

Underprepared, Ethnically Diverse Community College Students: Factors Contributing to Persistence

By Peter Barbatis

This research applied a third lens to explain why some students were successful in spite of previous educational experiences that did not prepare them for college.

ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the perceptions of underprepared college students who had participated in a first-year learning community at an urban, culturally diverse, commuter campus in the southeastern United States. Perceptions of graduates and those who earned at least 30 college-level credit hours were compared to their learning community peers who did not persist and had dropped out of college. A total of 22 students participated: 6 graduates, 12 persisters, and 4 dropouts. The factors included personal attributes, support systems, and other characteristics. Findings suggested the following ways to enhance the academic experience of underprepared college students: (a) include critical pedagogy, (b) integrate cocurricular activities with the academic disciplines, and (c) increase student-faculty interaction.*

Postsecondary institutions such as community colleges emphasize student retention because high levels of attrition may harm the interests of many constituents (Bragg, 2001). For example, Bragg identifies interests such as the long-term earning options of students; the economic vitality of communities needing skilled workers; and the institution's curriculum development, faculty planning, mission, and political impact.

College administrators perceive student retention rates as indicators which measure the quality of faculty instruction, support services, and student success. In community colleges this is particularly disconcerting because of the number of college students whose entry placement scores require them to enroll in developmental education classes and their low persistence and graduation rates (Bers & Smith, 1991; Burley, Butner, & Cejda, 2001). Nationally, approximately one-third of all students entering colleges or universities need remediation (Byrd & McDonald, 2005); as many as 41% of all community college freshmen nationwide are enrolled in developmental courses (Hoyt, 1999; McCabe, 2003).

The following question framed the study: To what did underprepared community college students who participated in a learning community and completed their developmental classes

attribute their having graduated (graduates) or earning at least 30 credit-bearing college credits (the persisters) as compared to those who participated in a learning community but did not complete their developmental classes and who dropped out of college (dropouts)?

College students enrolling in developmental classes and not participating in learning communities have demonstrated a higher attrition rate and a lower completion rate (Boylan 1999; Burley et al., 2001; McCabe, 2003; Roueche & Roueche, 1999) compared to college students who participated in learning communities; the latter academically outperformed nonparticipants (Brittenham et al., 2003; Knight, 2003; Raftery, 2005). Most studies have been conducted at 4-year institutions or among specifically defined cohorts such as those enrolled in honors colleges or specific majors. Zhao and Kuh (2004) analyzed 80,479 students from 365 four-year institutions, finding that participation in a learning community was positively linked with engagement in active and collaborative learning, increased interaction with faculty members, and augmented overall satisfaction with the college experience. At the time of this study, 284 institutions had listed their programs with the Washington Center Learning Communities National Resource Directory (2007). Of that number, 101 represented community colleges, and only 9 of those institutions, including the study site, had implemented learning communities for students in developmental education classes. Developmental education (also known as postsecondary remediation, basic skills education, compensatory education, or preparatory education) is composed primarily of sequences of increasingly advanced courses designed to bring underprepared students to the level of skill competency expected of college freshmen (McCabe, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

Several theorists have studied factors that contribute to persistence and attrition rates of college students. Tinto (1975) created the integration model, reflecting that students who are more integrated and feel valued are more likely

Peter Barbatis
Vice President for Student Development/
Enrollment Management
Bronx Community College of the City
University of New York
2155 University Avenue
Bronx, NY 10453
peter.barbatis@bcc.cuny.edu

to persist. Students who possess certain precollege characteristics such as middle to high socioeconomic status, positive secondary school achievement, and strong family support were more likely to persist and graduate (Tinto, 1997). Astin (1984) studied persistence and student success, finding that the greater the amount of time a student participates in cocurricular and other activities in and out of the classroom, the more likely he or she will continue in school. Frequent interaction with faculty was more strongly related to satisfaction than any other involvement (Astin, 1996); yet developmental, culturally and ethnically diverse students have rarely been shown to develop close relationships with their professors (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). However, because learning communities are believed to facilitate a student's integration to the campus community and directly involve students in their learning, this study was designed to investigate how social systems (such as peers, family, community groups) might influence students' experiences.

