

FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR/LEARNING COMMUNITY DISCOVERIES AND DREAMS: AN
APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi
Corpus Christi, Texas

August 2019

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This dissertation meets the standards for scope and quality of
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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ABSTRACT

Combined first-year seminar and learning community programs may have a high impact on college student engagement if they contain certain elements or practices. The purpose of the study was to discover student perspectives of participation in a combined first-year seminar and learning community program at a south Texas university to identify engaging elements from the learner perspective. Through an appreciative inquiry, participants were asked to recall impactful experiences from their participation and to make predictions about what would improve the experience for future students. The research questions that guided the study are: (1) What perspectives do participants express regarding their learning community participation? (2) What understanding or meaning emerges about participation in learning communities? (3) How do participants envision an engaging learning community experience? From focus groups, participants recalled past experiences in first-year seminar and learning communities to generate three major themes: *Masterminded Blueprints*, *Islander Accountability Group*, and *Impostor to Islander*. In their completion of written reflections, participants suggested elements to enhance future first-year seminar and learning community experiences and are represented by the theme *Dreamwork*. The understanding that emerged from participant perspectives of first-year seminar and learning community participation gave insight into how students describe their experiences as impactful. When compared to first-year seminar, learning community, and high-impact practice research, participant recollections accounted for nearly all the suggested components of effective first-year seminar and learning communities included in the literature. While participants reported a variety of student-centered practices, a common intellectual experience among all participants was not discovered suggesting the need for a more thorough

understanding of the purpose and value of first-year seminar in learning communities at the south
Texas university.

DEDICATION

To Ms. Sue who saw the light in me and keeps it alive with the strength of her legacy.
She would be thrilled to hear me say, “this is Chelsie. Right here. Right now.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to broadly acknowledge that the success of my dissertation journey was entirely dependent on my prior experiences and interactions including the variety of privileges I have been offered in my lifetime. None of my success would have been possible without support from others or without the ways in which I am able to interact with the world based on my situation within it. I am thankful for the opportunity I have had to pursue all my successes and failures because they have shaped me into the person I am today.

More specifically, my journey may have never reached fruition if it were not for my co-chairs, Dr. Bethanie Pletcher and Dr. Nancy Smith, who jumped on board what felt like a sinking ship. After switching research approaches and shifting committees, they both joined my team with big smiles and hearts. When I took longer than expected to complete my study and it came time for my first doctoral committee chair and mentor, Dr. Bryant Griffith, to retire, Dr. Pletcher and Dr. Smith stepped up and led me to the finish line with incredible support and kindness. I know that Dr. Griffith would be proud of the way they inspired me to complete my work. Dr. Glenn Blalock was a gift given to me from the College of Graduate Studies. The graduate faculty representative is not typically somebody with such an important role in the research itself. Without him, I would not have had such a robust and successful program to explore. Thank you for your contributions to our university and our integrative souls, Dr. Blalock. Thank you to Dr. Faye Bruun for stepping in to complete my dissertation committee team.

Next, my family set the foundation for the possibilities in my life. My father, David Hawkinson, and mother, Teresa Hawkinson, made sure I had every opportunity to become whomever I wanted. They never had expectations of the types of careers I should pursue or

topics I should study. Instead, they gave me encouragement and support to explore ideas that bring me happiness. They also gave me a brother, Trevor Hawkinson, who has always supported me from the sidelines. Finally, they introduced me to a military way of knowing friends as family and brought the Kilchriss' into our family when I was a little girl. The Kilchriss' constant encouragement and our memories together were often where I turned in moments of darkness.

I am eternally grateful for the support and camaraderie from my FYLCP colleagues. Specifically, Michelle Major Evans, has served as my long-time mentor and was the one who inspired me to pursue a Ph.D. in the first place. The path that Dr. Rita Sperry forged before me and the continuous advice she offers has been instrumental to my success in my current role in the FYLCP and in completing my doctoral program. There are too many other amazing colleagues who offered their support and ear throughout my journey to name. To those who I did not mention by name, the next round is on me!

Similarly, I have many friends who served as support systems throughout the entire dissertation process. My dissertation would not have been completed if not for the lovely Susan Peeples. Her continuous positive reinforcement and genuine interest in what it means to be a good teacher kept me motivated when I was down on myself and my ability. Rachel Guthrie Johnson was my first friend in south Texas and continues to be one of my biggest cheerleaders. I am thankful to Mary Breen for teaching me how to live life to its fullest, but to also get things done. Frank Pivik, Jr. stepped in during the final inning not completely aware of the what the dissertation game meant. I am so thankful for his patience and allowing me to express myself all while still loving me.

Based on my tendency to consider my friends as my family, I know that I have not given proper credit to all the people and experiences that shaped me into who I am today. I am thankful for each of the happy and supportive moments and for the dark and challenging ones too because they taught me about who I am and who I want to be. Thank you to each of you who has served an important role in my process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| CONTENTS | PAGE |
|--|------|
| ABSTRACT..... | v |
| DEDICATION..... | vii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | viii |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS..... | xi |
| LIST OF FIGURES | xvi |
| LIST OF TABLES | xvii |
| CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| First-Year Seminar/Learning Community Model of Learning Communities | 2 |
| Types of Learning Communities in the FYLCP | 3 |
| <i>Figure 1.1.</i> General Education History Learning Community Model..... | 4 |
| <i>Figure 1.2.</i> General Education Music Appreciation Learning Community Model | 5 |
| <i>Figure 1.3.</i> Major-Specific Preprofessional Science Learning Community Model | 6 |
| <i>Figure 1.4.</i> Major-Specific Theatre Section in a Political Science Learning Community Model | 7 |
| The Purpose of First-Year Seminar in Learning Communities | 8 |
| Effective First-Year Seminar/Learning Community Model Elements | 12 |
| Statement of Inquiry | 13 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Statement of Purpose | 14 |
| Research Questions | 15 |
| Definition of Terms..... | 15 |
| Methodological Framework..... | 17 |
| Rationale and Significance | 17 |
| Role of the Researcher | 18 |
| Summary | 20 |
| CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE | 21 |
| Theoretical Framework | 22 |
| Appreciative Inquiry | 24 |
| Learning Communities in Higher Education | 26 |
| Historical Development of Learning Communities | 27 |
| First-Year Seminars in Higher Education..... | 31 |
| History of First-Year Seminar | 33 |
| The Role of First-Year Seminars in Learning Communities | 34 |
| Learning Community and First-Year Seminar Assessment..... | 38 |
| NSSE: National Assessment of Student Engagement | 41 |
| FYS/LCs and High-Impact Practice Research..... | 45 |
| CHAPTER III: METHODS | 49 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Methodological Framework: Constructivism | 50 |
| Methodology: Appreciative Inquiry | 53 |
| <i>Figure 3.1. The 5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry.</i> | 55 |
| Rationale for the Research Approach | 56 |
| Subjectivity | 60 |
| Research Design..... | 63 |
| Data Collection Procedures..... | 68 |
| <i>Figure 3.2. Data Collection Stages and Timeline</i> | 72 |
| Data Transformations and Representation | 73 |
| <i>Figure 3.3. Code Cloud of Highest Frequency of Codes.</i> | 74 |
| <i>Figure 3.4. Process of Participant Experiences to Themes</i> | 75 |
| Reciprocity and Ethics | 76 |
| Academic Rigor and Trustworthiness..... | 77 |
| Summary | 79 |
| CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS | 79 |
| Appreciative Inquiry | 80 |
| Description of Visual Representation of Themes | 81 |
| <i>Figure 4.1. Visual Representation of Themes</i> | 82 |
| <i>Figure 4.2. The 5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry.</i> | 83 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Masterminded Blueprints | 83 |
| Islander Accountability Group..... | 98 |
| Impostor to Islander | 106 |
| Dreamwork | 113 |
| Summary | 122 |
| CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION..... | 122 |
| Summary of the Study | 123 |
| <i>Figure 5.1.</i> Tinto (1993) Model of Student Departure and the Visual Representation of Themes | 125 |
| <i>Figure 5.2.</i> Visual Representation of Themes in the Context of the Model of Student Departure (Tinto, 1993). | 127 |
| Discussion of Findings..... | 127 |
| Implications for Practice and Further Research..... | 141 |
| Strengths and Limitations | 147 |
| Conclusion | 148 |
| REFERENCES | 151 |
| LIST OF APPENDICES..... | 159 |
| Appendix 1: Focus Group Question Study Incorporation Permission..... | 160 |
| Appendix 2: Participant Document Invitation Email..... | 161 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Appendix 3: Permission to Replicate Appreciative Inquiry Image | 162 |
| Appendix 4: Focus Group Participation Follow-Up | 163 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| FIGURES | PAGE |
|---|------|
| <i>Figure 1.1. General Education History Learning Community Model.....</i> | 4 |
| <i>Figure 1.2. General Education Music Appreciation Learning Community Model</i> | 5 |
| <i>Figure 1.3. Major-Specific Preprofessional Science Learning Community Model</i> | 6 |
| <i>Figure 1.4. Major-Specific Theatre Section in a Political Science Learning Community Model..</i> | 7 |
| <i>Figure 3.1. The 5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry.</i> | 55 |
| <i>Figure 3.2. Data Collection Stages and Timeline.....</i> | 72 |
| <i>Figure 3.3. Code Cloud of Highest Frequency of Codes.</i> | 74 |
| <i>Figure 3.4. Process of Participant Experiences to Themes</i> | 75 |
| <i>Figure 4.1. Visual Representation of Themes</i> | 82 |
| <i>Figure 4.2. The 5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry.</i> | 83 |
| <i>Figure 5.1. Tinto (1993) Model of Student Departure and the Visual Representation of Themes</i> | 125 |
| <i>Figure 5.2. Visual Representation of Themes in the Context of the Model of Student Departure (Tinto, 1993).</i> | 127 |

LIST OF TABLES

| TABLES | PAGE |
|--|------|
| <i>Table 3.1.</i> Participant Data Collection and Learning Community Enrollment..... | 66 |
| <i>Table 3.2.</i> Data Inventory | 76 |
| <i>Table 5.1.</i> Appreciative Inquiry Generated Themes and Subthemes..... | 124 |

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Learning communities and first-year seminars structured for students in the first year of college are identified as high-impact practices in higher education (Kuh, 2008). Findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) point to significant increases in academic performance, engagement and perception of campus environments, and achieved learning outcomes when students participate in high-impact practices. Additionally, when students participate in one or more high-impact practice, they are more likely to persist to graduation (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013) and are more likely to understand the benefits of their learning experience (Finley & McNair, 2013). Many scholars recognize the compensatory effect of high-impact practices, noting historically underserved student populations benefit more from participation in high-impact practices than their college-ready peers (Finley & McNair, 2013; Kuh, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Less understood is the outcome of combining learning communities and first-year seminars into a singular first-year experience initiative. The underlying assumption is that combining two high-impact practices would have compounding effects on student learning and success. However, some research indicates that the outcome of combining the two practices, first-year seminar and learning communities, referred to as the FYS/LC model of learning communities, is not consistently positive (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016). For that reason, this research was conducted to identify what works in the combination of learning communities and first-year seminars based on positive student perspectives. Specifically, the First-Year Learning Communities Program (FYLCP) at a south Texas university, which hosts a FYS/LC model of learning communities, was analyzed for high quality educational experiences.

The following study examined the unique student perspectives of a combined learning community and first-year seminar experience in the FYLCP at a south Texas university through an appreciative inquiry, qualitative exploration. In focus groups, FYLCP participants engaged in the discovery stage of appreciative inquiry to identify effective learning community practices from their two-semester experience. Additionally, individuals from the focus groups were selected to participate in a dream stage to imagine what might increase effectiveness for future learning community participation.

First-Year Seminar/Learning Community Model of Learning Communities

To help students transition from high-school to college to increase success while they are enrolled and long after they graduate, colleges and universities have combined learning communities and first-year seminar programs (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016). In the FYS/LC model, there are increased opportunities for students to explore their integrative learning and build a greater sense of belonging by making connections with faculty and peers. With these experiences embedded in the first year, students can adopt and transfer the learning pedagogies of FYS/LC programs to their future coursework, careers, and lives.

