship had a profound impact on the satisfaction of the experience for all involved (cycle I, fall, 2008; pilot study, spring, 2008).

M and F are both dedicated professional educators. They each express care and concern for their students, the job they do, the institution, and their colleagues (journal entry, fall, 2009). This learning community link was one that arose out of a desire to continue the good work begun in fall 2008 between M and G in which student and faculty reported satisfaction with the experience, and student retention was high (cycle I, fall, 2008). The relationship between M and F was not an organic, self-propelled one. They responded to the institutional need to serve students, and took it upon themselves to do so in a way that has potential to promote greater success among first-semester, under-prepared students. However, the desire to reach students differently, to help them and the College grow and succeed, as well as gain greater satisfaction and skills in teaching, does not appear to be enough to promote a successful and satisfactory learning community experience for all (journal entry, fall, 2009).

If “A” Community College is to maintain its commitment to growing learning community initiatives, it would appear that working out the mechanics of scheduling, promoting, and enrolling the linked sections is only a portion of the equation. Establishing those procedures, developing the protocols, and designating the resources



has been challenging and is ongoing. This cycle of research indicates that it is also advisable to provide opportunities for faculty from a variety of academic departments to mingle, brainstorm, and contemplate meaningful connections between their disciplines. Such opportunities may forge the kind of relationship that seems to be the most productive in a learning community; a spontaneous, authentic chemistry that is gratifying for the participants and models desired behavior for students.

The next cycle of research will shift back to the institutional efforts to establish and grow learning communities at “A” Community College. I will chronicle the activities and interactions that occur during the spring 2010 semester as the Dean of English and Reading and I seek to schedule several basic skills learning community sections. Given the results of this study to date, we will continue to grow the initiatives, seek well-suited faculty pairs to teach them, and spread the word in the larger college community. Our objective is to showcase the work of the faculty who have participated in a learning community initiative, share information about the benefits, the challenges, and the national trends in this kind of student engagement, and provide networking opportunities for faculty to consider teaching linked sections.

Kotter (1996) writes of the growing trend in effective organizations where leaders provide appropriate guidance and direction, yet individuals have the autonomy and personal authority to manage their own behavior and the tasks with which they are charged. It is my hope that as “A” Community College’s plan to institute learning community links evolves the institution will operate in kind; where faculty members are self-directed and develop their own links and relationships. They can be free to bridge

their curriculum and pedagogy in ways that suit them and their students, while the institution provides the support, resources, and vision necessary to sustain them.

## **Chapter 9**

### **The Process of Creating Major Change**

In the fall term of 2009, electronic correspondence began between the Dean of English and Reading (C) and me, department chairpersons and division administrators, and the Registrar, to align and schedule linked courses for the fall 2010 term (personal electronic correspondence, fall, 2009). The ad hoc committee, which was my guiding coalition ala Kotter (1996), met sporadically again and determined an objective to form at least six learning communities linking basic skills English, Reading, and/or Math with a College Success Seminar and to offer them at each of “A” Community College’s four Higher Education Centers, the branch campus, and the main campus (field notes, fall, 2009). We were moving along Kotter’s 8-Stage Process of Creating Major Change with the development of this vision, and strategies to actualize it (journal entry, fall, 2009). The previous experiences of the division administrators in the English and Reading, and Counseling Divisions, along with the cooperation of the Registrar, made the processes for implementing the links in the registration system less complex, but still not without challenge (journal entries, fall, 2009; personal electronic correspondence, fall, 2009). Given what I had discovered over the previous cycles, however, a significant component was recruiting well-suited faculty member teams, those who would be enthusiastic, cooperative, and excited about such an undertaking (journal entry, fall, 2009).

#### **Embedding the Guiding Coalition in the Senior Academic Leadership Team**

Early in the spring 2010 term, two of the Academic Division Deans (including C, the Dean of English and Reading) approached me about leading one of the monthly Faculty Meetings sponsored by the Executive Vice President for Educational Services

and coordinated by the Academic Division Deans (journal entry, spring, 2010). These meetings had evolved from administrative information sharing (or dictates, as was the perception in the faculty) to faculty-led, professional development sessions, designed to offer teaching professionals the occasion to network with one another and impart educational innovations and trends. C had become the learning community champion among his peers and was a vocal supporter for the initiatives in his meetings with the other Academic Division Deans and the EVP of Educational Services. He was also tirelessly supportive of the faculty members in his Division who expressed interest in learning communities or any other initiative. It was due to his efforts that I received yet another chance to carry the change message to the larger body of the college's faculty.

### **The Power of Position**

C is a well-respected, senior member of the faculty turned administrator, and his opinion holds sway not only amongst his peers, but also in the broader college community. A charismatic and recognizable force with a shock of white hair and a full white mustache, C looks every bit the seasoned English professor. He is blustery, and occasionally a bully, yet is regarded as a legend and a treasure in the classroom. My enthusiasm and appreciation of his support vacillated over the eight months we worked together. I was grateful for his presence and voice at the tables at which I had no seat. I was also beginning to see results due to his participation and role, but there were times I feared his agenda and power to steer the project toward work that was not central to the institutional mission. When C attended the ad hoc committee meetings, he was clear that he was invested in the success of the new honors cohort program that was envisioned to function very much like a learning community. I have expressed my concerns about this

program, and conversely hoped for learning communities at “A” Community College to foster and promote the democratic values inherent in the community college mission (access and opportunity). By linking basic skills courses with college success courses, the learning community links I was championing would provide underprepared students with resources and skills that would support their retention and success in their college experience.

The honors program at “A” Community College reaches about twenty new students annually. While there is a student population that is both qualified and interested in this program, I see the community college’s primary role as offering access and opportunity to the neediest members of the community. However, access without support is not truly opportunity especially for the basic skills student population (Engstrom & Tinto, 2009). C has since embraced the idea of learning communities for first semester basic skills students, a population that the literature indicates benefits greatly from the intentional connections with faculty, peers, the institution, and links between classroom curricula (Minkler, 2000; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Love, 1997). Nearly 80% of incoming students at “A” Community College demonstrate a need on their placement test for basic skills remediation. With an annual incoming class of first-time, full-time students of approximately 3,500 students, the number of students who could potentially benefit from a basic skills learning community is far greater than the twenty students in honors (“A” Community College, Planning, Assessment & Research published data, fall, 2009).

The Executive Vice President of Educational Services had been inconsistent in her support for learning communities up to this point (journal entry, spring 2010). She did not impede faculty from planning and scheduling linked courses, but provided no

sanctioned time to collaborate, no earmarked funding to reshape curriculum, no designated personnel or institutional processes to manage the efforts, and no verbal or written affirmation to the faculty for their initiative. However, she demonstrated a degree of endorsement through her actions and made concessions that were supportive. In the fall of 2009 the EVP allowed a grossly under-enrolled ENGL 095 link with an HUDV 107, geared toward prospective health science students, to run with only 8 students registered. She allowed low-enrolled links between English and science courses to stay on the schedule until direct mailing efforts could raise the number of students in the sections.

The EVP offered me a venue to speak with the faculty, and not only showcase the work of junior colleagues but, also, provide opportunity for the instructional body to think about ways of linking their own courses. At this meeting, faculty would have time to chat and brainstorm with colleagues from a variety of disciplines with whom they could potentially work. My hope rose as I finally felt buoyed by the support of the senior academic leadership. We had 6 sections of linked basic skills and college success seminar classes on the schedule for the coming fall 2010 term; I believed the change was coming (journal entries, spring, 2010).

As I contemplated the flow and format of the faculty meeting, I was excited about the networking potential. My previous cycles of research indicated that faculty members who develop spontaneous, organic relationships with one another are likely to yield personal satisfaction from their learning community experience and have a positive impact on students' perceptions of their linked courses as well (journal entry, spring 2010).

At first I was told that I would be running the meeting and was to put together the program. After a week and a half, I received a number of emails from C inquiring about how the program was taking shape, what topics the faculty members would cover, how I was communicating with them about their charge and time allotment, and so forth. I responded with puzzlement by his sudden concern and (micro-) management; he then indicating that the EVP was “nervous and wanted more involvement on the part of the deans” (personal communication, spring, 2010).

I met with C and the other Academic Division Dean a few times to clarify how the program would unfold, which faculty members were covering what aspect of the content, and to delineate their own roles in the program, which were largely perfunctory. They made it clear that the program was mine, I was the content expert, and the stars were the teaching faculty. At the same time they both indicated the need to placate the EVP who expressed concern about my enthusiasm for the junior faculty members’ participation and their presentation to their colleagues.

Again, the climate at “A” Community College discouraged significant public participation by new faculty members, especially those untenured. A considerable amount of intellectual posturing and power-playing can take place in this sort of forum, and any unsubstantiated claim or questionable professionalism in the presentation could result in a quagmire of difficulty for my vulnerable colleagues. While disheartened by what I initially perceived as a lack of trust in my leadership abilities, I also recognized the power that the endorsement of the deans and EVP would have in the eyes of the greater college community.

## **Invoking Kotter's Process for Change**

Leading one of the EVP faculty sessions was a key opportunity to once again communicate the vision, to build further interest and energy among the faculty body to promote this institutional change, and to stretch and demonstrate my leadership. I was offered the chance to lead and provide a forum for those faculty members with whom I had been collaborating so they could share their significant work with their colleagues (Greenleaf, 1998). I felt a responsibility to my junior colleagues to care for them in this environment; I was asking them to do something daring and courageous. Some had already caught the eye or ire, of the EVP and deans, by speaking up at the college-wide Governance Forum, requesting more time to spend on the main campus for meetings and collaboration with colleagues (even though expressly hired to teach at the branch campus), and for taking maternity leave not long after being hired in a full-time, tenured position. Those with whom I had been working most closely were not yet tenured and had been in the institution for only a year or two (Bolman & Deal, 2003). I saw my role as their champion and protector, particularly as they entered the arena of their colleagues (Fullan, 2001).