Because Tinto (1975, 1997) and Astin (1984) did not address how the college system functions for underprepared, culturally diverse students, this research applied a third lens to explain why some students were successful in spite of previous educational experiences that did not prepare them for college. This study was informed by critical theory, a broad approach to challenging and destabilizing established knowledge or power structure (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Because race, class, gender, and socioeconomic status are variables that have been associated with lower completion rates or greater attrition of those who enroll in developmental classes in college (Boylan, Bonham, & Bliss, 1994; Burley, Butner, & Cejda, 2001; McCabe, 2003; Roueche & Roueche, 1999), the researcher hoped that a critical theory process could examine ways that race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, education, religion, and sexual orientation interact to impact on underprepared, ethnically diverse students' success in college. There was an interest in exposing power dynamics and oppressions within the social and cultural experiences of the individual participants and appreciating life histories and stories so as to emphasize unique contributions and perspectives of individual students. A critical pedagogy approach has been shown to result in an individual person's emancipation from potentially oppressive views of one's self (Freire, 1970). Student success as used in this study was defined as completing developmental coursework, maintaining at least a 2.0 grade point average, and either graduating from Broward College or completing at least 30 semester credits.

Method

The researcher examined the effect of learning communities on college students' attitudes toward college in order to identify factors which promote or hinder student retention. Semistructured interviews with each participant and a focus group with the participants provided narrative data which were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to gain insights into the experiences and perspectives of the participants. The researcher had access to directory information on all FYE (First Year Experience) students that included each individual's address, phone number, and email address. Initially, participants were mailed a letter detailing the study and were contacted by telephone to set up mutually convenient interview locations and appointments. For students whose phone numbers had been disconnected, the researcher used a snowballing sampling technique whereby he asked interviewed students for contact information of an FYE peer. Also, the researcher found other students on Facebook.com.

Participants

A total of 22 subjects participated in the study, including 17 women and 5 men who ranged from 19 to 46 years of age. Although the majority of the participants were in their early 20s, one student was 46. Table 1 briefly introduces the participants who had graduated: Absum, Frieda, Janice, LeLe, Nekee, and Sara.

Table 2 (p. 16) briefly summarizes the demographics of the persisters. Many of the currently-

enrolled participants were within 1 or 2 semesters of graduation. The persisters included nine women and three men. Seven students were Black and self-identified by their cultural identities; three students were Hispanic and two students were White-Non-Hispanic.

Table 3 (p. 17) briefly introduces the participants who had dropped out: Aleida, Anna, J.R., and Sacha. With the exception of Anna, who worked part time, the remaining dropouts who were interviewed worked full-time or were responsible for young children.

All participants in the study had participated in a FYE Learning Community based on retention models (Astin, 1985; Tinto, 1997). Underprepared students whose scores on standardized tests required them to enroll into all three developmental courses (reading, English, and mathematics) had a plan which required them to take their developmental classes in sequence. In addition to their noncredit classes in reading, English, and mathematics, students could earn 13 college-level credits toward their general education requirements.

Setting

The study was based at a large, urban community college (with approximately 65,000 credit and noncredit enrolled students) in the southeastern United States that offered technical certificates and associate degrees and had recently been authorized to offer baccalaureate degrees in certain majors. Broward College was one of the largest community colleges in the country and served

Table 1
Demographic Profile of the Graduates

Name	Year in FYE	# of Credits Earned	Age	Gender	Race/ Self-Identity	Major	Overall GPA
Absum	2004	60	23	M	Asian Indian	Engineering	2.76
Frieda	2005 ^a	60	20	F	Black Haitian	Psychology	2.55
Janice	2003 ^b	41	23	F	Black Jamaican	PTA	2.65
LeLe	2004	64	22	F	Black American	Special Ed	2.89
Nekee	2003	68	23	F	Black Jamaican	Business	2.48
Sara	2005	60	20	F	Black Haitian	Business	2.52

^aTransferred to the upper division before earning AA degree

^bTransferred after 41 credits to earn PTA degree at a private proprietary college