The FYLCP program at the south Texas university in the study was developed in 1994 when the university transitioned from an upper-division, undergraduate institution to include first and second-year student programs. Faculty involved in the development of the first-year experience “made a commitment to a particular vision of student learning that was both deep and personal, valued integration and application, and resulted from active engagement with course content and with other learners” and understood this approach to learning was necessary to serve the students most likely to enroll in a regional, public university (Blalock, Harper, & Piker, 2004, p. 125). From this commitment, it was decided that all first-year students would be required to

participate in an interdisciplinary learning community during both semesters of their first-year of college. Today, the FYLCP resides in University College, a new division focused on supporting several student success programs on campus including the FYLCP. It enrolls approximately 2,000 first-year students and administers around 19 interdisciplinary or major-specific FYS/LCs and an independent seminar experience for students who arrive at the university with significant amounts of college credit from high school and who do not fit into core curriculum learning communities

Types of Learning Communities in the FYLCP

The FYLCP hosts approximately 20 learning communities each semester to serve roughly 2,000 first-year students. It offers many different types of learning communities to provide unique experiences for a variety of student populations entering the university in any given year. The main commonality of all learning communities within the FYLCP is the First-Year Seminar course that serves as an integrative anchor for the connected courses. The traditional model of FYLCP learning communities incorporate four courses including two core curriculum courses, such as history and political science or psychology and a music course, with a first-year writing course and a first-year seminar to form what is called a tetrad. Huerta (2004) discovered increased intellectual interaction and student learning in learning communities incorporating three courses instead of four. The three-course version, called a triad and represented in Figure 1.1, continues to be the most common structure including general education courses such as history, political science, or psychology with first-year writing or communication and first-year seminar.

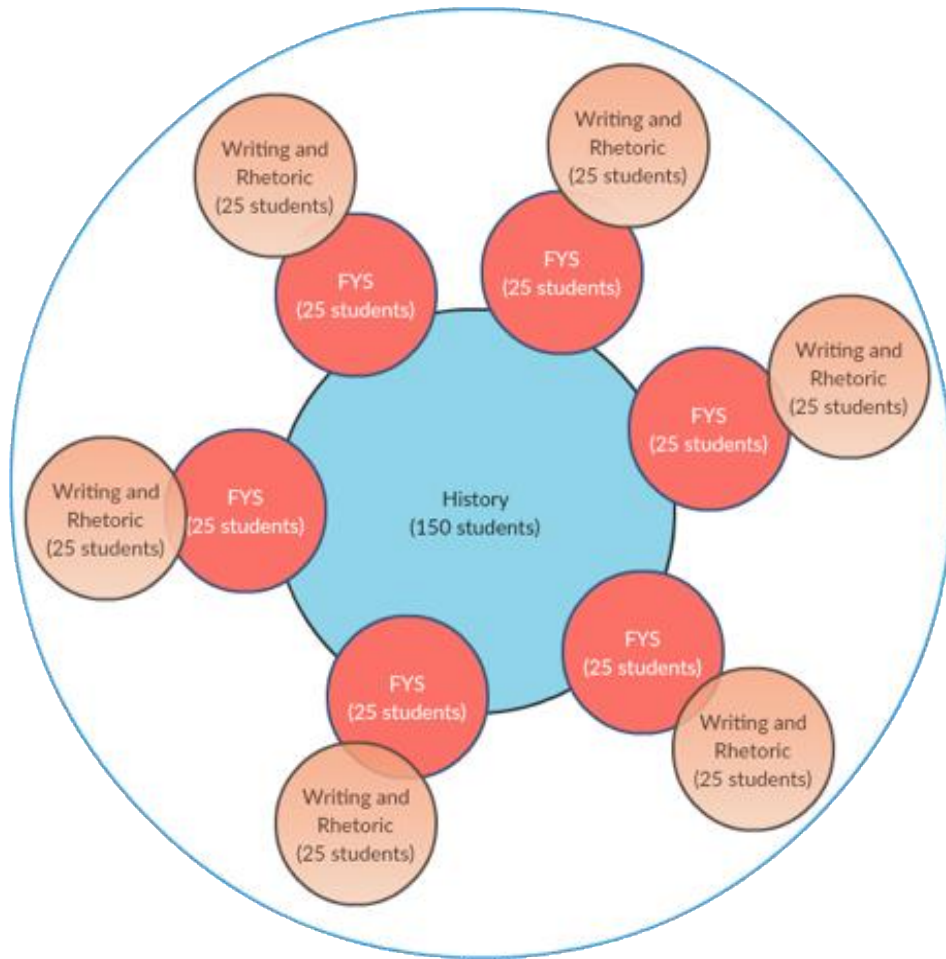


Figure 1.1. General Education History Learning Community Model

In the late 2000s, the amount of college credit students began bringing in from high-school inspired the dyad structure of learning communities where students enroll in one core curriculum course connected with a first-year seminar and is represented in Figure 1.2. Current efforts attempt to align integrated experiences in learning communities with two core curriculum courses, such as psychology and film and culture, with first-year seminar.

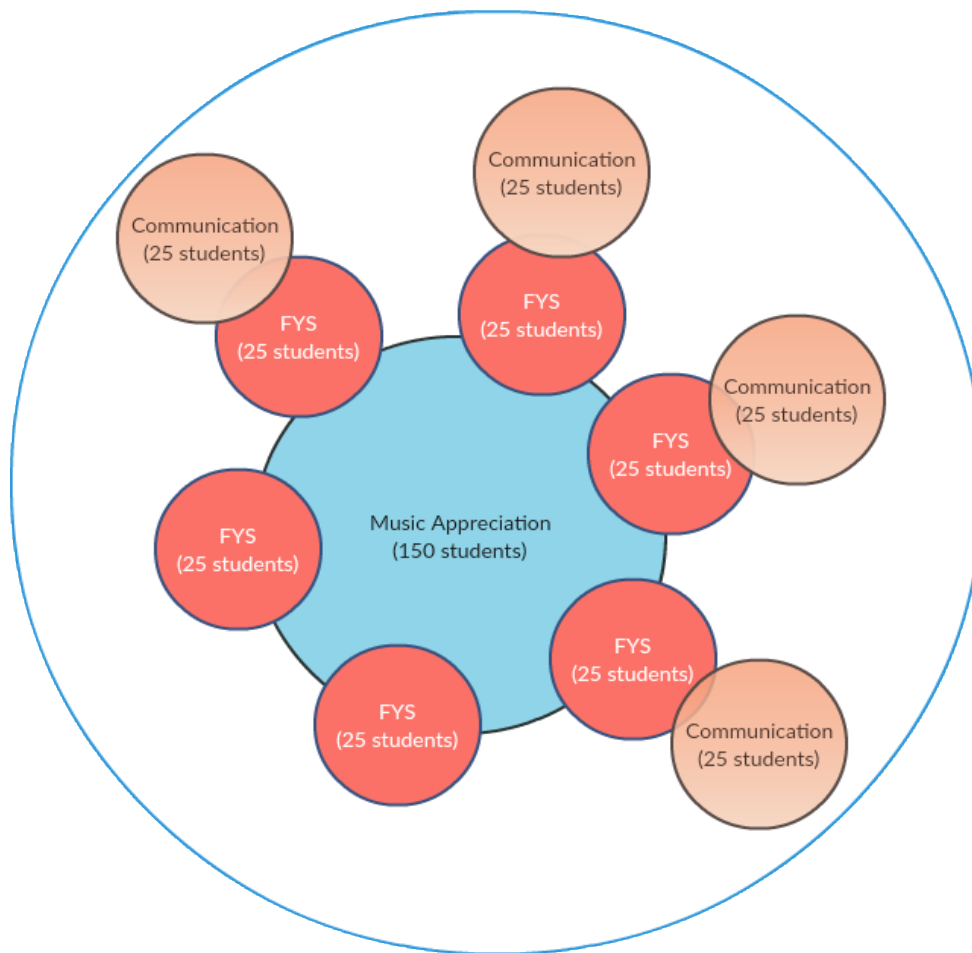


Figure 1.2. General Education Music Appreciation Learning Community Model

Other learning communities are geared toward students based on field of study or major. For example, the pre-professional science learning community, represented in Figure 1.3, follows the traditional learning community model with two core curriculum courses, biology and chemistry and the connected labs, first-year writing or communication, and first-year seminar. Students

who enroll in these learning communities must have an interest in a science-related field.

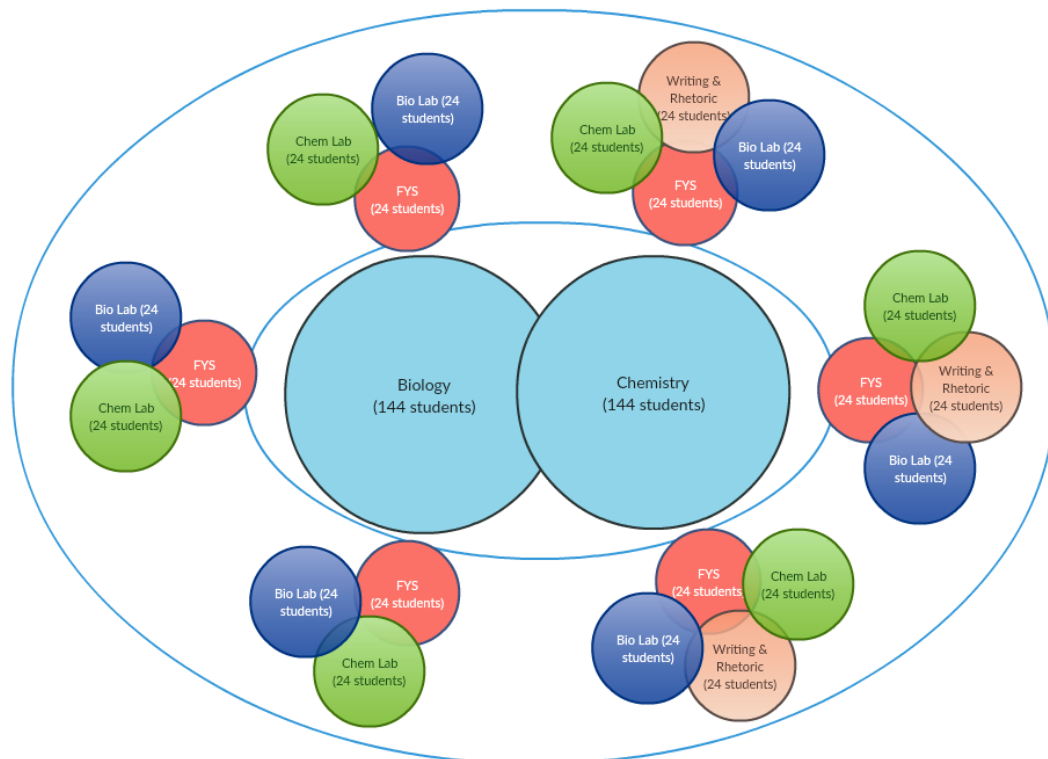


Figure 1.3. Major-Specific Preprofessional Science Learning Community Model

Learning communities for nursing majors have since been included offering anatomy and physiology, first-year writing or communication, and first-year seminar. More recently, the FYLCP started to incorporate major-specific courses to give students immediate insight about their intended profession. According to Complete College Georgia (2017), students are more likely to graduate from the university if they spend at least nine hours of their first-year in courses connected to their intended major. Learning communities for engineering majors include engineering, chemistry, first-year writing, and first-year seminar. At the very least, learning community hybrids exist by merging the traditional core curriculum model of learning communities, but reserving certain sections of first-year seminar for specific majors such as theatre or kinesiology seen represented in Figure 1.4.