“Communicating the change vision” (Kotter, 1999, p. 21) must happen in a variety of settings and with the support of a wide-range of individuals within the organization. Without an investment from those at higher levels of organizational leadership, a new initiative is likely to fail. Thus, having a faculty meeting and workshop devoted to the subject of learning communities was a very public display of support for the concept by the Academic Leadership Team (deans and EVP). The Academic Division deans and the EVP of Educational Services were communicating the change



vision and modeling positive reinforcement of it by providing the venue, and encouraging their faculty to attend. This sort of public endorsement lent greater credibility to the work of the junior faculty members who would present. If the EVP was willing to devote one of her meetings to the topic, it had some merit among the senior academic leadership team, and be given more consideration in the organizational culture.

Kotter indicates that every opportunity must be seized to send the message throughout the organization for the intended change to take hold in the culture (Kotter, 1996). The meeting was also “empowering broad-based action” (Kotter, 1996, p. 21) by encouraging faculty to consider non-traditional ideas and actions in their networking with colleagues. The objective of the program was to encourage faculty members to brainstorm about how they could link their own discipline’s content with the content of their colleagues. It was also a very public recognition of the short-term wins that had been accomplished in the learning communities in the fall semesters of 2008 and 2009. The momentum was gathering, but the faculty who were to present were nervous and concerned about their participation. For each of them, it was the first time they had made a professional presentation to a large body of colleagues and those who had challenges with the EVP or any of the deans actually feared some reprisal (journal entry, spring 2010).

In the weeks before the presentation I met with each of the faculty teams; M and G (who had returned from her maternity leave), M and F, and two other new faculty members who delivered a linked ENGL 122, research writing, with a CHEM 116, Chemistry in Life (a general education lab science for liberal arts students). These two women (K and B) began teaching at the College in the spring term of 2009, met at the

new faculty development sessions, and decided to link their courses for their first fall term. C supported the English Professor, who was actually a full-time temporary hire, with several broadcast emails promoting the learning community and announcements in public forums endorsing the efforts of the enthusiastic new faculty. The Science Dean expressed one-on-one verbal support for the initiative in personal conversation (journal entry, fall, 2009), and let the course run with fewer students than usual; however, she did not advocate for her faculty in the same way that C did for his. She did not rally enthusiasm, did not offer to promote further initiatives, and provided no public endorsement of the new faculty members' efforts.

### **Confronting the Culture**

During one of the Collegiate Governance Forums late in the fall 2009, a discussion arose about building participation in the governance structure. K, the English faculty member from the CHEM / ENGL link offered her opinion on the role of new faculty participation in Governance and challenged the institutional culture which limited such participation. As I was seated next to her, I took note of the scathing looks she received from a couple of the senior academic leaders. We did not have the opportunity to discuss that event again until the weeks just before the faculty meeting at which she would be presenting (journal entry, fall, 2009; spring, 2010). K and her partner B, met with me twice to discuss their topic for the presentation which was bridging the curriculum and building integrated assignments. We discussed how they would parse out their portion of the presentation; they shared their outline, rehearsed a bit, and reviewed their time limit. I was comfortable with their preparation and they were comfortable with the material and presenting it.

As we wrapped up our last meeting before the presentation, B excused herself to teach her next class, and K and I remained behind for a cup of tea in the cafeteria. We had an opportunity to chat informally, and it was then that she made a comment about her feelings regarding the academic leadership and their perception of her. K said something along the lines of, “it doesn’t really matter what kind of job I do with this I am still hated by \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_ (members of the academic leadership and senior colleagues in her division)” (field notes, spring 2010). When I inquired further, she shared the incident that I had witnessed and made some general statements about being unpopular in her own division.

I asked if she was comfortable sharing her work in this venue and if I could help in any other way. K dismissed the incivility and difficulty she faced, and focused on benefits for the students if more faculty members would teach linked classes. She also expressed gratitude to B her chemistry colleague, C, her division dean and department chair whom she insisted was her staunch advocate. I offered my support and thanks for her courage and willingness to participate in the program, particularly in the face of what she had already experienced at “A” Community College as a relative new-comer (journal entry, spring 2010). “A” Community College claimed a culture of collegiality, yet here was someone new, enthusiastic, and professional being treated poorly because her views did not coincide with the prevailing culture (journal entry, spring, 2010). K and I grew closer in that exchange and I admit feeling disappointed in my community and colleagues once I heard her story. Her commitment to the learning community effort underscored her dedication to her students and profession in my mind, and it was eye-

opening to me that some saw her as a threat or infidel. The veil was just beginning to lift however.

I reviewed the program with the other faculty teams as well. M and G were to talk about relationships that developed among their cohort and the feedback they received from students regarding their own relationship and its impact on the learning community experience. F was focusing on the professional development gained from working with a colleague in a learning community, and M agreed to reinforce these benefits. I had one other team of faculty from the ENGL 095, HUDV 107 link for health science students, who were to speak about infusing occupational content into their courses and the advantages of contextual learning for students in their link. This dyad was comprised of tenured faculty members with whom I did little preparation, except to reinforce the time limits under which we were operating (journal entries, spring, 2010).

The night before the meeting I learned that C would not be in attendance. He had not responded to my emails for two days and I was growing concerned. Finally, late in the evening, I received a phone call from the other dean who was on the program with us. He told me that C was having health problems, did not want me to worry, but would not be at the faculty meeting. I was concerned and disappointed. Concerned that it was serious and C had avoided telling me that he would not be there, and disappointed because I knew that his faculty relied on his support and would be dismayed and worried as well. I had my own concerns about the portion of the program that C was to address: the challenges we had faced as an institution in offering and successfully running learning communities.

My colleagues in the larger faculty body needed and deserved transparency and ownership of how the institution had failed in truly supporting these initiatives. There would be faculty members present who had tried to offer a link and failed to meet sufficient enrollment for it to run. C was the person to best address these issues. He was both respected and held the position power to openly raise the challenges and problems related to learning community initiatives and, also to share the advances we made in the past year. I had been counting on him to charge the faculty with bringing their ideas for collaboration to their department chairs and division deans and I had less confidence in his colleague who was not as seasoned an administrator and garnered less respect in the community. I also felt less protected and certain without him there, especially given the vacillations of the EVP (journal entry, spring, 2010).

On the day of the presentation, the faculty and I met in the meeting room before the scheduled time. We reviewed the program, checked the technology, and I told them C would not be with us. As expected, they were concerned and dismayed, but not to the point of distress. The program went on as planned and I acknowledged the support of the EVP from the podium and thanked her for letting sections run that were under-enrolled. I spoke about the challenges and time it takes to create this kind of change in an institution and we offered her a round of applause. I was surprised and disappointed that she left soon after, before the faculty shared their experiences. The faculty teams made their presentations to attentive colleagues, and were asked thoughtful questions by their peers. They were poised, expressive, and professional, and I felt a surge of pride in their work with each other, and our work together (journal entry, spring, 2010).

The workshop portion of the program was energetic and robust. The Academic Division Deans circled the room and offered suggestions to the faculty members who were intentionally seated at tables with people from other academic disciplines. Their assignment was to develop a learning community of two courses taught by those at the table. I offered a structure for faculty members to build one integrative and purposeful assignment that would bridge the curricula of the two courses (Appendix E) and further prompt faculty to consider use of community and co-curricular resources that engage students in the broader college community (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008). As each table reported at the end of the session, they offered creative and meaningful links to their colleagues. The session seemed a success, and I received a number of requests to share the presentation and resources at both the end of the program and in the days that followed (journal entry, spring 2010; personal correspondence, spring, 2010).

I took note of several faculty members clustered at their tables chatting and exchanging information as the meeting broke up. I thanked the presenters and felt good about our accomplishment until I realized how quiet and upset M and G were. The others left, but M and G stayed behind and related what happened right before the meeting began. G told me that when she and M went to the restroom, the EVP was also there. She did not speak to either of them, did not wish them well, did not acknowledge their presence even though they both said 'hello' to her. There was no one else in the room with the three of them. M and G each had their own history of discord with the EVP and were shaken by the slight they received from her just before their presentation. They, too, had taken note that she left the meeting before they addressed their colleagues. M and G shared that they felt demoralized, unappreciated, and unsupported. I was shocked and

equally upset by this news and felt betrayed that, while I was given the venue, she clearly did not support the work of these talented and dedicated young professionals or me. I also believed that she would have behaved differently if C had been present (journal entry, spring, 2010).

**Moving forward.** I received an email from C the next day congratulating me on the success of the meeting. He indicated that he “knew he could count on me” (personal communication, spring, 2010). He had spoken with some of his colleagues and his faculty and related that everyone was pleased that the presentations had gone so well, and that I had led a professional and engaging session (personal correspondence, spring, 2010). I was once again heartened that the response in the community was positive and people were talking about learning communities. There was no mention of the EVP and, in the days following the faculty meeting, I tried to rationalize her behavior. She was an extraordinarily busy person. C did not disclose the nature of his illness but indicated he would be out for a short period of time. He returned to his position within a few weeks and the momentum abated while we concerned ourselves with the business of the semester. We agreed to come back together in a month and a half’s time to work with the faculty who would be teaching the learning communities in the coming fall.

We had six learning communities on the schedule for the fall 2010 term, and were at the point of staffing them in collaboration with the department chairs of counseling, reading, and English. Two matches were made the day of the faculty presentation. F was excited to work with another English instructor with whom he was seated and who taught sections at the branch campus. They had a natural affinity for one another, discovered some common interests, and were already exchanging ideas for their community in the

fall term. My department chair also made a connection for her learning community and was paired with a reading faculty member with whom she had previously worked on a college-wide committee. The two were calm, caring, and easy-going in their manner, and appeared pleased to work with each other and to participate in a learning community. As my department chair's office was located directly next to mine, I witnessed their collaboration over that spring term. They too were busy making plans for their link in the following fall (field notes, spring 2010).

