

ATTENDING TO CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

SACRAMENTO STATE

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Introduction

Being the first in one's family to attend college represents a milestone of success in breaking generational, educational, and cultural barriers that in the past have prevented many underrepresented students from fulfilling their dream of a college education. To pave the way for student success and to open windows of opportunity for learning, student engagement, and community building, the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at Sacramento State University instituted the learning communities program in 1995. The first learning community consisted of nineteen students. Called *La Familia*, to represent the family and the importance of togetherness, it was created as a means of bridging the academic and social divide for first generation students. The program has now grown to serve over 380 students each fall and has offered as many as twenty-five different learning communities.

Within the context of an EOP learning community, a new cohort of students is enrolled together in a cluster of courses consisting of an EOP Freshman Seminar (Ethnic Studies 21), a general education course (anthropology, child development, communication studies, criminal justice, ethnic studies, government, or theatre arts), a tutorial support class called Learning Skills 39B to aid students in the general education class, and an English and math course. Students take part in the learning community experience for one semester and earn fourteen to sixteen credits. In the spring the learning community students enroll as a group in a one-credit Ethnic Studies 98 course to explore career paths and other transitional issues associated with the first-year experience.

The learning community cluster model has worked well in helping students complete their developmental English and math courses and has provided students in the program with support as they complete basic general education requirements. By the end of the fall term, students in the learning community have acquired leadership skills, are more self-confident, and have made the adjustment to college life. A large number of these students are ready to enroll in college-level

English and math courses. Many begin to take courses in their major and engage in community service and internship projects, as they explore their values and navigate their educational and career path in our second semester curriculum. This well-rounded first-year experience provides a foundation for EOP learning community students. Their successes have contributed to the overall expansion of the EOP learning community cluster model at Sacramento State because it demonstrably promotes student success among first generation and low-income college students.

In many respects, the growth of the learning community effort on campus has been attributable to the partnerships established between academic and student affairs, as well as evidence of the program's successes—improved first-year retention rates, higher grade point averages, and positive feedback from students, faculty, and staff. For example, the first-year retention rate of the EOP learning community students for the fall 2005 cohort was 84%, compared to 72% for first-time freshmen not enrolled in a learning community. After completing the EOP learning community in fall 2005, students' average GPA was 2.66, compared to 2.52 for students who were not in an EOP learning community. Based on feedback from students, faculty, and staff, the learning community has several programmatic benefits, which are best expressed by the following quotes:

What I liked most about my experience with EOP students was that it enabled me to have this huge reliable network. As a result, if I ever need advice or help on an assignment I always have someone to support me. By working with other EOP students, I am now motivated to keep moving forward with college. (Student)

The learning community helps to build rapport with students and aids the process of getting to know students in the program better. The community-building activities in the program bring students together and build a helpful network. (Freshman Seminar faculty)

Every moment in the learning community is a miracle. It inspires me to teach and be a professor. The students in the program who come from low-income and first generation backgrounds are the students I want to serve in some way in the future. (Teaching assistant)

The learning community is about the concept of team. Together we can win so much more than we can individually. We are here to help each other and to draw on each others' successes and strengths and the learning community fosters this togetherness and student success. (Staff member)

Clearly, the learning community has been instrumental in meeting the array of students' cultural, academic, and social needs. To explore in greater depth the ways in which the program has helped foster the integration of students into campus life, this chapter will discuss the following: the importance of community-building as a means of promoting the socialization and involvement of students in academia; the connection between students' self-esteem and a focus on diversity in student affairs work; the centrality of cultural integration as a precursor for student success; and the formulation of campus partnerships to aid student retention and innovation within learning community program structures.

Community Building and Campus Life

Cultivating community and building relationships is vital to the success of any learning community program. For students who come from low-income families and for those students who bring with them entrenched feelings of social isolation and, often, alienation from their family or community of origin, entrance into college can be a lonely journey. According to Folger, Carter, and Chase (2004):

Incoming students who are from low-income families and/or who are first generation college attendees are often at-risk in the university setting. They have transitional needs not generally met by traditional support services and often find themselves in academic limbo. These students will often either fail out or drop out when they cannot discover a meaningful connection between themselves and the university community. (472)

Students in the program echo the same sentiment regarding feelings of loneliness and isolation they experienced in their transition to college. In a focus group of learning community students, the following comments were made about the college adjustment experience:

Oftentimes in college parents do not understand academic information. While college opens your eyes to other things and

new ideas, it is hard for my family to understand just what I am learning. I often feel lost as a first generation student and that there is nobody that understands me. I had to find my own resources apart from my family.