Table 2
Demographic Profile of the Persisters

Name	Year in FYE	# of Credits Earned	Age	Gender	Race/ Self-Identity	Major	Overall GPA
Addison	2006	37	20	M	Black American	Business Management	3.04
Andy	2006	35	46	F	Black Jamaican	Radiation Therapy	3.15
Caridad	2005	42	20	F	Hispanic Guatemalan	Journalism	2.83
Dora	2004	63	21	F	Hispanic Costa Rican/ Italian	Nursing	3.46
Joseph	2005	33	21	M	White American	Atmospheric Science	3.14
Juanita	2006	32	19	F	Hispanic Puerto Rican/ Dominican	Nursing	3.20
Kyla-Renee	2004	36	22	F	Black Jamaican	Nursing	1.52
Melissa	2005	53	21	F	White American	Education	3.03
Nettie	2005	46	23	F	Black Haitian	Pre-Med	2.03
Robert	2004	61	22	M	Black Haitian	Accounting	2.57
Star	2005	49	22	F	Black Bahamian	Travel/Tourism	2.83
Tridi	2005	51	21	F	Black Haitian	Accounting	2.59

a diverse student population, particularly at the study site. As reported in *Achieving the Dream* (2006), ethnicity demographics indicated that 36% of the students were Black, 39% White, 22% Hispanic, and 3% Asian; in addition, approximately one-third of all freshmen enrolled in all three developmental courses of reading, English, and mathematics.

Procedure

Individual interviews were conducted face-to-face, with the exception of one telephone interview for a student who had transferred to a university out of the area. Each interview lasted 1 to 1 ½ hours and was recorded with a digital voice-recorder. The majority were held on the Broward College campus in one of the student services conference rooms, although three interviews were held off campus at a coffee shop or near the participant's place of employment. All

interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Each participant signed two copies of an informed consent release form approved by the respective institutional review boards of Florida International University and Broward College. One focus group was held after the individual interviews had been conducted and transcribed so as to provide the participants with an opportunity to review core categories and themes derived from individual interview data. All interviewed students were telephoned and invited to participate. Out of 22 students, 6 persisters and 1 dropout attended the focus group. It was held at the Broward College campus at a conveniently identified time for the majority of students. All interview and focus-group narratives were transcribed by the researcher. A pilot study was conducted to validate the protocol before implementing the full study, which resulted in minor changes in the interview protocols to include

broader prompts so as to elicit free association from the participants.

Data Analysis

Archived data was accessed (with permission from the participants) on year-to-year retention, grade point average, age, ethnicity, gender, first-generation-in-college status, and learning community participation of all subjects. The archived data were compared to the interview transcripts from the 22 participants and the researcher's logs and memos. Using a constant-comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), the researcher did not focus primarily on similarities but instead sought to identify relationships that connected statements and events within a context. Core categories were identified until no new themes surfaced outside the categories. Finally, interpretation brought meaning and coherence to the themes. Data analysis began immediately after finishing the first interview and continued throughout the process; all participants were interviewed.

Several procedures recommended by Creswell (1998) were used to verify the trustworthiness of the study at three important points. First, the data collection process was verified through triangulation of data sources, a process that required that the researcher (a) look at themes as they emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts and (b) then look for confirmation of the themes from other sources (e.g., researcher log, archival data, or other participants' interviews). Second, the steps to analyze the data and develop the themes were verified through an external audit conducted by a peer reviewer. Third, the transcripts and themes that emerged were checked for accuracy by the participants themselves.

Results

Reviewing the data the researcher identified four themes, organized as follows: (a) precollege characteristics, (b) external college support/community influences, (c) social involvement, and (d) academic integration. Each theme also contained several subthemes, providing further detail to interpret the experience. The experiences have been explained through the perceptions of three spokespersons who represent a range of ethnicities, majors, and patterns of persistence: Nekee (a 23-year-old business major who self-identified as a Black Jamaican) from the graduate group, Robert (a 22-year-old accounting major who self-identified as a Black Haitian) from the persister group, and Aleida (a 27-year-old radiography major who self-identified as Hispanic Cuban) from the dropout group.

As the first theme, precollege characteristics and traits described those attributes students bring to college. These internal factors included six subthemes: (a) sense of responsibility, (b) goal orientation, (c) resourcefulness, (d) determination, (e) cultural and racial self-identification, and (f) faith. The graduates and persisters shared internal characteristics that they believed may have contributed to educational achievement. Nekee revealed, "I knew that stopping with just high school wouldn't really help me in the long run cause I do wanna have a family and be able to provide for my kids. The higher in education I go, the better I'll be." Robert emphasized his goals as follows: "I hope to open my own store. I want to fill out income tax for people. My goal is to be the first college graduate in my family, then transfer to FAU in the fall." And Aleida explained, "I don't know [what I want to do]. I'm not sure. I want to go back to school, but I have to work."