M and G were to work together again also at the branch campus and were thrilled with the opportunity to tweak the experience for a new cohort. When G returned from her maternity leave, she was assigned back on the main campus, as F had assumed her position at the branch campus. I had the occasion to chat with her again more frequently and we discussed the plans that she and M were discussing for new assignments to link the content of the classes (field notes, spring 2010). I was paired with my original learning community muse; the English professor who began the initiatives by linking her research writing course with an environmental science course. I was elated to have the opportunity to work with someone I considered a gifted teacher. S was a professional who had taken great risks and established new ground throughout her career. It was a meaningful connection for me and by working with her in the classroom, I felt as though my research and journey were coming full circle. It was S's passion, commitment, and willingness to engage with her colleagues, her students, and her subject, that initially inspired me to continue working toward institutionalizing learning community initiatives at "A" Community College (journal entry, spring, 2010).



The fifth link was a basic skills math course paired with a basic skills reading course on which the faculty had chosen to work together through their work on the college-wide Basic Skills Committee. Finally, the last link was again a basic skills English course, ENGL 095 paired with the College Success Seminar, HUDV 107 at a higher education center in one of the county's urban areas. The faculty members who regularly taught these classes at the center had not volunteered, but as they were scheduled for them as part of their semester load, C sent emails to both, recruiting them to the cause. He asked if they would link their course with that of their colleague's and stressed the importance of the effort to the institution and the students. I was copied on the correspondence that was sent to my counseling colleague, who would also begin her role as the new department chair for Counseling over the summer. She agreed to link her class with the ENGL 095 course and I was again copied on her response to C. The name of the regularly scheduled English professor was soon assigned to the learning community section at the higher education center, though he did not respond to all if he responded to his Dean in writing.

**Tenuous links.** Not long after the faculty assignments were posted on the electronic schedule, the chair-elect of Counseling received an email from the male English professor who expressed uncertainty about his willingness to participate in the learning community. As our offices are in proximity, my soon-to-be department chair came in to speak with me about her concerns regarding her learning community partner and his outlook. I recommended she write back with a focus on the potential for a unique experience in the classroom not only for the students, but for the two of them as well. I also gave her suggestions regarding programs they could run or community events to

which they could bring students. She copied me on her response to him in which she tried to rally enthusiasm by pointing out the successes shared in the faculty meeting by a few of his department colleagues, and encouraged use of the content of the HUDV course as writing prompts. She also speculated about cultural outings they could take with their students, and offered me as a resource for the two of them as they collaborated on the link. I followed-up with an email to him indicating that the faculty with whom I worked expressed satisfaction with the linked course experience. I encouraged him to consider it and to meet with my counseling colleague with whom he was paired, to talk about ways to make it fun and interesting for them as well as the students (personal correspondence, spring, 2010). I did not receive a written response.

A few weeks later I called a meeting of the learning community faculty members for the fall 2010 term and asked in advance for those who had taught in the capacity before to share deeper layers of their process in linking their curricula and working together in this intimate setting; M, G, F, and S were on board. C and I spoke about the meeting and the value of bringing everyone together to increase personal familiarity and comfort. He planned to be in attendance. I believed his presence was important as a demonstration of the level of commitment in the institution. I raised the concern about the link at the higher education center and the willingness of his faculty member. C said he would “come along” and did not consider his resistance a barrier to the success of the initiative. I arrived at the room about fifteen minutes early and found F and the English professor who would be teaching at the higher education center already there.

## **Mixed Signals**

F was in good spirits and was chatting about his enthusiasm to work with his new partner in the coming fall term. The English professor indicated that he was not as enthused and was “strong-armed into this” (field notes, spring, 2010). I asked if he felt pressured to teach the learning community and suggested he make his feelings known to C. He shared that his name just appeared on the schedule after only a brief conversation with his dean. His concerns centered on his perception that he would be “hampered or stymied” by the linked classes (field notes, spring, 2010). He had a plan for how he wanted to structure his basic skills classes for the fall, and was going to field-test his idea over the summer within the Educational Opportunity Fund’s summer program. The students who participate in that program are a population that closely replicates the cohort of students [first-generation college students, academically underprepared, and diverse in every way] often found at the higher education center at which he would be teaching in the fall.

Others began filing into the room, so our conversation ended as there was some confusion about what the meeting was for and who had called it. A faculty member from the Education Department came in along with a Reading Department professor, neither of whom was on my list of invitees. C invited these two faculty members to the meeting to discuss the institutional grant he received to investigate students’ experiences in the fall 2010 learning communities. C did not include me on the correspondence to them and never mentioned his intention to discuss the research during this meeting. I was displeased with the miscommunication, but did not address it as things were unfolding (journal entry, spring, 2010).

When I raised the topic a few days later on the telephone, he made light of it, and said he thought it would be more efficient to have the grant discussion with everyone present instead of pulling another meeting together at a later time. I disagreed entirely, and was still not pleased that he failed to include me in the communication. At that point however, it did not seem worth pursuing the discussion. C named me in the grant application as a collaborator and institutional resource, but we had not spoken about how the project would unfold since he was awarded the grant. While I was delighted he would examine the impact of learning communities on students' persistence and perceptions of preparedness, the purpose of the meeting that day was to gather the teaching faculty together to share resources and best practices.

I was ultimately satisfied with what transpired during the meeting with the faculty, and discussion of the grant research was minimal. When C finally entered the meeting that day, he stood in the front of the room and "blustered" about the confusion. I had purposefully taken a seat at one of the tables that formed a U in the small classroom, to be one of the group of colleagues gathered to discuss the links for the coming fall semester. C took the lead, stood at the front of the room, and began to explain his intentions for the morning (field notes, spring, 2010).

He spoke about the grant project first and addressed why he invited the non-learning community faculty to attend the meeting. He then went on to speak about the professional development of the faculty who engage in learning communities and the benefits we had surmised, to date, from the work of those in the room. Finally, C turned to me to take the helm of the meeting and took a seat. While irritated at the time, upon reflection I saw that C was fulfilling his role in front of the faculty (journal entry, spring,

2010). He was the voice of the administration and the faculty needed him there as an embodiment of support from the academic leadership of the college. His presence lent credibility to and endorsement of the learning community initiatives (Kotter, 1999).

When I did speak I reiterated the benefits for faculty that I found in my examination of the learning communities. I asked for introductions around the room and, given the mixed purposes of the gathering, requested that each one present share their role in the learning community effort. I next validated the classroom faculty who had teamed together in linked classes and asked that they share the most personally and professionally gratifying aspects of the experience (field notes, spring, 2010). At that moment I felt it critically important to underscore the benefits in the classroom of engaging in a partnership with a colleague. With his colleagues' testimonials, I hoped to alter the perspective of the reluctant English professor who expressed feeling intimidated and resentful. I admit, too, to feeling intimidated and resentful. "C" usurped my meeting, and his lack of communication and means of accomplishing his own goals conveyed little value for others affected by his plans (journal entry, spring, 2010).

M, G, and F took the lead on the discussion and shared some of their experiences. G began by saying that a presence in each other's class is critical and found that when linking content in courses, students spend more time engaged in it and reflecting upon it; they ultimately develop a deeper understanding of the course content and through the shared knowledge and shared knowing they bond with one another (Minkler, 2002; Tinto, 1998). She continued by expounding on the big rewards she witnessed in the classroom in the way of spontaneity and a freshness of delivery of the content and responsiveness of the students. She also noted that flexibility with M led to increased

engagement and ultimately learning for the students in their link. As outlined in chapter seven, F and M had a different personal dynamic and thus a unique experience in the classroom. M shared that challenge but focused on the student characteristics rather than her working relationship with F (field notes, spring 2010).

F was seated next to N, the English faculty member with whom he would be paired in the coming fall term. As M wrapped up what she was saying, F picked up the thread and indicated that he hoped for his class to be more experiential in the coming semester. F said he and N wanted to take students out of the classroom and engage them in activities and events both in the college and the external community. C, as the Dean of English and Reading, interjected that he was paired with the right person. C praised N as one of his new faculty members, who while only in her second semester, was well known to the college community as an active adjunct instructor, and a former employee in the College's foundation office. She had a reputation for engaging students in activities and events outside the classroom, and the match with F appeared to be a good fit for them both (field notes, spring, 2010). They each shared with the group some of the ideas they had to engage students in self-exploration outside the classroom with trips to local art galleries, museums, and restaurants.

M interjected at that point to say that she struggled with engaging students in the writing assignments in basic skills English before she linked her class. She reiterated what we determined after the first cycle of research in chapter IV; the College Success Seminar provided a vehicle to reach students and compelled them to write about things that were inherently meaningful to them (field notes, spring, 2010). First semester students' transition to college is fertile ground for self-exploration through writing

(journal entry, spring, 2009). Retention in M's basic skills English course improved when the course was linked with the College Success Seminar. She concluded with "Students have to be interested in what they are writing about" (field notes, spring 2010). There was assent from around the room with heads nodding; the general atmosphere was positive and supportive (journal entry, spring, 2010).

At that point, S, my learning community partner who began the learning community efforts at "A" Community College, spoke up to say she too found that students were more engaged in writing when writing about things that interested them. Her concerns, however, centered on the constancy of enrollment in the sections and the challenge everyone encountered with a cohort of students enrolled equally in both sections of classes. She offered another solution in having both faculty names listed on each class roster so faculty members could check the sections of both courses. I spoke about the strides we made in the "I" section coding and listing both courses as co-requisite for each other to prevent unequal enrollment in the classes. S addressed her Dean when she said, 'The College needs to dedicate a person whose job it is to manage these things.' We had spoken of this in the past and I agreed with her statement in front of the group as did C. M also voiced an opinion and said that there was improvement, easier registration for the linked classes, less unequal enrollment and quicker solutions to problems that did occur, yet she agreed with S. "A" Community College however, was not at the point of allocating such resources to these efforts and committing that level of responsibility. I said that I would make the recommendation of the dual assignment for linked classes to the registrar, whom I indicated had been helpful and responsive to date (field notes, spring, 2010; journal entry, spring 2010).