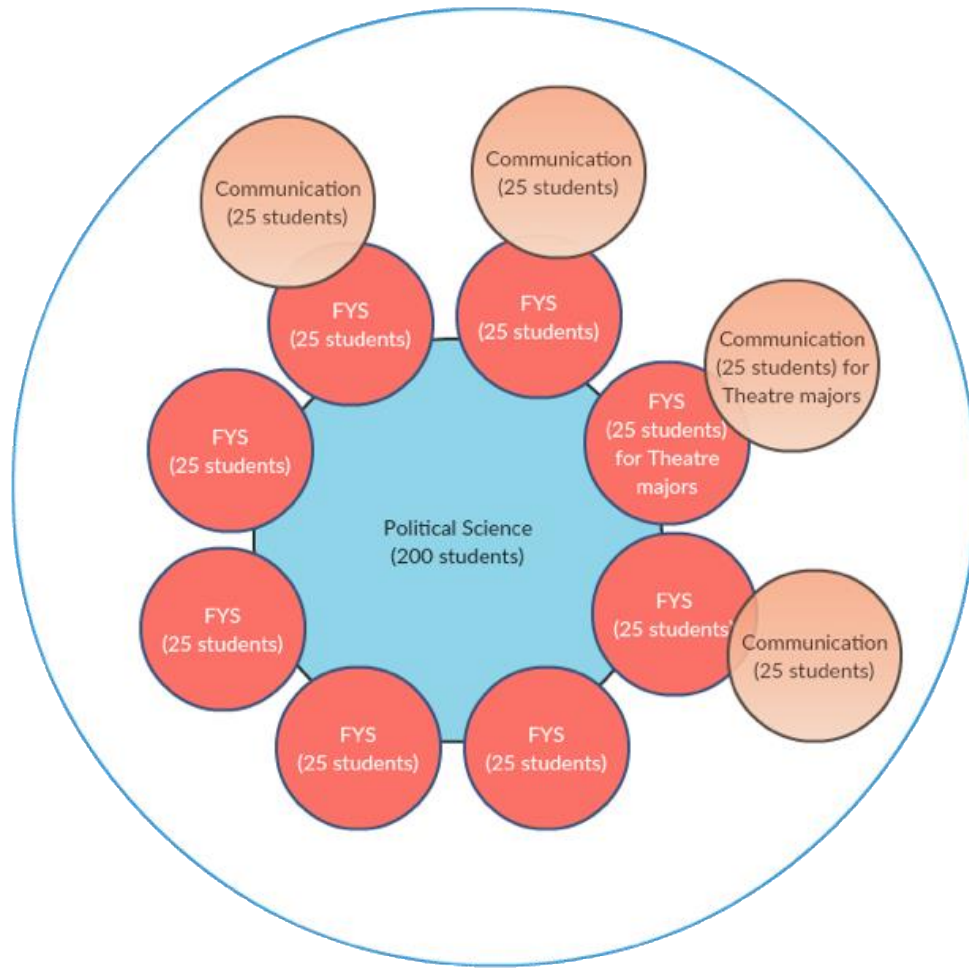


Figure 1.4. Major-Specific Theatre Section in a Political Science Learning Community Model

Learning communities are also designed with specific student populations in mind. Developmental learning communities follow the traditional model by including a core curriculum course, such as psychology, first-year writing, a first-year seminar, and an added developmental math course. One learning community pairs first-year communication with first-year seminar and helps international students gain confidence in their ability to communicate with the academic community.

The size of learning communities is based on the enrollment in the largest core curriculum course. The biggest learning communities serve approximately 200 students in a

large lecture, such as political science, and are broken down into eight smaller groups of 25 for first-year writing or communication, and first-year seminar. In other learning communities, the largest core curriculum course has 50 students and only two smaller groups of 25 for first-year writing or communication and first-year seminar. In some cases, first-year writing or communication classes and first-year seminar may attach to a general population core curriculum or major specific course that also enrolls sophomores, juniors and seniors.

Finally, the FYLCP offers an independent first-year seminar for students entering for the first time in college with the goal of guiding student learning and belonging. Because this model does not fit within the FYS/LC structure, it was excluded from the study.

With the responsibility of requiring two semesters of first-year seminar and learning communities to all first-year students, the FYLCP has developed creative solutions to guide all students through their first year of college. For each learning community, a first-year seminar is the main platform to help students integrate their learning.

The Purpose of First-Year Seminar in Learning Communities

The evolved goals of the FYLCP have placed contextualized education, or situated learning, at the forefront of first-year seminar (Blalock, Harper, & Piker, 2004). This means that the first-year seminar course, like the one administered in the FYLCP, is entirely dependent on the content of the linked courses and helps students with the types of learning required for understanding at the time of need. For example, if students in a linked psychology course are learning about different defense mechanisms, the first-year seminar professor might develop an activity where students compare movies they have watched to the defense mechanisms they are required to understand. The first-year seminar professor would use this lesson as an opportunity to discuss the cognitive value of making personal connections to the content they attempt to store

in their long-term memory. The contextualized nature helps students in an individualized way so each first-year seminar course adheres to a different curriculum dependent on the linked courses and population of students enrolled.

Another fundamental goal of first-year seminar in the FYLCP focuses on student learning to foster a sense of purpose and connectedness in the academic community. A variety of activities are introduced in the first-year seminar classroom to help students understand the value of a liberal education. Some first-year seminar classes implement career exploration activities to guide students to the right career path. Overall, the goal is to help students realize how to best take advantage of the opportunities best suited for them on campus.

A responsibility of first-year seminar faculty is to attend linked courses in the learning community and demonstrate their understanding to students as “master learners” (Fink & Inkela, 2015, p. 9). In a general education learning community, such as the one represented in Figure 1, the first-year seminar professor attends the linked history course with her students to help grapple with new information at the time of learning. She also guides students in completing assignments for the linked writing and rhetoric course. For the courses she is not logistically able to attend due to scheduling conflicts, she supports each by meeting with learning community faculty every week to know which strategies to use in first-year seminar to support upcoming content and projects. This is true for each learning community in the FYLCP. At the beginning of the semester, learning community teams, made up of faculty teaching the courses, select the content and theme that should drive expectations of learning community faculty and students. The first-year seminar course is the site where students begin to see connections between content from the learning community courses to their other personal, academic, and social experiences.

Connections are best made when students are guided in discussion and writing to promote understanding and learning.

According to the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, there are six different types of seminars that exist within the first-year with many designs offered within the same institution (Young & Hopp, 2014). These structures include an extended orientation; an academic seminar with uniform content across sections; an academic seminar with variable content across sections; a preprofessional or discipline-linked course; a basic skills study seminar; or a hybrid model containing several components from the other models. In the FYLCP, the first-year seminar is recognized as a seminar with variable content depending on the population of students being served (i.e. interdisciplinary, major-specific, international, developmental).

The content and purpose of first-year seminar in the FYS/LC model of learning communities depends on the ranking of the following priorities for the course found in practice today:

- “Share common readings, assignments, and projects;
- Pull together concepts from other courses;
- Serve as a place to process concepts from other courses and focus on metacognition, or learning about learning itself;
- Serve as a place for faculty members from other courses in the link to visit and discuss connections;
- Serve as a place to explicitly connect personal and/or social concepts with concepts learned in linked course(s);

- Serve as a place to discuss skills, behaviors, and dispositions important to achievement in linked course(s);
- Serve as a site for community building;
- Serve as a site for career exploration related to learning community themes and topics; and
- Serve as a site for service-learning connected to learning community themes and topics” (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016, pp. 22-23).

Currently, the first-year seminar course is taught by 16 full-time, professional first-year seminar faculty. Each is responsible for teaching five sections in the fall semester and five sections in the spring semester and for participating in service activities for the department and college. Faculty must have completed at least a master’s program and have experience teaching in learning communities. Adjunct faculty and graduate teaching assistants are needed to teach sections of first-year seminar for which there are not enough full-time, professional faculty.

Originally, full-time faculty from departments around campus were assigned to teach first-year seminar. The viability of tenure-track faculty teaching the first-year seminar course quickly disappeared with the increase in student enrollment and research expectations. As a result, graduate teaching assistants and adjunct faculty became the instructors of record for first-year seminar. In a study conducted at the south Texas university under review, Hartlaub and Jozwiak (2010) determined students were more likely to succeed in the first year if they took first-year seminar from a full-time professional faculty member. With this evidence, the FYLCP could justify hiring professional, first-year seminar faculty to help students transition to the university.

Effective First-Year Seminar/Learning Community Model Elements

For learning communities to be effective, the faculty responsible for teaching courses work together to align the content and curriculum of their courses to include active and integrative learning opportunities and assignments. Visher, Weiss, Weissman, Rudd, and Wathington (2012) note that learning community teams have varying levels of integration on the basic, midrange, and advanced levels. The best learning communities have linked courses that only include learning community students, are planned by faculty who meet frequently throughout the semester and align their syllabi to share themes or assignments, and integrate student support into the community.

Popularity of learning communities as a strategy for first-year student success has steadily increased since the publishing of Kuh's (2008) *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*. Here, Kuh demonstrated a connection between student success, as defined by National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reports and student participation in learning communities. As a result of this groundbreaking research, participation in learning communities was designated as a high-impact practice.

According to Kuh and O'Donnell (2013), the alignment of specific elements into FYS/LCs increase its likelihood of being a high-impact experience for students. Advanced learning communities include the following into their learning community design:

- Performance expectations set at appropriately high levels;
- Significant investment of time and effort by students over an extended period of time;
- Interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters;
- Experiences with diversity;

- Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback;
- Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning;
- Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world application; and
- Public demonstration of competence (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013, p. 8).

Statement of Inquiry

The need to further define and explore the effectiveness of FYS/LC programs drives the research. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) designation of learning communities and first-year seminars as high-impact practices begs the question of whether or not combined learning community and first-year seminar programs, specifically the one at a south Texas university, deserve the same recognition (Kuh, 2008). Chism Schmidt and Graziano (2016) recommend research on FYS/LCs that helps to understand what works for specific student populations and to focus on programs that are implementing high quality learning community practices. To extend a broadened understanding of what makes learning communities effective, Visher et al. (2012) recommended collecting and analyzing qualitative data. The intention of their study was to develop an understanding of the most effective practices in the FYLCP based on the recollections of students who participated during the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters.

Prior research combined with student perspectives of experiences from FYLCP participation add to the growing understanding of effective practices in the FYS/LC structures, specifically at the south Texas university. Existing research provides insight into what an effective FYS/LC program should entail for the student experience. Information collected from the NSSE has helped to define key elements of high-impact practices that increase student engagement in their learning (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). The National Survey of First-Year

Seminars (NSFYS) has helped to define the role of first-year seminar in the context of learning communities (Young & Hopp, 2014). Other research further identifies what makes learning communities powerful for students and faculty (Lenning et al., 2013). Each will be explored in further detail in the following chapter.

Statement of Purpose

Research highlighting the effect of learning communities on first-year students is modest largely in part to the variety offered in different formats across the nation. According to Padgett (2014), the characteristics and components of learning community structures and programs need to be shared to better understand what learning communities offer to first-year students. For the purpose of the study, elaborate descriptions of learning community structures in the FYS/LC program at the south Texas university are provided for a strong context to compare the understanding generated from student perspectives of learning community participation.

The purpose of the study was to understand student perspectives of learning community participation in the FYLCP. In addition, it was to align key elements of effective FYS/LC practices based on first-year seminar, learning community and high-impact practice research with the understanding that emerges from articulated student memories. Appreciative inquiry guided the methodology and was selected for the study based on its positive underpinnings. Under the assumption that a deficit-based research question might elicit only negative responses, a strengths-based approach gave participants an opportunity to discover the highest quality elements of their learning community experience.

The results will be used to inform future FYS/LC practices at the institution under study. Findings can also be compared to the original intentions of the program. Skipper (2017) suggested the need for first-year seminar administrators to audit existing programs to understand

which educationally effective practices are already taking place. This will not only inform what the program is doing well, but also help to identify important practices which are less visible and which should be incorporated into a common intellectual experience for first-year seminar students across the program.

Research Questions

To understand the student perspectives of participation in learning communities at a south Texas university, the following questions guided the research:

1. What perspectives do participants express regarding their learning community participation?
2. What understanding or meaning emerges about participation in learning communities?
3. How do participants envision an engaging learning community experience?

Definition of Terms

Assumptions of understanding on behalf of the researcher may lead to confusing jargon. For that reason, a glossary of key terms from the study is provided below. The following definitions represent terms from the study:

First-year student - First-year is the preferred designation of students without enough credits to be considered sophomore students. The antiquated terminology “freshmen” is excluding in its fundamental nature (personal communication, Gardner, February 2019).

First-Year Learning Communities Program (FYLCP) - A program that combines first-year seminar and learning communities by placing the first-year seminar as the integrative engine.

The program has been in operation since 1994 at Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi (Blalock, Harper, & Piker, 2004).

First-Year Seminar - A course embedded in learning communities to support student engagement and academic and social integration to the university (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016).

Learning Community - Two or more linked courses, one of which being first-year seminar, led by faculty who align syllabi content, integrate assignments, and meet regularly throughout the semester to collaborate on student learning outcomes (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016).

FYS/LC Model of Learning Communities – A learning community model that embeds first-year seminar within other linked courses to operate as the locus of integration (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016).

High-Impact Practice - A pedagogical intervention incorporated into higher education with the purpose of increasing student engagement (Kuh, 2008).