As the first person in my family to attend college, I have to be a role model for my younger brother. I have to pursue every measure possible to be successful in higher education in order to make my parents proud and build family pride.

It was hard being the first in terms of being away from home and having to maintain multiple responsibilities, especially coming from a small town to a big city. Ultimately, I came here to do good and succeed, but there was a lot of pressure. I feared failure but I took advantage of the experience and made the adjustment after a while with the help of the learning community.

To help build the connections that first generation students need to succeed, the EOP learning communities program at Sacramento State has created a community-building component to both prompt and pave the way for continued student engagement in campus life. For example, as a part of the learning communities curriculum, each learning community cohort participates in a community-building activity designed to build social ties with faculty and student service professionals who serve as their counselors. These activities help to foster leadership skills and campus and social awareness, as well as providing opportunities for experiential and cooperative learning. Activities have included group attendance at campus lectures and theatrical productions, involvement in off-campus extracurricular activities, and participation in team-building activities and multicultural events offered through student affairs. Within this context, learning community students have been enriched socially and have gained an increasing comfort with the university atmosphere.

In addition to opportunities for relationship-building and educational exploration, students in learning communities work with a peer mentor/teaching assistant. The role of the mentor is to help build the interpersonal and academic skills of students, while at the same time relating to the personal needs that students in the learning community often present within their first year of college. Knock (1985) suggests that student development within the context of student affairs practice involves addressing the needs of the whole student in

higher education in order to promote their growth and development. The learning community peer mentor plays a key role in shaping the first generation students' perception of campus life, helping them surmount the multiplicity of problems they face, and supporting them in a setting that can be daunting at times. Ultimately, it is through these critical relationships that students build their socialization skills, become more effective and creative in accessing campus resources and program services, and find the courage to be active agents of change in the system of higher education.

Central to the transformative process of community-building, is the emergence of community not only in the classroom but also in the campus at large and in one's service to the larger community. This process is aided by involving students in civic engagement experiences and community service projects promoted by the learning communities program. An expanded awareness of community and desire to give back to their community are demonstrated through students' involvement in gift-giving to needy families during the holidays, campus leadership projects in various clubs and organizations on campus, and participation in efforts in the Sacramento area to improve neighborhoods and the conditions in K-12 schools. Service to one's community helps contribute to "increased civic responsibility, personal growth, and a greater understanding of social problems, as examples, [and] all represent the possible benefits of involving students in learning outside the classroom walls" (Schmidt, Marks, and Derrico 2004, 207).

The Interconnection of Self-Esteem and Diversity

With a strong foundation of community building that reaches across the campus milieu and into the community, student connection points are built, both internally and externally, which affect learning community students on many levels. First, students who start college with fragile self-esteem come to see themselves as an essential part of the higher education experience. Second, interventions, programs, and services offered through student affairs units help weld together the many pieces that students have to juggle in order to be successful in college. Third, when a first generation student achieves a sense of belonging, his or her new identity as an educated person is crystallized and an innate sense of empowerment and cultural acceptance is solidified. All of these aspects of the learning community and the partnerships created between academic and student affairs help students feel valued in the diversity that they bring to the college campus. When campuses and

programs like learning communities provide an oasis of support and embrace people of divergent cultures and backgrounds, the adjustment of students to campus life is helped along in a positive direction. Also, services can be targeted to meet students at their point of need. It is the responsibility of the institution to create environments that foster respect for diversity in order to garner a firm commitment on the part of students to remain dedicated to their college goals (Zea, Reisen, Beil, and Caplan 1997).

Sacramento State as an institution has expressed this commitment in its work with the students in the EOP learning communities program. From senior administrators on down to the students served by the program, diversity has been valued and support has been given to nurture the students served by the program. Intensive academic advising, university orientation programming, assistance with housing arrangements, financial aid counseling, mentoring, tutoring, personal counseling, career planning, and basic skills development have all been a part of this work. These efforts have provided an intersection between learning and student life and have promoted the overall well-being of students and their success in the learning community. As revealed by Credle and Dean (1991), students of color often need assistance in understanding the organizational structure of the college system; this requires on-going mentoring and rapport-building interactions with faculty and staff to promote students' long-term career and educational goals.