The male English professor who felt pressured and resistant did not participate during the meeting. His learning community partner, my chair-elect, was not present although she told both of us in an email that she would be there. We were seated at the same table so I was unable to see his face through most of the meeting, yet he had not uttered a word. As we concluded the gathering with a plan to meet once more as a group before the summer and with encouragement for the faculty teams to collaborate, I asked if I could speak with him. C had left the room and those who remained were engaged in conversation with each other. I inquired into his perspective having heard others speak about their experience. He was non-committal still and said he had to think about it all further, but would most likely stay on the schedule and try to work with my colleague for the fall term. I offered assistance in anyway I could, from providing resources to monitoring enrollment. As he left I remained concerned about the link and made a note to suggest to C that he schedule a shadow section of ENGL 095 at the same time, on the same day, at the same location, just in case we needed to find someone else with whom to link with the HUDV 107 course (field notes, spring, 2010).

### **Closing the Circle**

S, my partner for the fall remained in the room at the end of the meeting, and we spoke at length for the next hour. We had not seen one another in some time as she was tending to an aging and ill parent whom had subsequently passed away. We caught up on all manner of concerns from personal to professional and finally got around to discussing our link. We both acknowledged the special quality of our learning community in the coming term as a way of bringing our relationship full circle: from S's early explorations and my inquiries, to working in partnership with each other in support of our students.



We had come to know one another in our early days together. While S was initially hesitant to invite me into her process as a teacher, over time, I gained her trust and confidence and was grateful for the many shared experiences over the past two years. As committed as I knew S was to teaching excellence, students' learning, and innovative pedagogy, she admittedly would not undertake the work to institute learning communities throughout the College. She was happy to try new things and even share individually with her colleagues, but taking on the bureaucracy of the College and dealing with the politics was not something she was willing to do.

### **The Catalyst and the Servant**

I took up the torch instead. S has been a pioneer with regard to trying new approaches to her craft; approaches with the potential to change the way students learn and the way the College delivers courses. Throughout her twenty-five year tenure in the institution, S found things that interested her and tried them in the classroom. She had in her dean a strong cheerleader, one who publically sang her praises and advocated her efforts. The culture of the College is one that espouses innovation and collegiality, but in practice adopts a hands-off approach that allows freedom but offers little or no support. Moving a concept from individual practice to institutional effort then becomes a protracted ordeal.

S has not been one to fight the fight in the administration to create broader change; that she has left to others. Such was the case with distance education. S and a colleague in her department were among the first to experiment with online learning. She reformatted curricula for literature classes and began to deliver them online; she developed a repertoire of resources and tools to enliven and enrich the online learning

experience, but she would not challenge the administrative roadblocks that prevented the medium from wider adoption in the institution. It was her colleague and her dean who moved that initiative forward and the tipping point came when other institutions in the state began offering courses via distance education. “A” Community College had a reputation to maintain and has always strived to be on the leading edge of the community college sector (field notes, spring 2010; journal entries, spring, 2010).

As a servant leader, I was also compelled by the significant work S and her colleague undertook in their learning community and was moved to act on her behalf to combat the frustration experienced in the scheduling and registering of students in the link. S believed in what she and her colleague were doing. Her students responded positively by staying in the class and participating more fully as noted by their professors. Both faculty members expressed a rich satisfaction with the experience when I spoke with them as part of my pilot research (field notes, fall, 2008). When I reflected on the efforts and impact made by S and her partner from environmental science, I decided to undertake it as my mission to push things forward in the College. Further, the value of the relationship that I witnessed between S and her colleague, and between M and G were significant, and contributed not only to the personal and professional satisfaction of the individuals involved, but, subsequently, to the health and well-being of the institution (journal entries, fall, 2008, spring, 2009, spring 2010). To me, these were efforts and relationships that were serving a moral purpose; they were aiding our students in their endeavor to learn and improve the quality of their lives (Fullan, 2001). It is the community of effort and the relationships built that connects this work to my personal mission and heart (Fullan, 2001; Palmer, 1998).

S and I were not only working together in the coming term, but we were doing so as part of an institutional attempt to run a total of six learning communities linking a basic skills course and a college success seminar, instead of just one as was the case for past years. Progress had been made to secure well-suited faculty pairs, streamline scheduling, and monitor enrollment. The EVP faculty meeting had facilitated two of those pairings, while another two already existed in the relationships between M and G, and S and me. The fifth was one that grew out of the professors' connection on a college wide committee on which they both served. The most tenuous link was the one not chosen by the instructional faculty, but suggested instead by the administration; in this case, C, as the head of English and reading. It was a marriage of convenience, an arrangement in which both partners had reservations. I, too, had concerns having witnessed the impact of a convenient pairing on a learning community effort when M and F worked together.

I was cognizant that such relationships were inevitable. If "A" Community College is to grow learning communities, however, we must consciously minimize the occurrence of such administratively assigned partnerships, and provide ample opportunity for faculty to choose a suitable partner. Creating networking opportunities for faculty to meet and discuss possibilities for intersecting their courses is certainly the ideal, and a realistic one with the support of the senior academic administration.

### **Self-Perception Versus Reality**

"A" Community College has long considered itself a progressive institution. As a self-proclaimed student development college in its earliest days, it has more recently lost pace with its peers. There are comparable institutions in the region scheduling learning

communities as regular offerings and seeing results in engagement and retention from comprehensive first year experience courses and programs (regional learning community conference, field notes, summer, 2009). Pairing first year seminars with basic skills courses provides students with necessary support as they transition into college in their first semester (Boylan, 1999; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Community college students in particular find benefit in the linking of this content instead of stand-alone experiences that require additional time in their already overscheduled lives (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

“A” Community College strives for innovation in the classroom and clearly endorses teaching excellence with professional development and technological support. In programmatic or institutional efforts aimed at engagement and retention, however, we have fallen short. Student retention and engagement initiatives, like First Year Programs, are often conceived in Student Affairs arms of institutions. While “A” Community College was founded as a student development institution, with a holistic model for supporting student learning and growth, it has failed to keep up with the needs of a burgeoning population. Initially, the College endorsed a team-approach to assisting students on their path to the future, with collaborative effort between counseling, teaching faculty, librarians, and career services personnel. The student body grew, their expectations and the social context in which they lived changed. The model was no longer realistic and failed to evolve in meaningful ways. Instead, direct service supplanted the student development model.

Enrollment Development and Student Affairs became consumed with meeting student-service needs of testing, advisement, counseling, and registration. In recent years,

there has not been time for collaboration that fosters student reflective practice and meaningful goal-setting. The lack of a timely and comprehensive model to address student development is what prompted the President to write a white paper and form a commission (COSD) to examine the student development model at “A” Community College. The recommendations of the COSD have resulted in the First Year Experience Program, and are supporting the learning community effort as well (journal entry, spring, 2010).

My early inquiries while on the college-wide basic skills committee coupled with the research from the institutional grant I received, fueled my desire to see learning communities instituted at “A” Community College as a means of engaging and retaining our first year students. While well behind the times in becoming a learning college as postulated by O’Banion (1997), I hoped to see “A” Community College meet the goals of such an institution. The most effective means of having a change initiative take hold in an organization is for the leadership to embrace it and live it in a very public way. The rest of the community will emulate the behavior modeled by the leaders and adopt the change into the culture (Kotter, 1996). Change had begun, but was not yet evident throughout the institution.

The principles outlined by O’Banion (1997) are consistent with the goals of learning communities in fostering students’ full participation, shared responsibility for their learning, and faculty subsequently shaping pedagogy to meet the needs of learners (O’Banion, 1997). On a number of occasions M indicated that the content and exercises in ENGL 095 could be tedious, but in her learning community, students wrote about the content in their College Success Course, which was tied to exploration of their values,

goals, and future as college students and educated citizens. The link between the two courses and their faculty allowed for a fresh approach, increased spontaneity, and responsiveness to the student cohort's needs (faculty interview, spring 2009; field notes, spring, 2010). The comprehensive American community college has historically been a nimble and responsive institution, one that offers a harbor of learning and access to opportunity for all members of the community in ways customized to meet their needs (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). As such, O'Banion's model of the learning college is a paradigm that can drive the community college into a new era of flexible offerings and innovative pedagogy that will meet the needs or demands of its constituents.

### **Progress not Perfection: Kotter and the Institutional Effort**

We at "A" Community College have come a long way in the two years since I first began this project. We moved from offering one learning community of basic skills English linked with the college success seminar at the branch campus to offering six such linkages in three locations. We set an institutional definition for learning communities that appeared in the College's catalog, master schedule, and webpage. We implemented codes in the registration system that flagged learning community sections of courses, making it easier for students and those whom assist them to understand the benefits and consequences of enrolling in a learning community. We made progress in securing the registration of a cohort by invoking co-requisite requirements for linked sections, and involved many members of the college community in the conversations that led to these advances. It was through my efforts and those with whom I collaborated that "A" Community College, its administrators, faculty, and staff were better schooled in marketing, scheduling, enrolling, staffing, and facilitating learning communities.

This change project unwittingly followed Kotter's framework for instituting lasting organizational change at first, and then adopted the strategies with purpose (Kotter, 1996). An imperative to expand learning community offerings appeared on a draft of the College's strategic planning matrix in spring 2007, and was the result of the work of the College-wide Basic Skills Committee when I co-chaired. It garnered no further discussion or institutional approach to implementation or planning. Its appearance also coincided with the awarding of my institutional grant to research learning communities and subsequent enrollment in the Community College Leadership Initiative through Rowan University's Educational Leadership doctoral program the following fall. My fate was sealed and I seized it as my role to move the initiatives forward. Kotter's 8-step framework unfolded as follows:

- On convocation day, the first day of the spring term in 2008, I presented the benefits of learning communities for community college students that I discovered during my review of the literature. It was my attempt to establish the issue as a challenge that the college as an organization needed to address; we had identified a goal, yet had not articulated a roadmap to reach it.
- Next I gathered a group of individuals throughout the institution who were primary stakeholders in the effort. My guiding coalition (Kotter, 1996) was comprised of the faculty who had taught learning community courses, the registrar who had been supportive and responsive in instituting changes to streamline the process of scheduling and enrolling the courses, and the administrators and other representatives from various offices around the College who had a hand in marketing, promoting, and staffing linked courses.