Key Element - A pedagogical practice that increases the likelihood of a meaningful high-impact practice student experience (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013).

Integrative Learning - An educational outcome that promotes student learning by making connections to experience, other academic content, and the real world (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008).

First-Year Experience - Everything an institution does with and for first-year students (personal communication, Gardner, February 2019).

Impostor Syndrome - The phenomenon that describes students who experiences feelings of “fraud,” “incompetence,” or “stupid[ity]” in the connection to college acceptance (Hoang, 2013. P. 42).

Islander – The mascot for the south Texas university.

Methodological Framework

Constructivist methods of inquiry assume that knowledge and reality are constructed through the accumulation of a person's experiences (Crotty, 1998; Glesne, 2011; Saldaña, 2011; Schwandt, 1994). The main intent of constructivism is the connection of objective truths with subjective understanding. The constructivist nature of appreciative inquiry further assumes that the way in which participants are asked to respond to questions about their experiences has an impact on the way their understanding is constructed.

As a framework which facilitates constructivist inquiry, appreciative inquiry was selected as the qualitative research method to guide the methods of the study. Developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), appreciative inquiry searches for the positive underpinnings of systems under study and operates with the assumption that value exists within all organizations. Appreciative inquiry is an alternative to problem-based methods of action research that recognizes the language used to describe topics of inquiry and how this has a direct impact on the results of the conversation. The generative language used in each stage of appreciative inquiry guides participants in creating the positive framework for future directions of the organization under study. Similarly, the inclusion of stakeholders as participants creates a sense of ownership and commitment to the outcomes of the inquiry.

Rationale and Significance

It was the intent of the research to understand student perspectives of learning community participation and to discover if the learning communities program at the south Texas university was engaging its students by utilizing effective educational practices. The main goal of the study was to discover if students who participated in the FYLCP during the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters experienced educationally effective practices. Kuh's (2008) publication recognized

that first-year seminars and learning communities provide added value to the college experience, but only when done well. In the process of discovering how the FYLCP best engages students, it was revealed that the first-year seminar is a focal point for what students perceive as valuable about their learning community experience. This understanding illuminated a more specific awareness of the type of learning communities offered at the south Texas university in comparison to the countless models offered at colleges and universities across the nation (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016).

The study contributes to a greater understanding of what happens within a FYS/LC model of learning communities at the south Texas university to make them effective from the student perspective. Best practices were discovered and can be replicated across individual FYS/LCs in the FYLCP or at other institutions.

Role of the Researcher

My role as researcher in the study was that of an insider due to my extended experience teaching first-year seminar in many different learning communities for the FYLCP. According to Given (2008), the researcher has a tacit role as the primary knower and interactionist role in relation to participants. As the primary knower, I conducted focus groups with the assumption that the ways students interact with their university experiences has an impact on their persistence toward learning and college completion. My interactionist role with my participants was that of an observer as participant. The only in-person interaction with each participant occurred during the focus group. From there, I contacted and communicated with a select few through email. While student participants knew I was a first-year seminar professor, none of the participants had been my students. My interactionist role extends as a professional in that the

participants understood that my prior work experience gave me a certain level of insight into their learning community experiences (Given, 2008).

By conducting qualitative research, I maintained a high level of reflexivity between my epistemological assumptions, theoretical framework, and personal values and beliefs by recording thoughts and decisions about the research in a reflexive journal (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). By selecting appreciative inquiry as my methodology, I had to weigh the omission of negative participant experiences in my overall findings. Similarly, findings were considered in relation to my assumption that the university is responsible for helping students connect to their learning experience over other ways students persist to graduation based on Tinto's (1993) model of student departure. Finally, my personal history working with learning communities required a high level of reflection in considering ways participants recalled effective pedagogical practices versus what I believe is effective based on my own experience teaching First-Year Seminar.

Researcher Assumptions

My research topic and approach contained many assumptions that should be revealed. The way the research questions were written assume participants had engaging experiences in their learning communities. The participants of the study likely had experiences in their learning communities that were not always engaging, but they were not asked to discuss those perspectives. The rationale for this choice is elaborated in Chapter Three. My assumption that students had learning community experiences that were similar became clear through the process of the research when participants from each focus group discussed the same overarching practices. However, participants did not describe their experiences in a way that made their experiences seem equal. In fact, some less than engaging practices were reported by some.

Another important assumption is that the first-year seminar professor has an overwhelming load of responsibilities for first-year student success. Findings from the focus groups led to an understanding that, when compared to how first-year seminars are conducted in learning communities across campuses, the goals of first-year seminar in the FYLCP are perhaps too numerous (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016; Young & Hopp, 2014; Hensheid, 2004).

Summary

The preceding chapter presented a summary of the study conducted to discover how former learning community students described the most engaging elements of their participation. A review of the scholarly literature suggests key elements and characteristics of effective learning community practices (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). Qualitative research methods were selected to guide the study to understand the unique perspectives of student experiences in learning communities at a south Texas university. Chapter Two, the review of literature, provides an overview of the definitions and histories of learning communities and first-year seminars. Throughout the exploration, key elements of FYS/LC programs are identified through the analysis of prior research on engaging learning community and first-year seminar practices. Chapter Three provides an overview of the methods selected for the study. Chapter Four describes generated themes to represent the understanding developed from student perspectives of learning community participation. Chapter Five concludes the dissertation with a discussion of findings connected to the generated themes from student recollections of participation in the FYS/LC model of learning communities at the south Texas university.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The scope of this chapter is to understand prior research in relation to what combined first-year seminar and learning community programs (FYS/LCs) do to engage their students in the context of educationally effective experiences and high-impact practices. This section begins with the conceptual framework that guided the research. Next definitions, brief histories, and an overview of types of learning communities, first-year seminars, and combinations of the two are presented to help provide context and situation for the program at the south Texas university. Next, research exploring student engagement from FYS/LC participation is explored. Finally, relevant research about the methodology is included.

As discussed in Chapter One, first-year seminars are the most common type of first-year experience found in the research with approximately 90% reported at four-year institutions and 80% at two-year institutions (Young & Hopp, 2014). Approximately half of colleges and universities offer learning communities as part of the first-year (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012). Fifty-eight percent of institutions offering learning communities do so by including a first-year seminar course in conjunction with two or more courses. Learning communities, first-year seminars, and combined programs are student-centered interventions designed to increase student success. According to Henscheid (2004) FYS/LCs have two main objectives: to integrate student learning from combined courses or to help students build a stronger sense of community.

Learning communities and first-year seminars programs are largely popular in higher education today because of their connection to first-year student persistence (Tinto, 1998). Many first-year programs operate under the theoretical assumptions of Tinto (1993) and his theory of student departure

Theoretical Framework

Tinto's (1993) model of student departure suggests a student's decision to persist in college is a result of both individual characteristics and the extent to which the student integrates into the social and academic environments on a college campus. Tinto's research on student retention is the most repeated and cited model for student retention in higher education (Kember, 1995). Inspired by a framework that helped to predict what might increase student success, colleges have implemented first-year seminars and learning communities to take on more responsibility for student integration into the campus environment.

Tinto's (1993) model delineates general principles that colleges should adopt to encourage student persistence. In addition, it highlights the need to consider how a student's pre-entry attributes should be considered in program design. Ultimately, college programs should be developed and conducted in a way to ensure students have opportunities to meaningfully integrate to the campus environment.

Tinto (1993) notes five phases leading up to a student's decision to leave college which are visually represented in his model (See Figure 2.1). First, the pre-entry attributes refer to how the sociological context—their family background, skills, and prior schooling—will affect an eventual decision to depart. Similarly, a student's goals and commitments to the institution and goals and commitments outside of the institution have a direct impact on their departure decision. Upon arrival to college, their institutional experiences are directly correlated to their departure decision. This may include their academic integration related to performance and interactions with faculty and staff and their social integration related to engaging in extracurricular activities and connecting with peer groups. If a student does not adjust their goals after their initial integration to college, the likelihood of their attrition increases.

The most notable element of Tinto's (1993) model for this study is the shift of responsibility from the student to the college or university. While individual factors such as family background, educational history, and skills are an element of the departure decision, Tinto's model suggests the academic and social systems at the institution play an integral part of a student's decision to finish college or not. First-year learning communities and seminars have become the places on most college campuses where students form their first academic and social connections.

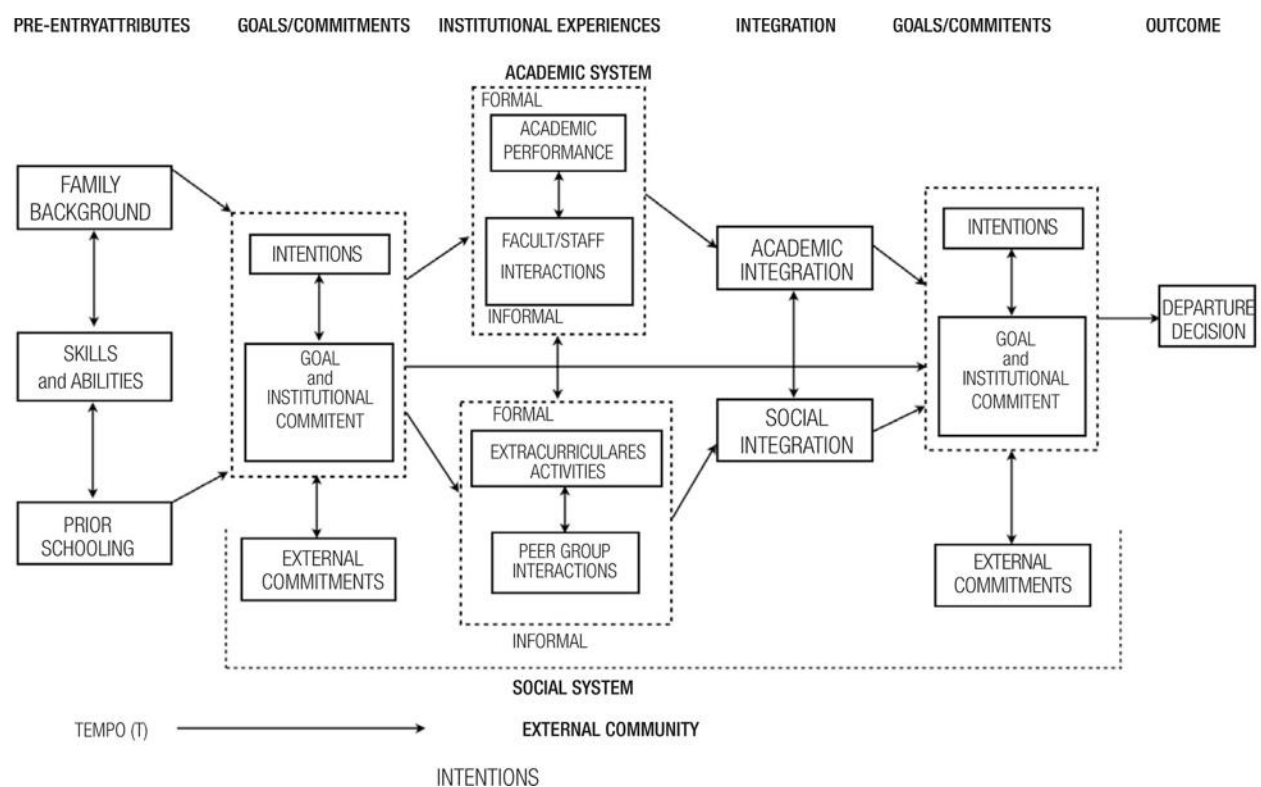


Figure 2.1. Tinto's Model of Student Departure (Tinto, 1993).

Prior research has enriched understanding of the ways students benefit from FYS/LC learning communities. The current study explores how students describe their experiences within a FYS/LC model of learning communities using appreciative inquiry.

Appreciative Inquiry

David Cooperrider, the developer of appreciative inquiry as a methodology, studied under Suresh Srivastva at Case Western Reserve University in the Department of Organizational Behavior (Clouder & King, 2015). Despite their intentionality to promote appreciative inquiry as a methodology, it has also been deconstructed as a series of methods. Clouder and King attribute this ambiguity to the delay in the publishing of a handbook and related materials. Without a specified set of rules, researchers have implemented many different approaches to collected data with appreciative inquiry.