In terms of cultural and racial identification, Nekee explained, "I think [Jamaicans] are more strict on education. Like, you have to go to school, even if no one else went to college." Robert believed that "in [my] Haitian culture... school is number one. I feel like in the Haitian culture, education is a very important factor. If you don't have an education, what do you have?" In contrast, Aleida said, "I don't think race or gender affects school. In high school, everybody was Latino, Black, or something. Nobody cares about that."

As an emerging second theme, participants attributed their success to supportive families who include parents, (mothers were named more often than fathers), siblings, grandparents, cousins, and fiancées. In addition, friends developed in K-12, as well as high school teachers had an influence on their decision and efforts to attend and persist in college. Nekee noted, "I had to strive to do better in my life, you know, to get an education so they'd be proud of me. Cause

they did not have that opportunity, I should take advantage of it." Robert emphasized family support and encouragement: "My dad encouraged me to stay in school because they don't really have a good job and they do everything they can to support me and give me a place to sleep." Aleida explained, "My parents came from Cuba during the Mariel. They were in high school, but didn't finish. My grandmother, especially, got upset when I stopped. I don't think my mom cared. I didn't want to end up like them. I wanted a good job, to be independent and stuff."

The third theme identified was social involvement, which is related to students who are involved on campus in different clubs and organizations and their interaction with other students. Much of the literature indicated that involvement outside the classroom contributes positively to student success (Astin, 1993). Nekee described her first experiences before FYE: "Before when I first started here, I wasn't comfortable at all. I was

Friends developed in K-12, as well as high school teachers had an influence on their decision and efforts to attend and persist in college.

like, nervous...it's scary. But then everything was okay from that because it was like a family." Robert appreciated "the computer club was a good experience for me 'cause we did a lot of stuff in there (pause) competitions. I got a lot more knowledge about computers and met people." Aleida said, "I went to work when classes were over. I guess I didn't have time."

The fourth theme, academic integration, refers to the students' inclusion in the campus academic culture and their interface with academia. Underprepared students who may have had limited academic success in the past gained an understanding and developed skills essential for success. This often included the development of positive interactions with faculty, recognition of college expectations, and effective study habits. Robert emphasized the importance of learning how to manage his studying. He explained, "Broward has taught me a lot...the FYE program taught me how to stop procrastination, how to be a better student. Before I came to Broward, I used to procrastinate more. Honestly, I see a big change in my life." In contrast, Aleida did not seem to take responsibility for her study time when she said, "I'm always on the go. It's constant. I guess, I'm not always patient. I want things to happen right away."

The common influences mentioned by all participants included parents, faculty, faith, and personal characteristics such as independence. However, the perceptions of the graduates and persisters seemed to be qualitatively different from the dropouts. Persisters more frequently mentioned a sense of responsibility, goal orientation, resourcefulness, and determination. They were more likely to explain how their culture, race, or ethnicity influenced their success. Furthermore, they reported they were more involved in campus life. In addition, they shared a belief that an education was liberating and a means to achieve their goals. Instead, the dropouts appeared to have been more likely to be deterred by life circumstances.

Based on the findings from the present study, I developed an emerging model (see Figure 1, p. 18) to explain the persistence of participating underprepared college students. The varying sizes of the circles represent the relative strength of the themes.

Larger circles indicate themes that seemed to have a stronger impact on the participants (i.e., external college support/community influence). This finding is consistent with Braxton and Lien (2000) who have argued that Tinto did not emphasize the importance of congruence with prevailing attitudes, values, and beliefs intrinsic to academia and of inclusion.