Each of these individuals contributed meaningfully to the effort and addressed the needs of the institution and its community, but C, the Dean of English and Reading became the primary champion and one with the power to help the initiatives move forward.

- As a group, we developed and committed a definition of learning communities to the college catalog, the master schedule of classes, and the webpage. This created a vision and strategy to anchor the efforts in the culture of the institution. We further articulated a goal of incrementally increasing the number of links between basic skills courses and college success seminars each academic year. As learning communities by design foster collaborative learning and engagement (Shapiro & Levine, 1999), they are naturally consistent with the mission and the culture of the institution (Kotter, 1996).
- To maintain communication throughout the institution, not only were the members of the guiding coalition (Kotter, 1996) informal carriers of the message in their own divisions and departments, but the chief academic officer devoted one of the monthly faculty meetings to learning community information and a workshop. This was a message of commitment to the college community on the part of the senior administration and actually encompassed a number of Kotter's (1996) steps that follow.
- The faculty meeting enabled professionals throughout the college to consider action of their own. The workshop nature of the faculty meeting was designed to promote the linking of classes from disparate disciplines to encourage adoption throughout the institution. Kotter (1996) maintains that change must



take place in many sectors of the institution in order to become rooted in the culture. We had put an operational support system in place, though it was still flawed.

- Also in that meeting, faculty members who taught a learning community at “A” Community College presented their experiences to their colleagues and highlighted the positive impact for the students as well as the personal and professional benefits they had reaped. It was a celebration of their work before the members of the community (Kotter, 1996). Their work was placed in the context of a national picture of student engagement and retention efforts. The systemic changes in the institution that aided scheduling and registration were also discussed as were the challenges in launching the programs.
- The faculty meeting generated greater interest in the community and inquiries for additional information. More specifically, it yielded two faculty pairings for the six basic skills and college success seminar links scheduled for fall 2010. The college community had a dawning awareness that more learning communities were being scheduled and enrolled. What needs to follow is assessment of student outcomes and a full reporting to the community on those results. If students are retained and successful at greater rates in linked courses, the value of those gains must be made apparent in the culture and used to garner additional support.
- Kotter (1996) maintains that for change to become embedded in the culture of an organization, each step must be fully enacted. If learning communities are to take hold at “A” Community College, the process outlined above will not

only need to be repeated, but also communicated again and again to the community. An emphasis on outcomes consistent with the mission of the institution and ongoing assessment must also be part of the picture for the change to take hold and become part of the fabric of the College's culture.

Establishing cultural change at "A" Community College will take a sustained effort over a considerable period of time. Given the diversity of the student body and the purposeful connections to regional industry, community colleges are often the first institutions to feel the impact of change in society and thus have garnered a reputation for being responsive, innovative, and flexible. However, the core of how we conduct the business of teaching and learning is largely unchanged. There is constant reimagining and changes to programming based on community needs assessment, yet there have not been alterations to the, what, and, how, students learn (O'Banion, 1997). Learning communities offer the community college a structural approach to changing the, what, and, how, students learn. A learning college approaches learning holistically and invites all members of the community to make meaningful and passionate connections to learning. My collaborative work with members of the college community from a vast array of departments is a testament to the widespread nature and potential for profound impact that full adoption of learning communities could bring to the institution.

## **Chapter 10**

### **The Evolution of the Project**

Throughout my 10-year tenure at “A” Community College, the various roles I have assumed have put me in close contact with the politics and players that drive many of the decisions and actions of the institution. That knowledge and those relationships aided my efforts on this project. I frequently found it a challenge to remember for whose benefit I was working, as it was often for the good of more than one constituency group. My leadership as stewardship (Senge, 2006) was focused on the various constituents’ best interests and a hope that the good work of all involved in the learning community initiative and this action research project, would endure to become part of the fabric of the institution.

### **Addressing the Research Questions**

I began this research with a focus on the benefits for students. Retention, engagement, and satisfaction are all documented outcomes for students who participate in learning communities (Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Minkler, 2000; Tinto & Love, 1997). Our students are our mission and their achievement brings success to the entire endeavor. I do the work that I do in the sector in which I do it because I feel strongly about the role of the comprehensive community college. The access and opportunity it provides to all members of the community lead to a better life for the individual and, consequently, a better condition for all society (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Dewey, 1916/1945). Action research projects, however, impel the researcher to continuously consider the information that each cycle yields. My process in this change project led me from an exploration of the students, to the faculty, to the curriculum in

linked courses, to the whole of the institution. Along the way, I took stock of my leadership and its evolution throughout this project.

My first research question asked how students described their experience in the ENGL 095/HUDV 107 learning community. Students in my first cycle of research offered rich descriptions of their enjoyment of the link, their connections to each other, and their level of understanding and comfort with the curriculum for both courses. However, it was the faculty relationship that seemed to drive their satisfaction with the experience. Students indicated that the quality of the faculty members' relationship was a significant part of their engagement in, and enjoyment of their learning community. They recounted how M and G modeled a working relationship for them, and were valued and trusted guides for their first semester of college. The impact of the faculty relationship on the students led me to examine that relationship in the context of the faculty members' satisfaction of, and engagement in their own learning community experience.

My second research question asked how faculty members described their experience of teaching in the ENGL 095/HUDV 107 learning community. Once I began exploration of the linked courses and the impact of the faculty relationship on everyone's satisfaction, my view shifted, and my efforts intensified towards improving the faculty experience and streamlining their processes. The faculty relationship became the driving force in this project as it appeared to have a qualitative impact on the satisfaction of all participants in the learning community (Minkler, 2000; Moore, 2000; Smartt-Gaither, 1998; Tinto & Love, 1997; Wishner, 1996).

I learned that when there is a natural chemistry and affinity between faculty members working together in a learning community, their enjoyment of both their

partner and their collaboration translates into an ease in the classroom that is noticed by students. The partners are more likely to spend time in one another's company and classroom, and demonstrate engagement in the content of both courses. The relationship appears more effortless to the students, and is deemed more supportive and enjoyable by the faculty.

The third research question was concerned with the quality of the faculty relationship. Less satisfying relationships may result from links of convenience in which faculty members do not choose their partner because of personal affinity, but because of proximity, or worse yet, administrative assignment. There may not be parity in respect, communication, effort, or skill. There may be individual difference that makes working together less than ideal. It is likely that everyone connected to the experience will have a less enjoyable experience than had the faculty members chosen one another. Faculty members who choose to work together in a learning community are more likely to create a satisfying experience for students and themselves. In a mutually rewarding relationship, faculty members may share similar characteristics or traits, a vision for their course learning outcomes, or a mutual respect for content mastery, expertise, or craft.

The College, its faculty, and its students are best served when faculty members can network and create opportunities to work together and bridge their course curriculum. The benefit derived from the EVP faculty meeting, and the community's positive reaction to it, provide a partial response to research question four. My fourth question asked what impact the link between ENGL 095 and HUDV 107 had on curricula and faculty of both courses, and what recommendations or suggestions can be made to the College with regard to learning community initiatives. The faculty members

with whom I worked most closely in my pilot cycles, and Cycles I, II, and III, all made major contributions to this action research project with their willingness to share their classroom experiences, their processes of shaping their curriculum in cooperation and collaboration with another, and their personal perceptions of working with their partner in this kind of relationship.

Students noted that when content and assignments from their two courses were linked, they not only were more connected to, or engaged in what they were learning, they felt as if they were doing less, but learning more. Faculty contend that students work smarter, not harder with integrated content, and actually develop greater sophistication with the material by applying the skills they acquire in one class, to the content of another. As previously indicated, when faculty are engaged in a satisfying relationship with a learning community partner, not only are students in the cohort likely to experience more support in the partnership, but faculty members report feeling more personally supported. They are thus more likely to reap greater professional and personal satisfaction. M shared that having a counseling colleague as a partner made her feel especially supported in her work with first-semester, basic skills students, who often have significant academic and personal challenges adjusting to the demands of college life.

Through this action research project, the ad hoc committee and I helped “A” Community College streamline its processes of scheduling and enrolling learning communities. We suggested to the academic and student affairs leaders that these processes continue to be refined as the initiatives grow. For now, the process remains diffuse in the academic departments and the registrar’s office. We discovered, however,

in numerous conversations with faculty and administrators involved in the project, that central coordination and responsibility would be helpful for all members of the college community. It would make sense to align the learning community initiatives with the First Year Experience program that the College is crafting. There is significant support in the literature regarding students' increased connection to classmates, faculty, and the institution, and their subsequent retention, as a result of participation in learning communities (MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2002; Minkler, 2000; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Tinto & Love, 1997).

Finally, my fifth research question sought evidence of my personal characteristics and stated perspectives on leadership and institutional change throughout the project. "A" Community College's well-being and future are at the heart of my efforts to institute learning communities as predictably offered curricular structures. The implementation of student learning communities can lead an institution to profound cultural change (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). I hoped to find indications that my efforts had an impact on the project's participants and the institution as I examined the cycles of research and reflected on the work I undertook over the past few years. In the next section, I detail my discoveries and tie them to the theories that support my view.