One of the main problems with action research as a methodology is that it highlights the negative as an most important element of inquiry (Clouder & King, 2015). The social constructionism foundation of appreciative inquiry recognizes that the emphasis on the negative in action research and other problem-based inquiry systems has implications for meaning made from the inquiry (Given, 2008). Further, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) critique the separation between theory and practice in action research. In introducing appreciative inquiry as an alternative to organizational change research, Cooperrider and Srivastva's major goal was to shift from predictive models of interpretivism to generative models of socio-rational realities.

In a study examining the use of appreciative inquiry in higher education literature, Clouder and King (2015) discovered it has been used in a variety of disciplines including health, medicine, education, psychology, and management. The term first appeared in the literature in the 1970s as an oppositional term to unappreciative management, but did not gain traction as a

valid research methodology until 2001. Appreciative inquiry has become most widely recognized a methodology that highlights positive experiences in a collective system or organization.

Appreciative inquiry was selected for the study because of its strengths-based, generative, and inclusive underpinnings. Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) developed a much needed update to appreciative inquiry as a methodology in which they made five guiding principles of appreciative inquiry clear:

1. The constructionist principle implies organizations are human constructions developed from language and interaction.
2. The principle of simultaneity posits that inquiry and change are necessary components and happen simultaneously when questions are asked.
3. The poetic principle assumes all collective systems are each an open book whose story is constantly being co-written by its constituents.
4. The anticipatory principle predicts that positive images of the future affect positive change behavior.
5. The positive principle presupposes that positive outlooks and social bonding are necessary for the continuous generation of change.

Adding to those foundational principles, Bushe (2011) drew attention to other important guiding principles for conducting an appreciative inquiry that were not as explicitly stated in Cooperrider and Whitney's (2001) work. Compounding on the constructionist principle, organizational inquiry is the construction of the self and the world so that the frame from which the research inquires has a direct result on what is discovered and created (Bushe, 2011). Critical to appreciative inquiry is the involvement of stakeholders from all levels of the organization to participate in the inquiry. Then, with that involvement, the stakeholders are participants in self-

organizing processes to implement the imagined futures from the inquiry. The most overlooked feature of appreciative inquiry, according to Bushe (2011) is that social systems do, in fact, have characteristics that give life to their operation.

Appreciative inquiry was selected as the mode of inquiry to maintain a strengths-based approach when evaluating the effectiveness of the FYS/LC program at the south Texas university.

Learning Communities in Higher Education

Learning communities are an educationally effective practice and promote college student engagement and learning through the implementation of collaborative learning pedagogies (Cross, 1998). Programs are as varied as the institutions at which they are offered. Clear definitions of the goal and purpose of learning communities are dependent on their situation within colleges and universities (Padgett, 2014). A current working definition from the Learning Communities Association (LCA, 2019) is:

an educational approach that involves the integration of engaged curricular and co-curricular learning and emphasizes relationship and community building among faculty or staff and a cohort of students in a rich learning environment involving or incorporating one of the following: A curricular structure characterized by a cohort of students participating in an intentionally designed integrative study of an issue or theme through connected courses, experiences, and resources. Or a community of learners participating in a residential learning community that intentionally integrates learning through curricular and co-curricular education in a residential experience.

The LCA definition was written to be inclusive of the potential structures that exist in programs across the country. Knowing how to provide professional development for such a diverse set of learning community programs across college and university campuses continues to be a challenge for the National Learning Communities Consortium.

Historical Development of Learning Communities

Each stage in the history of learning communities point to the value of a holistic learning experience for students. Residential learning communities in the early colonies were the first representations in American universities and were the precursor to the residential learning communities of the 21st century (Fink & Inkela, 2015). Changed priorities of the university from teaching to research caused learning community programs to all but disappear until John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn insisted on active and collaborative learning to encourage civic development. Dewey (1929) proposed learning should take place in both an academic and social context where learning processes were shared among students and faculty. Meiklejohn (1932) advocated for an integrated core curriculum citing intellectual fragmentation stemming from siloed academic disciplines.

Meiklejohn founded the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927 to build living learning communities where content and process of learning were the educational focus (Fink & Inkela, 2015). Students participated in a two-year curriculum that focused on democracy and classical Western thought by engaging in active and collaborative learning. Students participated in team-taught and clustered courses as well as co-curricular clubs (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). While the project lasted only until 1932, it serves as a strong framework for contemporary learning communities.

During the middle of the 20th century, learning communities experienced a resurgence to enhance learning experiences for students. Universities saw an increase in enrollment and a diversified student population with the passing of the G.I. Bill (Fink & Inkela, 2015). As more types of institutions (junior colleges, community colleges, minority-serving institutions) began to help educate new student populations, critics began to question the viability of a college education. This led insiders at a variety of institutions, such as the University of California, San Jose State, LaGuardia Community College, and The State University of Stony Brook at New York, to model programs like Meiklejohn's to promote quality education.

Initiatives that started during the 1960s and 1970s have had a strong influence on the ways learning communities operate today. Learning communities were built at Berkeley in the 1960s to focus on democratic participation (Fink & Inkela, 2015). LaGuardia Community College began co-enrolling students in similar courses with a common theme to focus on integrative learning. At the State University of New York – Stony Brook, Patrick Hill initiated the federated learning communities model. In this model, the learning community consists of two university courses and an integrative seminar led by a faculty member who attends each learning community course to help students foster integration (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). Evergreen State College emerged as a new college with an institutional mission to support team-teaching and yearlong programs of study. The Washington Center at Evergreen State College continues to be a strong leader for the learning community movement in higher education.

Learning communities largely exist as an act of reform. As colleges and universities continue to grow and diversify, critics question the effectiveness of an undergraduate education. To Cross (1998), learning communities have dual purposes; they prepare the future workforce

and they educate students for responsible citizenship. A focus on preparing students for the global world is shared by a project known as Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) and sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (Humphreys & Davenport, 2005). LEAP gathered faculty, administrators, and professionals from the workforce to define the skills needed for success in the 21st century. A total of sixteen skills were identified and defined into taxonomies known as VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubrics. These skills include integrative learning, foundations and skills for lifelong learning, intercultural understanding, and civic knowledge to name a few.

Entities such as the National Institute of Education and the Kellogg Commission called for a more active, integrated and engaging college curriculum (Fink & Inkels, 2015). After the development of the essential learning outcomes, Kuh (2008) published a report, also sponsored by the AAC&U, that specified types of programs colleges could adopt to better equip students with LEAP's defined ways of knowing. He used data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to recognize learning communities and first-year seminars, among eight other practices such as common intellectual experiences and capstone projects, as high-impact practices.

Before learning communities and first-year seminars were officially recognized as high-impact practices, administrators and faculty around the nation were building and implementing a wide range of structures based on their university missions and the needs of their students. An overview of different ways to categorize these structures is explored below.

Types of Learning Communities

The configurations of learning communities can drastically vary making it difficult to assess their effectiveness (Chism Schmidt, 2016; Smith, MacGregor, Williams & Gabelnick,

2004). Learning communities may do any of the following: pair or cluster courses, enroll smaller cohorts from large enrollments, coordinate or team teach courses, enroll specific populations of students (women, major specific, at-risk), or combine curriculum with residence life (Inkelas & Soldner, 2012). Clarifying components of different learning community programs into various characteristics can enhance generalizability from learning community to learning community and institution to institution. To align broader programs, scholars have divided learning community characteristics into different categories.

Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) discovered five main learning community models: linked courses, learning clusters, [first-year] interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies. Linked courses represent models that link two or more courses where faculty work together to share similar content from the perspective of their academic discipline. Learning clusters pair two or more courses who share a general theme, but do not collaborate as meaningfully as linked courses. [First-year] interest groups are not typical academic learning communities and are centered around student characteristics most often categorized by residential life. The federated learning community model incorporates a first-year seminar course into a learning community model of linked courses. Finally, the coordinated studies learning community model uses the linked course model within a student's entire semester schedule.

Learning community scholars have worked to discern the differences in individual learning communities. Visher, Weiss, Weissman, Rudd, and Wathington (2012) found that successful learning communities adhere to four different dimensions: targeted subject, courses linked, emphasis on curricular integration, and the inclusion of additional support services. An individual learning community are made up of specific and targeted subjects by the courses

linked and maintain goals for students to integrate their learning across topics. In some cases, the learning community may incorporate campus resources to help students to engage with the college campus on a deeper level.

Learning communities are the most effective when they consist of tightly linked content in two or more linked courses (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Lardner & Malnarich, 2008). Further, Visser et al. (2012) discovered varying degrees of success in the linkage of courses, content, and processes. Integration occurs at the basic, midrange, and advanced levels. The best learning communities have linked courses that include only learning community students. They are planned by faculty who meet regularly throughout the semester and align their syllabi to share themes or assignments, and integrate student support into the community.

The federated learning community model, more recently described as the FYS/LC model, is the best description of the learning communities program at the south Texas university (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016). This model pairs one or more courses with a first-year seminar whose faculty emphasize curricular integration and include campus support of varying levels. The first-year seminar faculty members serve as the master learners by attending linked courses and facilitating the integrative learning process for students enrolled in the first-year seminar course. Within this model, the approaches and learning outcomes for the first-year seminar course are as varied as those in learning communities.

First-Year Seminars in Higher Education

While the definition of first-year seminar is dependent on a variety of factors related to the purpose of the first-year experience program at any given college or university, Hunter and Linder (2005) provide a framework from which to begin. They suggest a first-year seminar should

“assist students in their academic and social development and in their transitions to college. A seminar, by definition, is a small discussion-based course in which students and their instructors exchange ideas and information. In most cases, there is a strong emphasis on creating community in the classroom” (p. 275-276).

Skipper (2017) defines first-year seminar in the context of its recognition as a high-impact practice. The following revisions incorporate learning pedagogies that support the instruction of the essential learning outcomes defined by the AAC&U and LEAP (Humphreys & Davenport, 2005). The definition is included in its entirety to represent the wide range of goals that may be found in first-year seminar programs.

The first-year seminar is a course that intentionally includes a range of effective educational practices in its design and delivery to support the development of skills and dispositions leading to academic and personal success in college and in 21st century global society. The practices are selected to support course, program, and/or institutional goals and woven into a seamless curricular and pedagogical fabric rather layered onto an existing course structure. Such practices emphasize opportunities for substantive conversations with peers and faculty members; significant investment of time and effort; frequent and constructive feedback; reflection, integration, and synthesis; exposure to diverse others and way of knowing; application of knowledge to real-world situations; and public demonstrations of competence, among others. The content of such a course could be an introduction to a discipline or field of study; an interdisciplinary exploration of a vexing social problem; or a student-led investigation of their own transition experiences, learning styles, and/or vocational aspirations (Skipper, 2017, p. 155).

To understand how first-year seminar came to be such a diverse intervention for first-year students, it is helpful to understand the history that inspired the course offering.

History of First-Year Seminar

While learning community programs were building up steam at colleges and universities across the twentieth century, so were first-year seminar programs. Increased access to education by more of the American population led to the implementation of measures to retain students from a variety of backgrounds. Previous to World War II, access to American higher education was primarily reserved for students based on merit and wealth (Koch & Gardner, 2014). Upon the return of soldiers after the war, the United States government funneled money into higher education through the implementation of measures such as the G.I. Bill, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 to help support men and women who were seeking employment. As access to higher education became more feasible for more diverse socio-economic populations to attend, interest in implementing first-year seminar programs increased.

The origin of first-year seminar can be traced back to 1911 at Reed College where it was offered as a course to help students with their academic and social transitions to college. By 1926, eighty-two American institutions required nine out of ten first-year students to enroll in the course (Koch & Gardner, 2014). Institutions such as Princeton, Northwestern, Stanford, and John Hopkins incorporated similar programs. However, resistance from faculty who did not support a course focusing on adjustment to college life led to a decrease before picking back up in the early 1970s.

First-year seminar programs like the ones today were first implemented at the University of South Carolina in its University 101 course (Koch & Gardner, 2014). University 101 was a

call to action by the president of the university in 1972 to “teach students not to riot” (Watts, 1999). Political unrest over civil rights and Vietnam War policies led to distrust in higher education’s ability to address these problems. After a riot broke out on the University of South Carolina’s campus, the president hoped a course like University 101 would help students “fall in love” with the university and find hope in education (J. Gardner, personal communication, February 2019). This mission brought student-centered approaches to the forefront of higher education consciousness. Building on the creation of University 101, the University of South Carolina began and currently operates the National Resource Center of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition and First-Year Seminar to provide institutional support for the implementation and assessment for first-year seminar and other first-year experience programs.