Levine and Nidiffer (1996), who studied the impact of poverty on individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend college, found that "the most valuable mechanism for steering students from poverty to college is people. Human contact is what makes the difference" (p. 77). The underprepared college students in this study were (a) first-generation college students, (b) first generation in the United States, (c) non-native English speakers, (d) women, and (e)

Table 3
Demographic Profile of the Dropouts

Name	Year in FYE	# of Credits Earned	Age	Gender	Race/Self-Identity	Major	Overall GPA
Aleida	2004	27	21	F	Hispanic Cuban	Radiography	2.92
Anna	2003	44	23	F	Black Jamaican	Criminal Justice	2.47
J.R.	2003	16	22	M	Black Haitian	Business	1.62
Sacha	2006	4	19	F	Black Haitian	Nursing	0.91

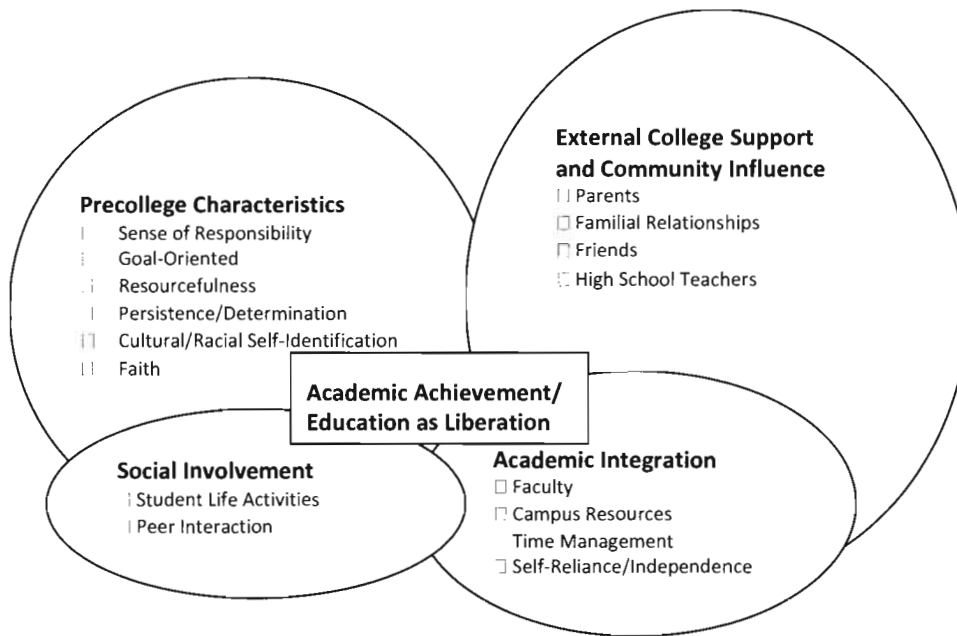


Figure 1. An emerging model of the factors that influence underprepared, culturally diverse college students' persistence to academic achievement and education as liberation.

from under-represented minority populations. Many participants provided examples of various internal and external influences that helped them negotiate college and use or learn skills/behaviors to persist.

Discussion

The emerging model provides an insight to the retention of underprepared, ethnically diverse college students. This study supports findings from Tinto (1975) and Astin (1985) who have discussed certain precollege characteristics, social involvement, and academic integration which contribute to persistence. Tinto's academic integration theory emphasizes prematriculation characteristics; in other words, those precollege traits that students possess which influence their initial level of commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1975). Tinto has identified ethnicity, level of family support, socioeconomic status, and secondary school achievement as primary characteristics. After a student has enrolled, Tinto claims the rites of passage three-phase process of separation, transition, and incorporation contributes to retention. Tinto argues that the more students assimilate to the institution's culture and the more they feel themselves to be valued members of the campus, the more likely they are to persist to graduation.

In contrast, the participants in the current study seemed to rely on their respective cultural affiliations (e.g., Black Haitians, Black Jamaicans, Black Americans, White Ameri-

cans, Black Bahamian, Hispanic Guatemalan, Hispanic Costa Rican/Italian, Hispanic Puerto Rican/Dominican, Hispanic Cuban, and Asian Indian). They all expressed high levels of family support. The majority did not talk about socioeconomic class, and interestingly, few of the study participants qualified for financial aid. The graduates and persisters more frequently than dropouts spoke about other personal characteristics not mentioned by Tinto, such as sense of responsibility, goal orientation, resourcefulness, determination, and faith. Perhaps the most important finding of the current study that differs from Tinto's theory is the influence of the study participants' cultural self-identification, particularly the emphasis their families placed on the importance of an education.