### **Leadership as Stewardship**

I undertook this action research project with the goal of moving "A" Community College into the future in accordance with some of the nation's best practices in first year programming and basic skills education (Boylan, 1999; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Siegel, 2003; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001; Wilmer, 2007). It was an objective that grew in force as I worked with faculty engaged in these initiatives and witnessed their

simultaneous gratification and frustration with the experience. The procedural and institutional barriers frustrated them and the work with one another and their students gratified them. As one who encompasses the unique characteristics of energy, hopefulness, and enthusiasm necessary to undertake a complex change project and sustain the effort, I campaigned for learning communities throughout the institution and promoted the voices and experiences of faculty who taught the links at “A” Community College (Fullan, 2001).

I embraced Fullan’s (2001) leadership framework and focused on building relationships with members of the college community from support staff to faculty to senior academic leaders. My work was guided by a higher or moral purpose as the goals of the project and the objectives of learning communities are synonymous with the democratic mission of the community college and the ideals of social justice (Capper, Hafner, & Keyes, 2002; Mawhinney, 2002; Palmer, 1998; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). My interests to serve were not motivated by external personal gain, but by a commitment to the ideal that integrated and collaborative pedagogy could not only transform the classroom into a new model for learning and engagement, but also redesign “A” Community College into a learning college for the future (O’Banion, 1997; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Creating a culture of learning provides opportunities that both support and encourage learning for students and every member of the college (Cox, 2004; O’Banion, 1997; Senge, 2006). As evidenced by the President’s white paper and subsequent Commission on Student Development, “A” Community College is ready for a transformational change, a concern for the entire institution, not simply those in Student



Affairs. Moreover, engagement and retention data are driving forces in public higher education accountability, particularly at the state and national levels (Dougherty & Hong, 2005). As the economic climate of a wealthy county changes, and enrollment projections for the coming years show diminishing numbers in the local public schools, the entire institution must be cognizant of retention and engagement efforts.

### **Facilitating Change: Conflict and Commitment**

There is an ethos surrounding the domain of the classroom and the purview of the teaching faculty in which one may suggest or coach, but not direct (journal entry, spring 2010). Such was the case with my department chair-elect and the English professor at the higher education center. F and M's link in the fall of 2009 was also not an ideal match, and while I had indicators of that, I did not pry into the situation and attempt to address it. In hindsight, I could have made suggestions or coached F as he worked with M. As in a turbulent marriage, there is reticence about meddling in that partnership.

I believed the most I could do for the reluctant, new, partnership in fall 2010 with my chair-elect and her assigned, English partner, was make myself available and check in periodically to offer encouragement, support, and resources. While my colleague invited me into their relationship, her partner was not as responsive or receptive to my offers. They managed to work together through the term, and even brought their students to a number of programs in the higher education center's local community. To my knowledge, neither faculty member was exuberant about the experience. It will be interesting to hear their students' reactions at the focus groups in spring 2011.

My approach in most instances is one that is affiliative, not directive (Fullan, 2001). Though in the scope of this project I found that when there were times I needed to

direct, it was to address administrative issues, not manage the faculty partnership. For example, codes needed to be entered and pre-requisites put in place in order to secure appropriate enrollment. It became my role to unearth the barriers to this process and address them directly. I have no line authority over any of the individuals whose job functions dictate their role in scheduling and registering learning communities, yet there was at least one occasion when in order to end the frustration of the faculty and students, I found it necessary to confront inattention to the processes that we had worked so hard to put in place (Kotter, 1996). I am not comfortable with confrontation in my workplace, and my goal is always to work cooperatively (Kouzes & Posner, 1998), yet I needed to address a function in the scheduling procedure and was rebuffed by the individual whose role it was. I stood firm and did not assume the responsibility myself. While it was difficult for me, I have since found our relationship to be more cooperative, and the individual to be more responsive toward me. I took my custodial role of the faculty seriously (Senge, 2006), and since, recognize that when I am acting on behalf of others, and faced with a situation that compromises their hard work, or my core values, I have an easier time than were I advocating only for myself.

My role with the faculty was one of stewardship (Senge, 2006). I saw it as a care-giving relationship in which I supported the faculty, demonstrated care, and helped them maintain the integrity and value of the learning community and its related relationships within the scope of the institution. According to Fullan (2001), in a successful change initiative, relationships improve and things get better. Leaders must be relationship builders and bring people together to create knowledge and share information. My formation of the ad hoc committee comprised of various members of the college

community, as well as the faculty meeting I facilitated to showcase the work of the learning community teaching faculty, are both significant examples of the relationship building I initiated and sustained. However, the encounter between M and G and the EVP on the day of the faculty meeting presentation is one that I continue to lament and chastise myself for not challenging and advocating on their behalf after its occurrence. I am left to question my level of commitment and leadership if I do not confront incivility aimed at those I support and serve (note: at the end of the spring 2010 term the EVP left “A” Community College for a presidency at a nearby community college).

### **Embracing the Role**

My work in the college community with various professionals in academic and student affairs allowed me to serve the teaching faculty and ease the process of marketing, scheduling and enrolling a clean cohort of students into their linked classes. The faculty members were then able to focus on the work of teaching and learning, and reshaping their curriculum to meet the desired objectives of integrated content and collaborative, cooperative pedagogy (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008; MacGregor et al., 2002; Matthews, 1994). As I led this research, others responded to my expression of care for the project, our students, and the individuals with whom I was working. I build relationship in my daily work counseling students and seek to do that with all whom I interact.

After the learning community faculty met for the first time in spring of 2010, F’s new partner contacted me to express how happy she was to be involved in the effort and said, “Thank you for the support and resources, it was a great meeting. You are very good at what you do and I hope you are recognized for that” (personal communication,

spring, 2010). This faculty member was beginning her second year in the institution and was not someone with whom I had worked before. Other than a few introductions, that meeting was our first encounter and I was both surprised and pleased to have elicited the response from her (journal entry, spring, 2010). Moreover, as I pulled the EVP's faculty meeting together, the English professor who taught in the learning community for health science students remarked, "Thank you for undertaking these efforts with an ardent heart. I am happy to participate in the meeting." (personal communication, spring, 2010). We had worked together on the College-wide Basic Skills Committee, and his comment validated my long-term commitment to the initiatives, and left me feeling supported by a colleague and friend.

M repeatedly called upon me to help her manage the administrative aspects associated with the endeavor. Her frustration with the system and gratitude for the assistance were evident in regular electronic communications during the enrollment phases of each registration cycle (personal communication, spring, 2008; spring, 2009). During our interviews she verbalized appreciation of the support I provided in navigating the registration system and its personnel, and issuing directives to the division administrators and their support staff. She regularly sent me messages that were friendly and affectionate. M has been a steadfast, committed, member of this project, and the personal and professional payoffs in the classroom make any of the frustration encountered worthwhile (personal communication, spring, 2010). Both she and S spoke to me separately about the College having a dedicated learning community office or individual. In a conversation with M, she said:

There has to be someone responsible for these initiatives and it should be you.

You have already done all the work and you have the background and the passion to make it happen and keep it going. If the College really wants learning communities to work, they have to be willing to allocate the resources (personal communication, spring 2010).

S and I spoke about the College's commitment and my role after she shared her thoughts in the small meeting with the teaching faculty for the fall 2010 links. She verbalized her frustration that day amongst the other faculty members, and directed her comments to her dean that she wanted to see the College make the commitment. I felt S conveyed authority in that meeting as the first faculty member to link her class with another. The others present seemed to feel it too; she had everyone's attention and respect (field notes, spring, 2010). She waited to speak as the enthused others were speaking over one another. S opened her mouth a few times and we made eye-contact while the discussion charged on. When the energy abated, I said, "[S] has been patient, but has something to say. [S]?" She said her piece in the room, but I knew that would be as much as she would do. As mentioned before, S would not get involved in administrative struggles connected to her initiatives. She preferred to do her thing and stay out of the fray (field notes, spring, 2010). S's statements in the meeting were not lost on C, and it was not the first time he had heard her concerns.

C also understands the necessity to have dedicated personnel involved in the learning community effort, and has used his position to advocate at the tables he occupies with the EVP and other institutional decision-makers (journal entry, spring, 2010). The interim Executive Vice President indicated recently that he would like me to write a

proposal for broader implementation of learning communities at “A” Community College (personal communication, fall 2010). He shared this with the deans first and later with me in a casual meeting. No formal conversation or request has occurred yet, but I know it is C who is the constant voice and advocate for learning communities and me as their champion, in the meetings of the senior academic and student affairs leaders.

C and I collaborated on a number of occasions through the academic years 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 as we set out to ameliorate the institutional challenges of running a learning community. He has come to know me, understand my level of commitment to not only this initiative, but also, to the institution and our students. More recently, C and I had a conversation in which I asked him questions about his present outlook with regard to learning communities, his understanding of his peers’ perspective, and his thoughts about the future of the efforts at “A” Community College:

We know that they work to retain students, and are especially helpful for basic skills students. The rest of the deans are not on board yet. I think we need to follow up with data collection and analysis of student outcomes. Not only asking students if the learning community had an impact on them in the semester they took it, but if they noticed anything in the next semester. We need to look at how they did in their classes in addition to whether or not they are still enrolled. More data will help us get the deans on board, but I think we have to continue our efforts regardless. We cannot let them die after all the work that has already been done, and with more and more faculty interested in teaching them each semester (interview, fall, 2010).

I also asked C about his perception of my role in the project. C surprised me with ready acknowledgement and validation of my findings with regard to faculty pairings:

Your examination of the faculty certainly demonstrated that who works together is important. We won't always have the magic of [M] and [G] but I think we know now that these things can't be assigned. Finding the resources and time to get people together might be a challenge. I think you are the person to do that though Beth. The College has to make a commitment to having someone run learning communities, and you are the perfect person to do that. You've done all this research, you've invested the time, you know all the players, and you've already made things happen. I'm not sure what \_\_\_ (interim EVP) has in mind, but if the College is going to move forward, you're the one (interview, fall, 2010).