The type of first-year seminar can vary based on the goals of the institution and the programs from which it is offered. What began as a course meant to extend a student’s orientation to life as a college student has shifted to a course more focused on academic content (Hunter and Linder, 2005). Next is an overview of the different types of seminars offered at colleges today.

The Role of First-Year Seminars in Learning Communities

After reviewing course descriptions for approximately 200 first-year seminar courses, Barefoot and Fidler (1992) defined five basic types of first-year seminars including “extended orientation seminars, academic seminars with uniform content across all sections, academic seminars on various topics, pre-professional or discipline-linked seminars, and basic skills seminars” (p. 2). A sixth category, hybrid seminar, was added to the list in 2006 to include options for institutions promoting more than one goal for their first-year seminar program (Young & Hopp, 2014).

From the analysis of 100 first-year seminar syllabus and program descriptions from the 1997 National Survey of First-Year Seminar Programs, twelve noted ways in which first-year seminar functions within a learning community were discovered:

- Share common readings, assignments, and projects;
- Pull together concepts from other courses;
- Serve as a place to process concepts from other courses and focus on metacognition, or learning about learning itself;
- Serve as a place for faculty members from other courses in the link to visit and discuss connections;
- Serve as a place to explicitly connect personal and/or social concepts with concepts learned in linked course(s);
- Serve as a place to discuss skills, behaviors, and dispositions important to achievement in linked course(s);
- Serve as a site for community building;
- Serve as a site for career exploration related to learning community themes and topics;
- Serve as a site for service-learning connected to learning community themes and topics;
- The seminar serves as a “learning lab” for students to practice skills from other courses.
- The seminar serves as a place to review linked syllabi to keep students “on track.”
- The seminar instructor and instructor(s) from other linked courses assign one grade for individual or multiple assignments or for the entire team (Henscheid, 2004, p. 2).

A more recent list by Chism Schmidt and Graziano (2016) in a special edition published by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition repeats the

first nine examples, but excludes the last three from the original list. While they do not provide justification for the removal of the last three items, the choice to omit the designation of first-year seminar as a “learning lab” may be due to the way the first nine on the list describe what could take place in a “learning lab.” To “review linked syllabi” and “share grades among linked courses” are likely omitted due to the surface-level learning that may result from these approaches. Relying on these superficial measures of integration might not encourage learning community collaborators to keep integrative learning at the center of the learning community and first-year seminar.

Henscheid (2004) established two main modes of first-year seminar in learning communities. One is situated within in an intricately, collaborative team who assigns integrative assignments and where seminar serves as the focal point for student integration of knowledge. The other mode of first-year seminar is achieved when the seminar encourages interaction among faculty and students, but is not explicitly the initiator of integrative learning. Henscheid (2004) described these modes as binaries and suggested that programs focus on one outcome over the other.

The NSFYS uses the first-year seminar categories introduced previously to understand more about what types of first-year seminars are offered from year to year, their characteristics, content, and assessment, who takes and teaches first-year seminar, their content, effective course pedagogies, and assessment of first-year seminar. After the designation of first-year seminar as a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008), the NSFYS began incorporating questions about first-year seminar in relation to other high-impact practices, specifically learning communities. According to Greenfield, Keup, and Gardner (2013), the first-year seminar is often the “curricular anchor for other first-year initiatives” (p. xxxv).

The 2012-2013 NSFYS asked first-year seminar administrators to elaborate if they selected the option that their institution offered first-year seminar in learning communities (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016). Their open-ended responses were compared to the types of first-year seminars noted above and were explored to understand how learning communities were included in the operation of the first-year seminar. The following are the themes of what takes place in first-year seminar based on their frequency included in the open-ended responses: building community, exploring concepts across courses, enhancing skills, behaviors and dispositions important to academic achievement, career exploration, linking the social with the academic, sharing readings, assignments, and projects, faculty members visit other linked courses, metacognition and reflection, and service learning.

In a study using the First-Year Initiative (FYI) survey conducted across 45 institutions, Swing (2004) found greater gains on several measures for students who participated in first-year seminars connected to learning communities over students in standalone first-year seminar sections. Learning community participants reported more peer-to-peer connections and out-of-class engagement as well as knowledge of wellness issues, study skills, and time management. They also described a greater understanding of campus policies and academic services and were more likely to interact with faculty and develop critical thinking and academic skills. Overall, students in learning communities had greater satisfaction with their college experience.

Connecting the FYI survey to student persistence, Porter & Swing (2006) discovered the most substantial components of first-year seminar that led to persistence in college were study skills, academic engagement, and health education. College knowledge, peer connections, and co-curricular engagement were not as highly connected to a student's immediate decision to

persist to graduation. Understanding the role of the first-year seminar in learning communities helps to guide the expected outcomes students might report as best practices.

Learning Community and First-Year Seminar Assessment

The following studies help contribute to understanding about why FYS/LC programs should exist. Several studies sought to demonstrate that participation in an FYS/LC increases student persistence and performance. Tampke and Durodoye (2013) conducted a study at the University of North Texas to explore the success outcomes of students in a standalone first-year seminar or a first-year seminar embedded within a learning community. Student outcomes from the two interventions were compared with student outcomes from traditional courses. The group comparisons included retention to the next semester (fall to spring), retention to the next year (fall to fall), cumulative GPA, and academic standing. Each of the students included in the sample were undecided in their major selection. Findings indicated the first-year seminar produced the highest GPAs and good academic standing, while the FYS/LC supported higher GPAs and better academic standing than the control group. Students participating in the FYS/LC had the strongest effect on retention.

Friedman and Alexander (2007) discovered that students at Appalachian State University who participated in a first-year seminar linked to other courses earned higher grades than those enrolled in a non-linked version of first-year seminar or those who did not enroll in first-year seminar at all.

Chism, Baker, Hansen, & Williams (2008) at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis found that students who participated in combined themed learning communities and first-year seminars were retained at a rate of 70% instead of 65% for non-participants and had an average of a 2.68 GPA instead of 2.45 in fall 2005.

Other studies on FYS/LC participation focus on learning outcomes. Hansen, Meshulam, and Watson (2010) conducted a mixed methods study to assess the effectiveness of a math-focused learning community consisting of a first-year seminar and introductory or intermediate algebra. Through quantitative analysis, the researchers sought to discover if students in the math learning community performed better than non-learning community students. In addition, they measured if the students perceived the learning community as beneficial, if participation enhanced learning outcomes; and if the participation promoted success in math self-efficacy, campus engagement, understanding and use of academic resources, the formation of study groups, time management skills, ability to manage and to cope with math test anxiety. These variables were measured through an end of semester paper survey administered to both learning community participants and participants who did not receive the learning community treatment. Survey results indicated learning community participants reported higher levels of understanding related to general education outcomes and were more likely to use campus resources. In individual interviews, participants found math practice as the most useful benefit of learning community participation including exercises to deal with math anxiety. In addition, participants had increased organization skills from their participation. Finally, participants recommended the inclusion of even more math practice in future learning communities.

Smith, Goldfine, and Windham (2009) at Kennesaw State University compared 1,116 student self-evaluations from a questionnaire to determine the extent to which course or program outcomes were being met after participating in first-year seminars embedded in learning communities or as a standalone independent section. Their assumptions were that students participating in an FYS/LC would report higher rates of course goals and outcomes being met; however, findings did not show a significant difference between the two. Their major

explanation for the null hypothesis was the need to have explicit goals and outcomes of the various programs to ensure cross-campus adoption.

Kahn, Calienes, and Thompson (2016) conducted a qualitative study using a Peer-to-Peer Reflection Protocol (PRP) to encourage a communal conversation about an English as a Second (ESL) Language-focused learning community. The learning community consisted of courses in ESL, speech, a course such as psychology or history, a [first-year] seminar, an integrative language seminar, and a tutoring component. The ESL, speech classes and tutoring continued for students into the spring semester. The research questions guiding the study explored understanding about the quality of the ESL learning community program with the intention of improvement and if their findings aligned with the PRP creators' findings. The communal conversations included learning community students who participated in both semesters, English faculty involved in one or both semesters of the learning community, the ESL learning community co-directors, and the Associate Director of Institutional Research. One of the major cited goals was to "blur the line that is typically drawn in higher education between assessment and teaching" (p. 5). Findings included collaboration in content and collaboration in process. Participants expressed the value of collaboration in their learning community with their peers and faculty over time. In addition, the communal conversation led to collaboration in process where the students, faculty, and administrators bargained about future learning community decisions collectively.

Most important to the qualitative understanding of what gives life to FYS/LCs in the FYLCP are studies that look at how FYS/LC programs engage students. Lichtenstein (2005) used focus groups to evaluate comparisons between learning community models within the same program at a large Southwest university. While the learning communities program did not

include a first-year seminar component, their research sought to explore student perspectives of participating in a learning community program. Focus groups sought student responses to questions about what students found important, favorable, damaging, or relevant in their learning community participation. Through focus group responses, Lichtenstein (2005) discovered the differences that cause students to perceive positive classroom environments versus medium and negative classroom environments. One of the main features of a positive classroom environment included strongly linked courses with shared syllabi, joint assignments, similar readings, and topic discussions in classes. Participants reported more hands-on activities and guidance with college level skills such as writing in positive classroom environments. Finally, participants noticed a greater sense of community and felt support with their transition to college in this positive classroom environment.

Since the NSSE identified learning communities and first-year seminars as high-impact practices, there has been increased interest in the operation and synergy of combining the two practices (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016). Much of what we know about how learning should take place in first-year seminar and learning communities is generated by research gathered by the NSSE, which is supported by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).

NSSE: National Assessment of Student Engagement

The current study is an indirect measure of student engagement through qualitative focus groups seeking to align with the original program goals and best practices defined by the scholarship in the field. Most of the research about learning communities and first-year seminars falls into one of four categories: student progress and performance, student engagement, integrative learning and interdisciplinary understanding, and faculty and staff outcomes (Chism

Schmidt & Graziano, 2016). This review of the literature sought to focus on prior research assessing student engagement in FYS/LC programs. Relevant research about singular programs was also included to enrich understanding about student engagement in the first-year.

The major study contributing to understanding about learning communities and first-year seminars as high-impact practices for student engagement is described by Kuh (2008) in his summary of the NSSE comparing self-reported data with student participation in Educationally Enriching Experiences. The NSSE is a major tool in helping higher education understand student engagement.

The evolution of student engagement assessment on the college level has led to a strong framework of institutional and programmatic practices and key characteristics, including high-impact practices and their key elements, for colleges and universities to increase student learning and retention. NSSE has become the assessment tool to begin and continue conversations for total quality management in higher education. In a shift to assessing for improvement, the NSSE has helped to identify high-impact educational practices for increased student engagement and retention. The reflexive nature of the NSSE helped practioners discover key characteristics to support the effectiveness of high impact practices.

Launched in 2000, the NSSE measures the extent to which students participate in engaging educational practices and what they gain from participation. Before the NSSE, the national dialogue about quality in higher education centered around institutional resources and reputation (Kuh, 2009) or focused on student outcomes like grade point average (Ewell & Jones, 1996) rather than focusing on authentic assessment of student learning and effective practices.

The NSSE design team consisted of many prominent scholars on student engagement in higher education including Peter Ewell, Alexander Astin, and Arthur Chickering, among others

(Kuh, 2009). To understand how the definition and parameters of student engagement came to be for the NSSE, it is important to review each scholar's contributions to student engagement as a construct in higher education.

Ewell and Jones (1996) compiled a summary of student engagement literature for effective instruction. The following characteristics significantly influenced the development of the NSSE. The university:

- “creates high expectations for student learning;
- provides coherent, progressive learning;
- creates synthesizing experiences;
- integrates education and experience;
- creates active learning experiences;
- requires ongoing practice of skills;
- assesses learning and gives prompt feedback;
- enables collaborative learning experiences;
- provides considerable time-on-task;
- respects diverse talents and ways of knowing;
- increases informal contact with students;
- gives special attention to the early years” (p. 18-28).

Astin's (1999) contributions to student engagement in higher education come from his theory of student involvement. According to Astin, student involvement is directly related to the physical and psychological energy that a student puts forth. Stemming from Freudian cathexis, Astin recognizes that student engagement peaks when students place psychological investment in

something outside themselves. In addition, the theory of student involvement recognizes vigilance, time on task, and effort as essential for student engagement. The following premises are important for student engagement according to the theory of student involvement:

- “investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects;
- involvement occurs on a continuum; students have varying degrees of involvement objects;
- involvement can be measured quantitatively (how often they study) and qualitatively (how well they understand content);
- student learning is dependent on the level of student involvement in that program;
- effective educational policies are directly related to student involvement” (p. 519).