Although Tinto (1975) mentioned the level of family support as an initial influence, he emphasized the need for disengagement from past relationships and familial cultures so that students could assimilate into the college culture: disengagement of past relationships to create new ones. In contrast, the participants in the current study (particularly the graduates and persisters) kept their relationships with family members and high school friends. They also reported that their high school teachers made a difference in their decision to stay in college. Although both the graduates and persisters reported they had made new friends, the more important influences were external to the college/campus community. In contrast to the graduates

and the persisters whose peers attended college, the dropouts' friends did not share in the same academic experiences.

Consistent with Tinto (1975), the persisters and graduates appeared to have had good experiences and positive interactions with college faculty and accessed campus resources. In addition, they learned good time management skills. To a lesser extent, they were self-reliant/independent. Some participants described breaking from their family financial dependence. Thirty years after Tinto offered his model, these factors remain true and seemed to emerge for this group of ethnically diverse, underprepared college students.

In contrast to Tinto (1975), Astin's (1984) theory emphasizes that, rather than change and assimilate to the institution's culture, college students should maintain their individuality yet become socially engaged in programs and initiatives (i.e., college activities, classroom involvement, faculty interaction, etc.). This study, has found that many of the graduates and the persisters frequently expressed many of the benefits of social involvement when sharing their own experiences.

As pointed out by Astin (1984) and Tinto (1975), social involvement and academic integration do not entirely address the needs of ethnically diverse, underprepared college students. For example, Swail (2003) studied retention of minority students in higher education and suggested that other factors such as completing a rigorous high school curricular program; experiencing diversity among the faculty, staff, and students; and having access to financial aid appeared to be important predictors of college persistence. In addition, it was found that teacher expectations and the impact of matching learning with teaching styles were important factors in minority student achievement (Sanchez, 2000). This study further supported the need for a new theoretical perspective. All of the participants possessed one or more of the following characteristics: first generation in college, immigrants or children of immigrants, racial or ethnic minority status, or women. All of the graduates and persisters considered a college education as a means to achieve emancipation from their current life and as an opportunity for greater success. The critical theory approach appeared to add a promising dimension to understanding the needs of a more diverse student population.

Recommendations for Community College Practice and Policy

Based on the findings of this study, factors identified, and the emerging model of the factors

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that influence underprepared college students' persistence illustrated in Figure 1, the researcher poses implications for practice at the 2-year institution. Although those intended for practice are offered as a result of this specific study, some recommendations may be appropriate to higher education administrators, faculty, and staff working with underprepared students at other institutions.

First, parents and extended family can be instrumental in the lives of underprepared, ethnically diverse students in this study (especially the graduates and persisters). Although only a few dropouts contributed to the study, their experiences reflected an absence of familial supports. Therefore, college personnel should consider developing programs and strategies to involve parents and family members. Rather than expecting all college students to detach or separate from their families to create new social support systems, college personnel can engage the parents and family members. Several participants in this study reported that their parents participated in pre-enrollment activities, such as new student orientation. Many mothers encouraged, if not mandated, their son or daughter to join the FYE program. Although some institutions have offered a "Parents Going to College" session during the freshman orientation program to include information on degree requirements, campus resources, financial aid, and contact information, postsecondary institutions, particularly community colleges, could do more. Rather than provide only one initial experience, programs should be continuous and sustained throughout their family member's enrollment. For example, a family guidebook of campus resources and important contact information should be provided to each household. In addition, a family advisory council could be created where at least once a semester, members review and provide feedback regarding campus initiatives and programs. Finally, colleges could enroll parents and their son or daughter in a student life skills course or seminar to reinforce habits and behaviors that promote success at home. The majority of students reside with their families, and it appears parents and family members want and need to be involved. As indicated by Dora who has noted,

My parents don't speak English extremely well. When I was in high school, my mom used to help me study for advanced vocabulary and my science classes. She would sit with me at the dining room table and quiz me at night. She had no idea about what I was studying and couldn't pronounce the words, but she helped me.

In other words, when a son or daughter attends college, often the entire family is involved, not just the enrollee. The home culture should not be considered a distraction.

Second, faculty and administrators might develop new programs based on the types of student learning experiences known to support student success and persistence to graduation. Failure to connect with others on campus, including peers, student organizations, faculty, and/or staff, contributes more to voluntary withdrawal than almost any other factor (Brittenham et al., 2003). This finding is consistent with the current study. Students spoke highly of the cocurricular activities (leadership retreats, field experiences) where the classroom lesson was supported by Student Life. As Juanita has indicated,

The whole FYE thing was good because we had trips and activities. It was actually doing it and going. I've heard about professors that

It is a serious mistake to limit learning outcomes to only cognitive values.

don't care, but the professors I've taken have been great. They don't make me feel like I don't want to come, they make me feel like I want to be in class.