I believe C and I have come some distance since our early discussions on the topic of learning communities. I asked him why the change to championing the initiatives for basic skills students when his early support was focused on the honors cohort. C insisted that he did not get involved only because of the honors students, but it was true that the link between M and G turned his head with regard to the impact of learning communities on basic skills students. The commitment demonstrated on the part of the teaching faculty and me, convinced him to back the efforts.

I attempted to lead C in the direction of addressing my leadership more specifically, but he is not a gifted listener. He is an orator. I knew that I was fortunate he granted me time to speak with him alone in my office for more than a half hour. In all, I was satisfied with the time we had together, the nature of our discussion, and shared

perspective on the future. I would have liked more detail from him regarding his perception of my leadership, but was affirmed and assured that he saw me as the point person for learning community initiatives at “A” Community College and had shared that view with his peers and supervisors. My initial plan was to ask C to complete a section of “A” Community College’s administrator’s performance appraisal instrument. When I reviewed that instrument in anticipation of our meeting, it seemed contrived to me to ask C to complete this when our work together was not structured as supervisor and subordinate. It was more natural to have a conversation about his perceptions of me and my work. His ability to speak directly about my research gave me confidence that he truly did have an understanding of the work I had done over the past few years.

I feel that my interest, work, and expertise on the topic of learning communities at “A” Community College have been validated by many in my professional community. Faculty colleagues, administrators and staff from across the college, and members of the senior leadership team, recognize me as the point person for learning communities. The Director of Student Development Services (and my former supervisor) left a voice message not long after the faculty meeting presentation in spring 2010 indicating that if he could make it so, I would be heading up both the First Year Experience program and coordinating learning communities as part of that effort (personal communication, spring, 2010). While I appreciate and value the acknowledgement of my efforts and the knowledge I have accrued, I find myself still disappointed and disillusioned that the College has failed to provide real support in the form of dedicated personnel, requests for learning community sections from each academic division, and earmarked time or funding, for these efforts.



The First Year Experience program, too, has been given short shrift. The President assigned its management as an additional responsibility to someone who has already demonstrated that his current duties are a challenge. While it is true that in the present economic climate, “A” Community College must do more with less, programs that have great potential to impact student retention and engagement; are worthy of investment. As an institution, we, like students in a learning community, must work smarter not harder as we seek alternate ways of engaging and retaining our students. We must additionally demonstrate our commitment to using students’ resources and time well, by linking classes and offering them more value for their investment. Students indicate that they feel they get more for less when they engage in a learning community, although clearly faculty do not view this as the case. In fact, faculty report students perform more complex work with better mastery, when course assignments are linked.

First Year Experience programs and learning community initiatives have the capacity to engage the entire institution as the college community comes together in support of our students’ learning and affiliation (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). I see real potential in both being vehicles for “A” Community College to become a learning college, by compelling us to work cooperatively, and assess and adjust our approaches to the business of teaching and learning. I have growing concerns, however, for the College and its minimal investment in these two initiatives. While I believe in my ability to shepherd the learning community effort in the greater college community, I recognize the limitations of my current role, particularly as the players change in the upper levels of the institution’s leadership. As noted, the EVP, who offered some support to the initiatives, left “A” Community College last summer. The Acting

EVP is the Dean of Enrollment Development and Student Affairs, and he, too, has verbalized support of these efforts, but while we are in a state of flux, and his capacity and tenure are limited, I have doubts that any programmatic decisions will be made, as they are not presently a high priority.

As I contemplate who else in the College is in a role of positional power and has already expressed support, I have considered reaching out to the Director of Institutional Research. He and I worked on the Commission on Student Development together, and he chairs the committee that formulates the College's strategic planning matrix. We have discussed at length, the benefits of learning communities in the scope of student engagement and retention, and also worked together on the First Year Experience program. He is likely to stay in place for some years to come, and as a member of the President's cabinet, may serve as an advocate for the learning community initiatives. If I hope to sustain momentum of the learning community initiatives, I must begin to cultivate new pockets of support in the community, particularly with those that have access and the ear of the top levels of administration (Fullan, 2001).

### **Connecting the Pieces: Learning Communities, the Learning College, and the Change Project**

This action research project supports the assertion of others that learning communities that pair basic skills courses with first year seminars not only provide integral support to the community college student, but afford teaching faculty opportunities for rich personal and professional development (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Matthews, 1994; Minkler, 2000; Tinto & Love, 1997). As the work unfolded, I noted the shift in my focus from the benefit to the student, to the satisfaction of the faculty, to the

well-being and development of the institution (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The project succeeded in addressing how “A” Community College schedules, markets, enrolls, and delivers learning community offerings, and has planted seeds within the culture regarding the potential for broad-based benefits for all in this community of learners (Cox, 2004; O’Banion, 1997; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

The learning community project took place over two full academic years and afforded me the opportunity to examine my leadership while working with an array of individuals across the institution. I have accrued organizational and operational skills in managing large scale projects throughout my career. I have also succeeded in rallying individuals in the community to participate in ways not always associated with their assigned duties and responsibilities. This research effort demonstrated my assertions that servant leadership touches those served by improving their condition and, consequently, has the capacity to benefit the whole of the community (Fullan, 2001). If those served by the servant leader become better-off than they were, they are more likely to become servants themselves, and guardians of the least-privileged in society (Greenleaf, 1998). The faculty members who engaged in these efforts have become servants to the cause. They share their experience with colleagues; they speak about the impact on themselves and their students. The concept of the leader as servant is one that has a direct connection to social justice, which lies at the heart of the community college mission.

I feel strongly that our work in the community college extends well beyond ourselves and the individual students with whom we work. All members of the community are afforded access to higher education and, thus, increased opportunity through enrollment in the comprehensive community college (Cohen & Brawer, 2004).

Our classrooms are forums of democracy where each participant can find his or her voice. The discovery and creation of knowledge is the primary business of the institution and not solely confined to the student body, but all members of the college community (Parker, 1998).

We who dedicate our lives to this entity are called to serve the good of society by ensuring the health of the institution. (O'Banion, 1997). My role as a Student Development Specialist allows me a unique vantage point. As a faculty member, I am viewed as a colleague by the teaching faculty, not an administrator. Yet, I see the larger picture of the institution in both academic and student affairs programming, and it is the marriage of these, often separate domains, that make for successful and healthy learning community programs (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). It is because of this privileged perspective that I feel especially responsible to be an active steward in my college's community, to encourage the institution to respond effectively to the needs of our students, and all of those who share in our endeavor.

My work with students affords me access to a wide view of the institution; student services and policies governing enrollment, registration, student life and activities, and academic offerings and their scheduling. Furthermore, students invite me into their perspective of their experience at "A" Community College on a daily basis. When students share their experiences I am granted access to the impact of what happens in the classroom; and how that can make or break an individual's success and persistence. I interact with students in my classroom, in my office in one-on-one meetings, and in group sessions in my colleagues' classrooms or in workshops.

As I guide students in the management of their overall academic experience, I help them to comprehend and frame their community college education in the scope of their current and future life. My role in the classroom and interactions with the student body are no less valuable, but they are different than a content professor's. S and her teaching colleagues are innovative masters of their craft, and must devote their energy and time to their primary work in the classroom. I understand her reticence in taking on the institutional quagmire to move initiatives forward. It is time-consuming, messy work that is often thankless and unending. As a servant leader (Greenleaf, 1998), my aim is to not only work for assurance that students participate in a productive educational experience, but also to promote a dynamic, satisfying experience for my colleagues as well.

To echo what C said, but from a different dimension, I am the perfect person to carry this initiative forward. I possess the perspective, acumen, and connections to understand how learning communities benefit the entire organization, and the personal characteristics to grow and sustain the effort (journal entry, fall, 2010). Nationally, there are a host of comparable community colleges that have instituted comprehensive first year experience programs linking basic skills courses with college success seminars (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). "A" Community College, like many others, will face shortfalls in local and state funding, and diminishing pools of traditional students from its county's public schools in the years to come (Dougherty & Hong, 2005). How we, as an institution, position ourselves in the way of recruitment strategies and retention efforts may make a considerable difference in securing the overall health and well-being of the

institution. The approach I have chronicled here can be replicated at other community colleges, as we, as a sector, grapple nationally with an uncertain future.

Creating a culture of learning provides opportunities that both support and encourage learning for students and every member of the college (Cox, 2004; O'Banion, 1997; Senge, 2006). As evidenced by the President's white paper and subsequent Commission on Student Development, "A" Community College is ready for a transformational change, a concern for the entire institution, not simply those in Student Affairs. Moreover, engagement and retention data are driving forces in public higher education accountability, particularly at the state and national levels (Dougherty & Hong, 2005). As the economic climate of a wealthy county changes, and enrollment projections for the coming years show diminishing numbers in the local public schools, the entire institution must be cognizant of retention and engagement efforts.

I am proud of the accomplishments of the past two years and the continuing efforts to improve the process, and encourage connections among faculty interested in teaching learning communities. The senior academic administration is presently in a state of flux at "A" Community College. How learning communities will be supported in the foreseeable future is unknown. I will continue to make the case for the economy of effort and widespread benefits that are possible with investment in learning communities as part of a comprehensive First Year Experience program. I recognize the limitations of my current role, but also have a new appreciation for the qualities I do possess and how much change I have effected over the course of this project. If I can invoke repetition of Kotter's steps for leading complex change in a complex environment, there is hope for a

sustained cultural change for “A” Community College and all its many cherished constituent (Kotter, 1996; O’Banion, 1997).

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## Appendix A

### Faculty Interview Protocol

College Success Seminar (HUDV 107) and Fundamentals of English (ENGL 095)  
Learning Community – Fall 2008

**This interview is part of a research study for a doctoral dissertation. The goal of the study is to examine how linking college courses in a student's first semester may affect student perceptions of engagement and actual success, and faculty perceptions of student success and personal satisfaction in teaching linked and non-linked courses.**

**Participation is voluntary and you need not respond to all questions. Participation will have no impact on your evaluation as a faculty member at the College. The interview questions should take about 30 minutes to complete. Participants' confidentiality will be strictly maintained.**

**Principle Investigator: M. Beth Boylan 732.224.2560**

#### Domain I: Training and Support

1. Did you undergo any formal training or do any focused research before undertaking this linked course experience?
2. Have you received any institutional support for your initiative (monetary, time, administrative acknowledgment, etc?)