In another attempt to draw conclusions from previous empirical research, Chickering and Gamson (1987) gathered a group of educational researchers to promote effective teaching and learning practices that had already been discovered. Their seven principles for effective education practice include:

- “encourage contact between students and faculty;
- develop reciprocity and cooperation among students;
- encourage active learning;
- provide prompt feedback;
- emphasize time on task;
- communicate high expectations;
- respect diverse talents and ways of learning” (p. 2).

Friedlander and Pace's (1986) main contribution to the concept of student engagement for the NSSE recognizes that quality of effort is key to student success. In other words, a student's engagement with institutional resources and opportunities is a far better predictor of student success than their credentials upon entering an institution of higher education. Pace developed the College Student Experience Questionnaire, which was the precursor to the NSSE for assessing student engagement in higher education. Pace's work is foundational to the movement of measuring student engagement and effective educational practices.

The NSSE uses constructs of student engagement known as behavioral aspects without emphasis on psychological, socio-cultural, and holistic understandings (Kahu, 2013). For NSSE, student engagement in higher education represents student quality of effort and involvement in productive learning activities (Kuh, 2009).

FYS/LCs and High-Impact Practice Research

Several studies, sponsored by the AAC&U, highlight the high impact of first-year seminar and learning communities on student engagement and success using NSSE data. The learning communities reported in generated NSSE data do not necessarily follow the FYS/LC structure, but with assumption that the student engagement is generally consistent across learning community models, we can generalize their findings to describe the FYS/LC model of learning communities.

Based on NSSE data, Kuh (2008) discovered, through an analysis of a variety of high-impact practices, students who participate in learning communities or first-year seminars, among other high-impact practices, reported greater experiences with high-levels of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student to faculty interaction, and a supportive campus environment. He suggested several reasons that high-impact practices are effective for students.

The time and effort investments associated with the types of learning activities increase a student's likelihood to invest in an activity and their academic program. Next, the nature of the activities in these practices increases the likelihood that students will interact with their peers and faculty in a meaningful way. These practices likely increase a student's access to learning about and with diverse populations. Students who participate in high-impact practices are more likely to receive regular feedback on their performance. They are challenged to transfer their learning to other settings in their lives. Finally, Kuh suggests that students participating in learning communities or first-year seminars are more likely to have life-changing experiences than those who do not participate at all.

Through a review of prior research Brownell and Swaner (2009) discovered several components that ensure first-year seminars and learning communities are successful. To be more effective in first-year seminar programs, administrators should establish specific goals and select the seminar model that most closely fits the goals of the program and involves cross-campus instructional teams such as a resource team. Learning community teams should use engaging pedagogies such as active and collaborative learning and help students realize the skills they learn in first-year seminar are those they will need to get through college and life. For learning communities, courses should be intentionally linked, surround gateway courses to support struggling students, integrate a first-year seminar, incorporate instructional teams, invest in faculty development, and use engaging pedagogies.

Kuh and O'Donnell (2013) found, from analyzing NSSE data, that high-impact practices have a compensatory effect, meaning that underserved student populations benefit from participation more than those with traditional access to education. In many cases, they influence students to perform better than they would had they not participated. Echoing the effects of

learning communities and first-year seminars as high-impact practices for students in higher education and the characteristics that matter, Kuh and O'Donnell (2013) described what they refer to as key elements of high-impact practices. To be high-impact, programs should incorporate at least the following components:

- “Performance expectations set at appropriately high levels;
- Significant investment of time and effort by students over an extended period of time;
- Interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters;
- Experiences with diversity;
- Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback;
- Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning;
- Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world application; and
- Public demonstration of competence” (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013, p. 8).

Finley and McNair (2013) used a mixed methods approach to understand the result of certain high-impact practices on underserved populations of students. Using NSSE data from 25,336 students, they compared student participation in learning communities, service-learning courses, study abroad experiences, internships, capstone courses, and research with a faculty member to self-reported gains in deep learning, practical competence, general education, and personal and social development. From their analysis, they found students who participate in learning communities were more likely to report experiences with deep learning than students who did not participate in high-impact practices. In addition, the more high-impact practices in which students participated in, the more they self-reported meaningful learning experiences. These findings were significant for all populations, but more significant for typically

underserved student populations including first-generation, transfer, African American, Asian American, and Hispanic students.

Through focus groups, Finley and McNair (2013) sought to discover how traditionally underserved students describe what it means to be engaged in learning and where that learning is most likely to take place. Participants reported significant learning when they participated in group work, applied their learning, interacted with peers, and made connections to their own experiences. Also, students recognized their abilities to connect with peers outside of the classroom helped them to stay engaged in their learning. Participants found their access and usage of support networks to enhance their learning. They also reported a desire to make connections to adults and advisors in ways that would help them stay on course to graduation. Criticisms came from students who felt they did not have adequate time to spend participating in high-impact practices and those who sometimes did not understand how the high-impact experiences connected to their intended field of study.

Summary

First-year seminars and learning communities have a long history in higher education in the United States. There are countless ways first-year seminars and learning communities are implemented. One is combination of the two experiences by embedding first-year seminar in learning communities to serve as a course to encourage academic integration of student learning called the FYS/LC model of learning communities. High-impact practice and FYS/LC research highlight key elements of programs that demonstrate student engagement.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

The purpose of the study was to understand student perspectives of participation in learning communities at a south Texas university. Appreciative inquiry was the methodology selected to guide participant reasoning and construction of knowledge. The research was designed to elicit constructivist understanding regarding engaging practices in the First-Year Learning Communities Program (FYLCP). Data gathered through dialectic focus groups and reflective writing were analyzed to develop an understanding of participant perspectives of current practices in learning communities during the 2016-2017 academic year and future engaging practices.

From a series of questions adapted from Finley and McNair's (2013) study to assess underserved students' engagement in high-impact practices, former FYLCP student participants were asked about how learning communities contributed to their perceived engagement and learning. Participants were gathered in three different focus groups ranging from three to nine students. Overall, seventeen students shared personal perspectives during the discovery stage of the research. Select students from the focus groups were asked to complete written reflections for the dream stage of the research.

In the first and second stages of the research, focus group participants defined learning and engagement to frame the ways they viewed engagement and learning in their learning community participation and identified the best of their own FYLCP experience in the discovery stage. For the third stage of the research, select students who participated in the discovery stage completed written reflections in the dream stage to imagine what would have made their experience even more meaningful.

Focus group audio files were transcribed and coded for themes using values and eclectic coding for the first and second stages of coding, respectively. Values coding was selected due to its emphasis on finding what participants described as valuable to their experience in learning communities (Saldaña, 2011). Eclectic coding was chosen to allow freedom in final categorization.

To understand the participant perspectives of participation in learning communities at a south Texas university, the following questions guided the research:

1. What perspectives do participants express regarding their learning community participation?
2. What understanding or meaning emerges about participation in learning communities?
3. How do participants envision an engaging learning community experience?

Methodological Framework: Constructivism

The epistemology of the research was based on the postmodern perspective of constructivism. Constructivist thinking presupposes that knowledge is constructed, not created, from a person's situation in the world and from the experiences they accumulate (Crotty, 1998; Glesne, 2011; Saldaña, 2011; Schwandt, 1994). Constructivism informs most qualitative research because it attempts to connect objective truths about the world with subjective experiences of the world as experienced through the lenses of individuals (Schwandt, 1994). However, constructivists do not seek to discover a realistic and hard truth like those following epistemological traditions in the natural sciences. Instead they follow pluralistic and relativistic philosophies of thought that explore "truth [as] a matter of the best-informed and most sophisticated construction on which there is consensus at a given time" (p. 128). The results of constructivist inquiry are pluralistic, resulting in a reality expressed through many different

symbols and systems, and are pliable in that reality can be shaped to adhere to purposeful acts of behavior.

Nelson Goodman is credited with developing the first definitions of constructivist theory (Schwandt, 1994). With foundations of pluralism and pragmatism, the goal of constructivism is to build upon and remake existing interpretations of the world by combining them into new frames of interpretation. Constructivism was the eventual result of interpretivist goals to develop methodologies for social science similar to those developed for the natural sciences. However, constructivism is different from interpretivism in that it does not seek to obtain facts in a literal account of the world. Instead, it recognizes truth is ever changing and dependent on the perceptual frameworks with which it explores meaning.

Under the purview of constructivism, several philosophies were considered as it was adopted as the theoretical framework for the study. Components of Guba and Lincoln's (1985) "constructivist paradigm" framework guided the inquiry. Unlike traditional models of empirical inquiry, constructivist observers do not attempt to maintain objectivity in the pursuit of knowledge. According to Guba and Lincoln (1985), the quality of constructed meaning is dependent on the constructor's access to information and ability to deal with the new information. Following the properties of their paradigm, I identified as a major stakeholder in conjunction with the participants' expressed experiences and in recommending new constructions of knowledge produced as a result of the inquiry.

As with all scientific research methods, there are criticisms about knowledge building through constructivism. A major critique challenges the method from which subjective ideas lead to intersubjective meaning (Schwandt, 1994). To help alleviate this criticism, specific descriptions of the methodologies selected to construct knowledge help to define the knowledge-

seeking process. A second criticism argues in traditional interpretivist constructions of knowledge, the observer lacks authority to interpret meanings of the developed understanding (Schwandt, 1994). Over time, the development of constructivism has invited researchers to have more involvement in the subject under inquiry to help construct critical meaning of the solicited knowledge (Creswell, 2014). Following this solution, a third criticism of constructivist inquiry is that it gives too much power to the inquirer (Schwandt, 1994). To maintain objective subjectivity, researchers should incorporate member checks and peer debriefing, among other strategies for trustworthiness and rigor (Creswell, 2014). Finally, criticisms arise about the simplicity of celebrating a single representation of knowledge from an individual despite the conclusion that there is not a single representation of the world (Schwandt, 1994). However, the social constructionist perspective within constructivism argues that knowledge is socially constructed and shared realities exist. The inclusion of multiple participants and focus groups helped develop a socially constructed reality.

Adopting a paradigm from the educational connoisseurship and criticism perspective of constructivism, the study also follows that the form in which the constructed truth is represented matters (Schwandt, 1994). In other words, the nature of the discovered knowledge should be communicated in a way that constructs and contains specific and nuanced meanings for the audience. For that reason, decisions were made to include information about the First-Year Learning Communities Program (FYLCP) based on its unique place in the global educational landscape. Similarly, the results were constructed in a format specific for guiding the formation of better learning communities. Per the nature of the methodology selected for the study, the results are a summation of *dream* stage analysis. The format in which they are written prepares future stakeholders for the *design* stage of the methodology.

The resulting constructed knowledge from the inquiry will most benefit audience members who are stakeholders in the FYLCP. However, stakeholders at any institution seeking to successfully structure the FYS/LC model of learning communities for first-year college students will benefit from the results of the study. More abstractly, faculty wishing to incorporate more effective models of engaging practices in their teaching will benefit from the discussion of the study.

Methodology: Appreciative Inquiry

As described in depth in Chapter Two, appreciative inquiry is both a theoretical and methodological framework. Appreciative inquiry was developed as an alternative methodology to action research. David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva (1987), the pioneers of appreciative inquiry, criticized problem solving models of action research stating they provide a limited understanding of organizational issues and ignore the opportunity for more innovative models of change research. Instead, their vision for appreciative inquiry adds positive, therefore, generative opportunities for organizational change. The protocol incorporates the five stages: *definition*, *discover*, *dream*, *design*, and *destiny* (David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry, 2019).

Through the knowledge-seeking lens of constructivism, the study sought to explore students' *appreciative* perspectives of learning community participation. Following appreciative inquiry as the methodological framework, data was collected with the intention of discovering the positive core of the FYLCP as a collective system from the student perspective (Given, 2008). While student participants were the main source of information, my subjective perspective as a long-time faculty member for the FYLCP and coordinator of the first-year

seminar program contributed to the results of the constructed knowledge about what gives life to the FYLCP.

Appreciative inquiry is grounded in social constructionism (Bushe, 2011; Clouder & King, 2015; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Given, 2008). As the intention of appreciative inquiry is to use past positive history to direct the future, it implies the way in which stakeholders of a collective system talk about their perspectives have implications for the knowledge constructed. Appreciative inquiry consists of three major assumptions about the world (Clouder & King, 2015). First, it employs generative thinking that challenges old assumptions and builds on imagined, collective alternatives. Next, it attempts to combine scientific investigation with artistic appreciation. Finally, it seeks to change the lens through which research is conducted to open up the possibility of new aspects of the world that could not have been recognized through the old lens.