Many underprepared community college students could benefit from such clubs and organizations that are tied to their major if they are embedded in the classroom experience. Postsecondary institutions need to expand the concept of learning to include affective outcomes such as leadership, self-understanding, and citizenship as well as cognitive outcomes. It is a serious mistake to limit learning outcomes to only cognitive values (Astin, 1993).

Third, the instructional delivery system, particularly in developmental classes, should be presented in a format that allows students to focus on acquiring specific competencies and using adult education methods rather than methods that students were exposed to in high schools. Some of the participants in this study regarded the preparatory classes as punitive because the courses did not generate college credit. Also, they emphasized that the courses, especially the developmental courses, were taught in ways that were too similar to what they experienced in high schools. Furthermore, they were required to pay for the developmental instruction which should have been learned in high school. Melissa said,

When I found out I had to take the prep classes, I was a little bit—I don't know—discouraged, maybe intimidated because you go through high school and then a lot of like, that first English class, 0021 is straight from high school. So, you feel like you're back in high school. So I think it kinda pushes you away because you are like, I already did this. It doesn't make sense. So, I think that's what a lot of it is—I guess having to pay for the class. They don't like that. Then you don't really get the credit for it. I think it pushes people away.

Although additional research is needed, a new model in which acquiring the competencies of reading, English, and mathematics in an integrated curriculum may increase year-to-year retention and higher grades in subsequent classes. If competency-based curriculum is applied, students could achieve incremental success and experience making timely progress. Janice noted, after transferring to another private college where she was successful due to a more creative instructional format, "it's one class a month. So, you're just concentrating on that one class, which I like."

Fourth, underprepared college students should be allowed to earn transferable credits while enrolled in developmental courses (Killackey, Thomas, & Accomando; 2002). Many of the participants in this study felt developmental courses were a discouraging barrier that extended the time to completion of their programs of study. Frieda explained:

After I graduated I talked to one of my friends that I went to high school with and I told her that I graduated and everything and she asked me if I took any prep classes and I said, "yeah, I took a couple of prep classes," and she said that she kinda felt like she wanted to go to school but she feels that people that take prep classes, it's like they're never going to graduate. I said, "no, I mean, I probably would have graduated earlier if I would have taken classes the first summer when I started here." But I think maybe prep classes make the students feel like they're not gonna get out.

If skills learned in the developmental courses (i.e., reading) can be applied in related college-level courses (i.e., computer concepts, sociology) and students earn college-level credits simultaneously, they are more apt to discover interdisciplinary application and make progress in earning credits toward their degree. Developmental courses should not be taught in isolation but rather in ways that allow students to see the connected relationships among disciplines (Grubb & Cox, 2005; McCabe, 2003).

Students need to learn how to transfer and practice newly acquired strategies to the demands of each course with tasks perceived to be authentic (Stahl, Simpson, & Hayes, 1992). Learning communities may facilitate that process.

Fifth, the results of the study indicated that college administrators and staff should support the transition of students as they mainstream with the general student population. Some students missed the peer support they had while in FYE and recommended that the program be extended. The voices of persisters such as Dora, Nettie, and Juanita and dropouts such as Anna emphasized the importance of peer support. Dora noted, "the semester after FYE, I felt confused and a little alone. The students I knew were no longer around or in the same class. I had phone numbers and we would sometimes chat on-line, but it wasn't the same." Anna, a dropout, noted, "If I was still in the FYE program, it could have kept me in school. It was more structured." Perhaps colleges should consider the implementation of a Second Year Experience.

Sixth, to increase students' sense of academic integration, administrators could group students based on major to increase their academic discipline identification. Absum reported, "if I had the same major of students with me who were focusing on...in the same direction, I think, it would have helped a lot." Perhaps more of these supportive peer relationships would continue beyond the first year if the participants were in the same program of study.

Reviewing the impact of FYE on students as identified in the themes from this study, there are some policy implications that colleges might implement. For example, the number of FYE learning communities can be expanded to involve more students. Furthermore, to attract more students, additional cohorts could be added to include evening or part-time groups.