#### Domain II: Communication and curriculum development

1. How did you create and manage the linkages between the classes?
2. How do you communicate with your linked faculty member?
3. Did any challenges arise between yourself and the other faculty member? How did you negotiate the process and did you create a unified experience for students?

### Domain III: Benefits

1. What are the student benefits of learning communities from your perspective?
2. What are the faculty benefits of learning communities from your perspective?

### Domain IV: Challenges

1. What are the challenges of learning communities for faculty from your perspective?
2. What are the challenges of learning communities for students from your perspective?

### Domain V: Learning and Insight

1. How has this experience changed you as a faculty member in your non-learning community classes?
2. How might this experience change students in their non-learning community classes?
3. What specific things have you noticed in the way of engagement and relationship-building in your learning community class as compared to other non-linked sections?

Domain VI: Advice

1. What have you learned most from this experience?
2. What advice would you offer a colleague interested in this kind of initiative?

## Appendix B

### Student Engagement Instrument

#### ENGLISH 095 SURVEY “A Community College”

This questionnaire is part of a research study for a doctoral dissertation. The goal of the study is to examine how linking college courses in a student’s first semester may affect success and satisfaction. Responses are anonymous. Participation is voluntary and you need not respond to all questions. Your participation will not affect your grade in this class in any way. The survey should take about 5 minutes to complete.

Principle Investigator: M. Beth Boylan 732.224.2560. Questions regarding the study may also be directed to my Rowan University faculty sponsor, Kathy Sernak at 856.256-4050 at the Graduate School of Education.

**A. Please mark the box that best indicates how often you have done each of the following in this course:**

1. Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas, information or skills from different classes

Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

---

2. Put together ideas or concepts from different courses during class

Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

---

3. Worked with classmates during class

Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

---

4. Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments

Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

---

5. Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary)

Very Often      Often      Sometimes      Rarely      Never  
                                                                                       

---

6. Participated in a community-based project as a part of a regular course

Very Often      Often      Sometimes      Rarely      Never  
                                                                                       

---

7. Talked about academic or career plans with an instructor

Very Often      Often      Sometimes      Rarely      Never  
                                                                                       

---

8. Talked about academic or career plans with an advisor or counselor

Very Often      Often      Sometimes      Rarely      Never  
                                                                                       

---

9. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with instructors outside of class

Very Often      Often      Sometimes      Rarely      Never  
                                                                                       

---

10. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with classmates outside class

Very Often      Often      Sometimes      Rarely      Never  
                                                                                       

---

11. Discussed ideas from our readings or classes with others outside class (family members, co-workers, etc.)

Very Often

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

---

**B. Please circle the number that best represents the QUALITY OF YOUR RELATIONSHIPS with people AT THIS COLLEGE (where NA = do not know or not applicable).**

CLASSMATES

Friendly, supportive

Unfriendly, Unsupportive

7 6 5 4 3 2 1 NA

---

OTHER STUDENTS (NOT CLASSMATES)

Friendly, supportive

Unfriendly, Unsupportive

7 6 5 4 3 2 1 NA

---

INSTRUCTORS

Friendly, supportive

Unfriendly, Unsupportive

7 6 5 4 3 2 1 NA

---

ACADEMIC SUPPORT STAFF

(e.g. counselors, librarians, learning assistants, tutors)

Friendly, supportive

Unfriendly, Unsupportive

7 6 5 4 3 2 1 NA

---

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!



## Appendix D

### Faculty letter to ENGL 095 / HUDV 107 Students

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Welcome to “A” Community College and Congratulations on your enrollment in the English / College Success Learning Community!

We wanted to provide you with some information about what to expect in these two classes and to let you know that we are really excited about all that we have planned for the coming semester.

First, what is a learning community? A learning community links two classes together so that what you learn in one class is related to what you learn in the other. One group of students is enrolled in the same sections of classes – unlike your other classes, where you likely will be with all different students.

The professors in a learning community work together so that your lessons and assignments in both classes are connected to each other. As a result we, the professors, and you, the students, are connected to each other. We spend a lot of time together, thinking and talking, and exploring and working. From what we know so far, this seems to work out well for everyone!

In your English class, you will be expected to develop your writing skills. Instead of writing about just any topic, you will write about the topics in your College Success Seminar and that class is all about you: who you are now, how you got way, and where you want to go with your life. Trust us, it really is . . . all good!

If you have any questions you can email either one of us or both of us. We are looking forward to meeting you in a few weeks. It’s going to be a great semester!

All the best,

G and M



## Appendix E

### “A” Community College Strategic Planning Matrix

---/1 July 2009 – 30 June 2010			
I. From the Classroom	II. Targeted Growth and Mission Priorities	III. Quality & Excellence	IV. Community Connectedness
<p><b>A. Foster Teaching and Learning.</b> Ensure integration of ESMP, ITSP &amp; FMP in planning and implementation of key academic, technology, and support services initiatives.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Collaboratively align Information Technology with institutional and educational priority goals.</li> <li>2. Implement relevant recommendations from ITSP III.</li> <li>3. Implement recommendations from examination of Educational Philosophy.</li> <li>4. Continue emphasis on expanding TLC initiatives.</li> <li>5. Update Five Year Plan for HEC's with attention to service availability and comparability.</li> <li>6. Expand Experiential Learning and Career Services.</li> <li>7. Expand Learning Community experiences.</li> </ol>	<p><b>A. Expand Access &amp; Opportunity. Develop Enrollment Management Plan to optimize growth opportunities and affordable access.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Implement recommendations of branch campus status assessment.</li> <li>2. Focus on continued increase in FTFT students, with special attention to anticipated decline of cohort.</li> <li>3. Focus on education as a lifelong activity for all residents of Monmouth County and region.</li> <li>4. Continue focus on integration of credit/noncredit programs, where appropriate and feasible.</li> <li>5. Focus on new and/or expanding markets with attention to scheduling, marketing and student services.</li> <li>6. Monitor the continued reliance on tuition and fees.</li> <li>7. Maximize county-wide access through continued growth of HECs.</li> <li>8. Recruit and retain more students into science, technology, engineering and math.</li> </ol>	<p><b>A. Assess and Align Organizational Leadership. Continue to implement and assess organizational changes.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prioritize and implement results of examination of Student Development Model.</li> <li>2. Assess Division Dean structure.</li> <li>3. Finalize implementation of CALM recommendations.</li> <li>4. Assess institutional satisfaction with new IT governance structure.</li> <li>5. Implement reclassification system recommendations.</li> <li>6. Assess integration of Diversity Council in Governance &amp; College initiatives.</li> </ol>	<p><b>A. Promote Brookdale's role in Economic Development. Position Brookdale to assist in local and state-wide initiatives in economic development.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Implement BCC role in Monmouth County Strategic Plan.</li> <li>2. Assess progress in Fort Monmouth initiative(s).</li> <li>3. Conduct Community Needs Assessment with business and industry focus.</li> <li>4. Build recognition of BCC value to community among state and local leaders; and community at large.</li> <li>5. Build partnerships and joint ventures to promote growth and access.</li> <li>6. Promote and expand BCC customized training role in support of economic development.</li> </ol>
<p><b>B. Develop/Modify Curriculum Development for a Changing Student Body.</b></p> <p>Implement recommended changes and continue comprehensive review of credit and noncredit curriculum.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Examine expansion of HUDV 107 to majority of FTFT students.</li> <li>2. Focus efforts in student accountability.</li> <li>3. Implement 09-10 new program development goals in ESMP with attention to the non-traditional student.</li> <li>4. Continue focus on Basic Skills analysis of enrollment and outcomes.</li> <li>5. Increase engagement</li> </ol>	<p><b>B. Increase Retention, Graduation &amp; Post Associate Learning. Expand retention and personal enrichment initiatives.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Expand initiatives to increase student success;               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Graduation rate differences</li> <li>b. Course completion rates</li> <li>c. Lower-performing students</li> <li>d. Factors identified in CCSSE survey</li> <li>e. Others.</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Assess impact of Lampitt Bill.</li> <li>3. Increase number of dual admission agreements and enrollments.</li> <li>4. Develop a culture that promotes post-associate degree attainment through the Community and “Bachelor’s through Brookdale.”</li> </ol>	<p><b>B. Ensure Organizational and Leadership Development. Ensure high quality, diverse workforce equipped for new challenges.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Continue emphasis on collegial governance and decision making in One Brookdale tradition.</li> <li>2. Continue implementation of select preliminary initiatives/actions connected to the six target areas identified in the 1/17/08 Diversity Council Report to Brookdale Community College; assess initiatives as appropriate.</li> </ol>	<p><b>B. Continue comprehensive self-examination and visioning for future success. In concert with findings from VVMG, and suggestions of Middle States Visiting Team (2008) develop and communicate report of findings, implications &amp; recommendations.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Implement recommendations of reviews of VVMG and Educational Philosophy.</li> <li>2. Envision curriculum, technology, staffing, facilities and financial models for Brookdale 2015 – 2020.</li> </ol>

## Appendix F

### Designing Integrative and Purposeful Assignments

How will students use what they are learning in the world or apply learning to problems or questions?

1. What is the integrative assignment?
2. What shared learning outcomes does the assignment support?
3. What will each of you be asking students to learn / do to prepare for this assignment?
4. What do you anticipate to be the general characteristics for advanced, developing, and beginning work to be for this assignment?
5. How will you help students develop the ability to assess their own work?
6. How will students use their work to solve problems?

What do you most want students to learn from your course? (big ideas)

What curricular, co-curricular and community resources will you use?

(Lardner and Malnarich, 2008)