Counseling-Enhanced Developmental Learning Communities – Service through Innovation

Skagit Valley College is an educational institution where trying out new ideas—whether pedagogical innovation, general education reform, or system redesign—is encouraged and valued. Faculty members contend that “do-overs” are a part of the learning process and are strongly related to the concept “intellectual humility.” The faculty are equally committed to conducted research to measure success after new ideas are implemented.

The Counseling-Enhanced Developmental Learning Communities program (C-E Dev LC) came about from a penchant for experimentation and research. The C-E Dev LC program is designed to strengthen developmental education and learning support at Skagit Valley College. Counseling faculty are teamed with teaching faculty and students to form developmental education learning communities. Counseling and teaching faculty work collaboratively to incorporate college success skills into course content. Topics are tailored to meet in-class needs and generally support student learning and success.

The program is aimed at enhancing the efficacy of the college’s approach to addressing the learning needs of its most academically challenged students, accelerating their progress to college-level coursework, and improving their persistence to degree or certificate completion. The specific program goals are to:

- Support our most challenged students in their successful completion of developmental education requirements
- Improve retention of new students
- Improve persistence to academic level work and to certificate and degree completion
- Develop academic faculty advising skills
- Strengthen counselors’ understanding of the value of learning communities
- Gather data on the efficacy of developmental learning communities for the purpose of analyzing and instituting best practices for student success.
The Counseling-Enhanced Developmental Learning Communities emerged as the result of several data points. First, both our internal data and the results from the CCSSE administrations in 2003, 2005 and 2007 affirmed the college’s longstanding and highly successful experience with learning communities as a method to achieve positive learning outcomes. These results indicate that students who took learning communities were significantly more likely to engage in activities that increase their time on task (and thus their chances for meeting their educational goals) as well as to assume responsibility for their learning: they were significantly more likely to have prepared two or more drafts of an assignment, worked with other students both in and out of class, and worked on papers or projects requiring integration of ideas or information from various sources than their counterparts who had not. Students who had taken learning communities also indicated a higher incidence of interaction with faculty members. In addition, the CCSSE data suggested that taking learning communities made a significant contribution to meeting general education outcomes.

The program was also partially a response to the high number of students who place at the developmental level and the low retention rates in developmental courses: approximately 90% of new SVC students test into developmental math and 50% into developmental English/Reading, and 48% of new degree-seeking students persist from the fall when they entered to the following fall.

In addition, CCSSE data suggested that the college should increase support for learners, particularly in developmental courses. Data from CCSSE indicated that SVC t was consistently well above the benchmark on Active and Collaborative Learning; however, we tended to be average on the Support for Students dimension (see the 2007 benchmark data below). Thus, this program builds on our strengths while focusing on areas where we wanted to improve.

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<th>Active &amp; Collaborative Learning</th>
<th>Student Effort</th>
<th>Academic Challenge</th>
<th>Student-Faculty Interaction</th>
<th>Support for Learners</th>
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Implementation

In the Counseling-Enhanced Developmental Learning Communities, counselors work with instructors and students in-class on a periodic basis depending on the needs of the students; however counseling faculty always attend the class several times during the first week of the quarter and generally once or twice a week during the reminder of the term. Five study skills topics are covered during the quarter in each learning community:

1. Educational Planning
2. Time Management
3. Note Taking & Other Study Skills
4. College Resources & Services
5. Test Taking/Preparation.

When and how these topics are introduced vary from learning community to learning community based on the emerging needs of the students. In addition, all students are expected to meet with the counseling faculty outside of class at least once during the quarter to develop an educational plan, and are encouraged to also meet with one of the teaching faculty to further discuss their educational plan.

It is important to note that both teaching and counseling faculty supported this program and insisted that the program development and continuation be grounded in data so that the program results could 1) increase our understanding of the relationship between counseling-enhanced developmental learning communities and student success, and 2) inform curricular design and resource allocation in the future.

The evaluative aspects of the program include:

1. Measuring student outcomes in four areas:
   - Student success in the core course(s) (English and/or Math)
   - Student success in subsequent core course sequence
   - Student retention from quarter to quarter
   - Student persistence to degree or certificate

2. Collecting qualitative data from surveys of participating faculty and students to obtain attitudinal data and assist with possible interpretations of the quantitative data.
3. Analyzing the demographics of students in both developmental learning community courses and the stand-alone comparison courses to help ensure that results are not significantly affected by differences in student characteristics.

Thus far, we have several data points in the program evaluation. First, students in counseling-enhanced developmental learning communities have positive attitudes about their courses. The following comments are typical:

- I liked having 2 classes at once rather than only have 1 at a time. I feel I learned more too.
- Was fun. Very intriguing.
- I think combined classes are a great way to learn.
- I like having these two classes together because it makes me feel more connected -- knowing the same people and teachers are working together.

Survey data has been collected from teaching and counseling faculty with regard to perceptions about the process and outcomes of the pilot project. For example, teaching faculty reported that having a counselor in the classroom “really enhanced the connections made in the classroom and improved the interaction and dynamic for discussions and lectures” and “provided a different voice; a richness to skills development.” For both teaching and counseling faculty, the biggest challenge was finding time for both course content and success skills topics. The faculty who integrated success skills into course content seemed to be most satisfied with the program.

While the longitudinal analysis is not yet complete, the results for the individual cohort data indicates that while students in Counseling-Enhanced Developmental Learning Communities do not pass at a significantly greater rate, the retention rate is higher for students in the Counseling-Enhanced Learning Communities than other developmental students.

References