To ensure that students in the EOP learning communities program have had these needs met, each student in the program has a personalized counselor and advisor trained to meet the individualized needs that first generation students often present within academia. Unlike the teaching assistant/peer mentor who helps students primarily with their academic coursework, the counselor helps students deal with personal issues they face in college and suggests strategies for success. Faculty and staff regularly collaborate with personnel in student affairs to help students access resources on campus and develop connections with helpful people and offices on campus. Providing this level of direction helps students bolster their self-confidence, develop feelings of self-efficacy, and heighten their self-concept when it comes to understanding the university maze. For example, research conducted by Clifton, Perry, Stubbs, and Roberts (2004) found that the pedagogical environment created by faculty and staff as well as the institution at large are paramount to how students perceive institutional levels of support and how they cope within the college environment. In addition, in order to

promote self-esteem and a sense of connection, and to maintain quality and diversity within institutional settings, Richardson (1991) suggests that colleges (1) help students graduate, (2) plan strategically, (3) encourage perceptions of comfort with the institution among students, (4) expect support from faculty in efforts to assist students, (5) present culturally reflective curricula, and (6) promote diversity in both the student affairs and academic affairs communities.

To address the retention needs of students as noted by Richardson, the EOP learning communities program at Sacramento State and the university as a whole launched efforts to create a more welcoming campus and to develop academic programs that better serve students. These include partnering with students to reduce the time to degree completion, providing a comprehensive array of support services, and helping students achieve a sense of belonging on the college campus. More specifically, in learning communities, students have been exposed to culturally reflective course materials in the EOP Freshman Seminar class as well as extracurricular activities and projects designed to expose them to the diversity that abounds in the campus community. An intense focus has been placed on the faculty-student relationship and the importance of providing support and care for each student to humanize the learning experience and the college journey. All of these retention strategies have helped to nurture the seeds of success, achievement, and excellence in the students served by the program.

Cultural Integration and Student Success

All of these efforts to create avenues of success and promote student integration and engagement are domains that place faculty in a central role in their work with students. These strategies hinge on the six factors previously noted by Richardson that institutions should address in serving students. Key to this integrative work is realizing the critical role faculty play in student retention and in meeting the culturally diverse needs of students. To effectively serve students in this way, the learning communities program has created a faculty training component. Program faculty receive specialized training in collaboration with our Center for Teaching and Learning and undergo a year-long track of professional development in course pedagogy in learning communities, assessment, effective relationship-building, and how to use dynamic and creative techniques in the classroom. This training process occurs in groups, through lectures, and through individual consultations with the program coordinator.

The training program emphasizes the importance of fostering student success and instilling in faculty the recognition that it is more than just an academic and social endeavor. For students who come from educationally disadvantaged communities and who have struggled with various forms of economic, cultural, and emotional hardship, a number of challenges often stand in the way of academic achievement. While a growing body of research (for example, Tinto 1975) points to the need for students to be academically and socially integrated into campus life in order to be retained in college, many first generation students also need to be culturally integrated into the institutional setting. This entails an actualization of students, so they, as cultural beings, achieve a cultural fit with the institution, and feel culturally accepted by the institution both in and outside the classroom. In order for students to achieve this level of integration, their perception of the college culture must be one of equity. Thus, the college culture must transmit a caring ethos, and students must feel that faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals are there to advocate on their behalf and help assure their success through helpful advising and a range of other supportive services (Heisserer and Parette 2002).

To this end, within the EOP learning community context, a pedagogy of caring is created through the acknowledgment by faculty and staff of the cultural transition and adjustment experience that students undergo in navigating higher education. Staff members in the program meet with students on a regular basis to assist them with personal issues and help them overcome cultural barriers and other impediments to attaining a degree. Just as student service providers and faculty in general must remain both creative and sensitive in their work with students, the EOP learning community continues to remain responsive to the ever-changing needs of underrepresented students in order to assist them in their pathway toward success. This is an aim that all programs should strive for in aiding learning and the cultural integration of students in campus life. As noted by Lovett (2006), student affairs must be linked with the learning experience; likewise, the academic side of the academy must be open to engaging in a partnership that addresses the needs of the whole student.

Campus Partnerships and Program Innovation

In conclusion, partnership and collaboration should be at the heart of all our efforts to serve students. Without these two active ingredients, the EOP learning communities program would not have been able to achieve

the level of success it has in its 11 years at Sacramento State. Through countless projects and expansion efforts designed to better serve students and revitalize the program, the learning community has been a hallmark of relationship-building, cultural acceptance, and cooperation among faculty and staff to foster student excellence. All of these team-building endeavors have resulted in the following program innovations:

- community-building activities for students
- professional development and training opportunities for faculty and staff
- service learning and community service enrichment activities
- the provision of a comprehensive range of services to assist students academically, socially, and culturally
- relationship-building and collaboration across all sectors of the campus

These hallmarks of success have been achieved through the dynamic partnership created between academic and student affairs and by placing the needs of the underrepresented student first. The program is based on the belief that students learn better together. Moreover, the efforts of the university are more successful when all parties pull together to foster the cultural integration of students in campus life. When any student achieves success in the learning community, we all achieve success.

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