In addition, the development of a 3-credit student success course may be beneficial. The literature supports the implementation of a freshmen seminar class that teaches time management, goal-setting, and educational planning and complements the academic disciplines (Fidler & Godwin, 1994; Folger, Carter, & Chase, 2004; Ishler, 2003). As found in this study, many of these behaviors may be learned in college to enhance student success and retention.

Recommendations for Future Research

Developmental education can greatly benefit from continued studies that listen directly to

students' voices and perceptions of their own college experiences. By focusing on issues of access and preparation, researchers can provide additional information about possible barriers, motivational issues, diversity influences, cultural factors, and students' learning orientations. Further, qualitative research informs and identifies areas of interest for quantitative researchers to pursue.

To develop the knowledge base related to underprepared, ethnically diverse college students and their success, a study of the experiences and perceptions of male students as compared to female students would be helpful. Approximately one-third of the students who entered the FYE program at Broward College were men. In addition, there was a disproportionately small number of men who graduated or had earned 30 or more credits (4) compared to those who started in the FYE program (29); approximately 14% had been retained. In com-

Qualitative research informs and identifies areas of interest for quantitative researchers to pursue.

parison, 16 women had graduated or earned 30 or more credits out of 69 women who initially joined FYE; 23% of the women persisted. Understanding the needs of men who persist may help administrators and faculty introduce more effective support services to retain them.

In addition, a further study of students enrolled in developmental mathematics is warranted. Both the archival data and interview transcripts show that the majority of underprepared students in the current study encountered difficulty with mathematics. Many participants withdrew from or failed their math courses. As a result, those courses had to be repeated, thus extending time to completion of their programs of study.

A study of underprepared students who did not participate in a learning community might reveal that their experiences are qualitatively different from those who did participate. In this study, it was found that half of qualifying underprepared students joined the program. Perhaps there are characteristics that distinguish the learning community participants from those students who choose not to join. Outside of basic demographic information and entry test scores, little is known about those who choose not to participate in FYE. The nature of the differences could inform college

administrators and faculty about how to better engage nonparticipants so as to increase their retention through graduation. Clearly, more research is needed to further validate the value and success of the FYE program.

Although Tinto (1975) refers to family support as an initial influence for college students, the findings from the current study differ from Tinto's theory with respect to the influence of the study participants' cultural self-identification and the emphasis their families placed on the importance of education. Based on the findings, the researcher has posed an emerging model to explain the success of underprepared college students. A study designed to determine the impact of family as a variable that influences persistence is warranted.

Conclusion

The ideals of learning communities are consistent with the values of community colleges. Key factors in retention for the graduates and persisters in the current study included high level of faculty-student interaction, integration of academic and social activities, opportunity for involvement, mentoring, leadership experiences, cultural and social support, and use of campus resources and student services (similar to findings reported by Harvey-Smith, 2002). This study supports research by Tinto (1975) and Astin (1984) who discussed certain precollege characteristics, social involvement, and academic integration which contribute to persistence. Tinto studied mostly White, Non-Hispanic, students who came from middle-class and higher socioeconomic levels and had higher secondary school achievement records in contrast to the participants in the current study who represented first-generation American, immigrant students. Participants in the current study all expressed positive influences from high levels of family support and more frequently spoke about other personal characteristics. Participants also agreed that it was beneficial to be socially involved and engaged on campus with activities to work closely with peers and faculty on class projects. Finally, all participants regarded education as a means of liberation to break away from the current dominant cultural frame of reference to a more open, hopeful view of self with limitless potential.

Analyzing the impact of learning communities on students who are most at-risk for attrition can inform community college administrators, admissions personnel, and faculty about the at-risk students' experiences. With

increased understanding of the lived experiences of persisters and graduates compared to dropouts, perhaps more holistic initiatives can be developed to positively impact the at-risk, developmental student population. Such programs can allow them to experience greater success in their postsecondary education programs. In the final analysis, understanding the experiences of developmental students can help college faculty and administrators structure more effective mentoring relationships when working with this student population. As indicated by Robert, "College is important cause out there is not easy. I am the first one in my family to go to college and I don't want to mess that up."

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Understanding the experiences of developmental students can help college faculty and administrators structure more effective mentoring.



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