In the 5-D, cyclical model for appreciative inquiry, there are five stages: definition, discovery, dream, design, and destiny or delivery (see Figure 3.1). Participants first engage in the *definition* stage to define the topic of inquiry. For example, participants were asked questions in the beginning of the focus group to help operationalize the term *engaged learning* before they were asked questions about what engaged learning meant in learning communities. Second, participants are invited to a dialogue in which recollections of what went well and what made those things thrive are discussed in the *discovery* stage. The third stage is the *dream* stage, where participants think about the past achievements of the subject of inquiry to imagine innovations and improvements. During the *design* stage, stakeholders determine how the system should operate with new insights from the *discovery* and *dream* stages. Finally, the *destiny* or *delivery*

stage determines how the new design is delivered. The process begins again with the commitment to seek answers to new questions.

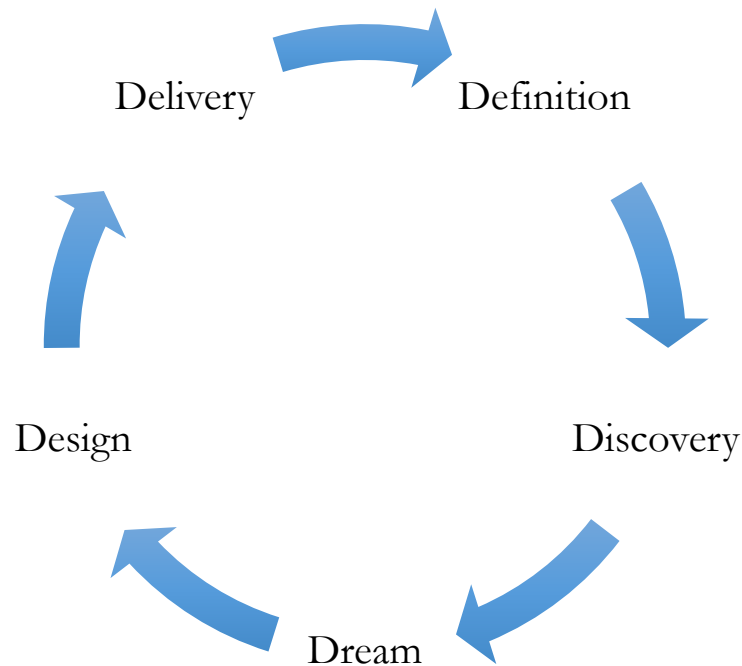


Figure 3.1. The 5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry.

As with all methodologies, there are some criticisms about using appreciative inquiry as a methodological framework. One major criticism is that there is not one specific way to conduct appreciative inquiry (Bushe, 2011; Clouder & King, 2015). Cooperrider waited to publish specific protocols associated with his developed framework to force the exploration of the philosophical underpinnings. Therefore, many iterations on how to design an appreciative inquiry have developed over time. The constructivist epistemological framework allowed for this fluidity in the design of the current study. More interpretivist approaches would find the lack of structural design problematic. A focus on the positive may invalidate negative organizational

experiences (Bushe, 2011; Clouder & King, 2015). Cooperrider resisted allowing these criticisms to invoke deficit-based structures of inquiry into the appreciative inquiry model.

Appreciative inquiry as a methodology guided the research design and process to discover how participants describe participation in learning communities during the 2016-2017 academic year. The design includes participant perspectives for the first three stages of the appreciative inquiry model. Participants *defined* engagement in learning, *discovered* the most effective experiences from their learning community participation, and *dreamt* of an even more engaging learning community experience. The appreciative cycle will begin again with the development and pursuit of new questions about what gives life to learning communities.

Rationale for the Research Approach

It has been established that learning communities are effective practices for a wide range of students from varying educational backgrounds (Kuh, 2008; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2011). When combined with first-year seminar, learning communities increase the likelihood of peer-to-peer connections, out-of-class engagement, and academic and social wellness (Swing, 2004). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) student self-reported survey data has been used to identify the beginning of a list of key elements that lead to high-impact programs (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). Less is known about how students describe engaging elements of combined first-year seminar and learning community programs. While Chism Schmidt and Graziano (2016) identified the ways in which institutions use first-year seminars in learning communities to promote student engagement, the ways in which students describe effective practices in a combined model needed more attention.

The purpose of qualitative research is to help researchers understand why particular behaviors occur (Given, 2008). To gain a better understanding of how students describe first-

year seminar and learning community experiences as engaging elements, a qualitative methodology was selected for the study. Committed to the assumption that student perspectives about the value of learning communities were dependent on past educational experiences and several different experiential factors, constructivism was selected as the main epistemological view. As a foundational component of appreciative inquiry, social constructionism was selected to guide the methodology of the research. By conducting focus groups where participants constructed their learning community perspectives with a learning community faculty member, the result is a richer understanding of the learning community experience in the FYLCP.

Recalling the principles of appreciative inquiry described in Chapter Two, the rationale for selecting appreciative inquiry as the research methodology is supported with the following principles and definitions:

1. The Positive Principle - The construction of knowledge follows affirmation.
2. The Simultaneity Principle – Embarking in constructivist research begins with intervention.
3. Stakeholder Involvement – Stakeholders are a necessary component of change research.
4. The Anticipatory Principle – Images of the future influence current behaviors.
5. The Poetic Principle – Organizations have life-giving properties (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001).

The positive principle was the initial and main condition of appreciative inquiry that led to its selection for the study. The assumption that authentic knowledge must follow positive affirmation led the researcher to seek positive representations of learning community experiences. According to Cooperrider and Whitney (2001), the positive approach adds “hope, excitement, inspiration, caring, camaraderie, sense of urgent purpose, and sheer joy in creating

something meaningful together” (p. 17). As introduced in Chapter Two, all first-year students at the south Texas university are required to take two semesters of learning communities to complement their transition from high school to university life. The FYLCP was implemented in 1994 when the university transitioned from a two-year to four-year institution and has been part of the first-year student experience ever since. Considering the program has grown substantially since its beginnings at the university, it can be assumed that student experiences vary based on a variety of factors. In the acknowledgment that some students may have negative perspectives of their experience in the FYLCP, it was in the scope of the research to build upon their positive experiences within the system.

The simultaneity principle implies that the inquiry serves as an automatic intervention to the organization through the direct frames through which the researcher examines the topic. Therefore, the need to preserve hope in the organization was intentional in the design to maintain the researcher’s focus on positive change. As a long-time faculty member and new coordinator in the FYLCP program, focusing on negative realities of learning communities would directly affect the possibilities of change in the institution and the day-to-day functioning of the researcher within the program. Instead, focusing on what inspires the organization had a direct impact on outcomes of the research. Throughout the focus group recordings, I can be heard applauding the positive experiences students had in the FYLCP.

Some could argue that in addition to excluding administrative perspectives from the original study design, the lack of other stakeholders’ involvement, including faculty and staff who work in learning communities, leads to a flaw in the research design. However, according to Bushe (2011) “many different ways of doing [appreciative inquiry] have proliferated and it is inaccurate to say [appreciative inquiry] is done in any one way” (p. 2). It was the purpose of the

research to focus on how participants describe engaging experiences in learning communities in order to build on the best of what already exists. It was beyond the scope of the current research to incorporate faculty and staff perspectives of effective learning communities. Future studies of learning communities using appreciative inquiry might include faculty and staff perspectives. While acknowledging the existence of additional perspectives, the current research design chose to operate within only one level of subjectivity.

The principle of anticipation provided a potential benefit to the participants and not just the anticipated benefit to the organization. Recall that the anticipatory principle states that the image of the future guides current behavior, in this case engagement in learning communities. Through collective definitions of what it means to be engaged in learning in learning communities, participants may have imagined futures where they participate in those engaged experiences in other settings that had not occurred before. In other words, participants may have received the unintentional benefit of collectively building more positive definitions and structures for their future engagement in learning.

Lastly, the poetic principle and assumption that all organizations have life-giving properties lead to understanding of the importance of the researcher's subjectivity within the study. The poetic principle implies that organizations are like books that are co-authored by those that communicate their stories. The researcher's own assumptions about learning community engagement combined with realized images of how students perceive learning communities, develops future images of how learning communities should operate at a south Texas university. In addition, the researcher has her own frame of the value of learning communities from her own experience as a student participant.

Subjectivity

My role in the research had a direct effect on the knowledge constructed from the questions explored. Schwandt (1994) argues that by incorporating my perspectives as a valuable component of a qualitative inquiry, the study achieves more reliability. My unique understanding of the FYLCP program gives me an advantage in analyzing the data collected from student participants.

By the end of the study, I had advanced to the position of First-Year Seminar Coordinator for the First-Year Learning Communities Program. The responsibilities in this position include curriculum design, faculty development and training, student enrollment, and assessment. My journey and path to this position and to my research questions stem from my commitment to learning communities. Not only have I witnessed the influence they have on student success and learning, I myself participated in learning communities as a first-year student at the same south Texas university under study. I wholeheartedly believe in the value of the FYS/LC structure of learning communities and what it adds to students' experiences.

My firsthand experiences as a student involved in a learning community expanded my understanding of what it meant to be learner. When I started college in 2003, I was required to enroll in a fall and spring learning community as a first-year student at the south Texas university in the study. As a first-generation college student who arrived at the university because it seemed like what I was supposed to do, I was not confident in my abilities to succeed academically. Each learning community was designed to contain components of transformational learning. In one semester, the collaborative learning community team structured an experience to teach us about Mexican-American history that had been all but ignored in my prior history classes. This new understanding made me form a stronger connection to my local community. We were

encouraged to think about our projects in terms of service learning and required to share our end of semester projects with a live audience at an event called First-Year Symposium. This experience reinforced the idea that our contributing voices were important. In addition to history and writing, my triad connected my first-year seminar class to a general population, major-specific, early childhood education course. In this class, I was encouraged to volunteer with a student mentee at a local elementary school, further connecting me to the local community and helping me with an understanding of education as a profession. During this experience, I discovered I was not particularly talented with young children and subsequently switched my major to nursing. During the second semester, my learning community encouraged me to consider if the new nursing major I selected made sense for my personality and life goals. My overarching project in my writing course was a paper about what it meant to be a nurse. At the completion of that assignment, I went searching for another major. In addition, the learning community supported my performance in second semester courses by spending time in first-year seminar discussing concepts related to the connected political science class.

By the end of each semester, I had developed relationships that became the foundation of the networks I would build over the next two decades. My first-year seminar professors, who encouraged me to challenge myself both semesters, continued to be available throughout my undergraduate careers and even still, today. The friends I made in my first-year seminar course continued to be my friends until at least the end of my undergraduate degree. To me, the learning communities created a space at the university that helped me realize I belonged at the university.

I began teaching the first-year seminar course in learning communities in the fall of 2007 when I started the English master's program at the south Texas university. Since that date, I have taught in a variety of learning communities which included the following courses: General

Psychology, Film and Culture, Writing and Rhetoric, Developmental Math, Introduction to Philosophy, Essentials of Geology, State and Local Government, United States Government, and United States History to and since 1865. Based on my wide range of experiences working with different departments and faculty, I understand that not all learning communities are created equal, and, therefore are not equally effective for all students.

As my role in learning communities changed from student participant to a faculty member with curriculum design responsibilities, my constructed reality of the program continues to be guided by my early experiences as a student.

From my own experiences as a learning community student and from watching the FYLCP develop over time, I have continually tried to incorporate what I believe to be educationally effective practices into the learning communities in which I teach. My goals are to enhance peer connections, academic development and growth, real world application to learning, integrative learning, and learning about opportunities at the institution. Increasingly, making meaningful collective and individual connections with my students has become a priority. As I become more comfortable with the rituals of the classroom, I have found ways to get to know where students come from to better help them find where they are going. By incorporating a learning community team shared office hour, known as “breakfast hour,” my learning community team is able to connect with students in a more casual setting. The outcome of these relationships encourages students to find confidence in themselves. For example, when offered an opportunity to share a project about their growth as students, one struggling and timid student shared a deeply personal and brilliant poem about his transformation at our university. From that safe space, he went on to record a video version of his poem and had it published in a creative

writing journal. This type of learning would not have been possible without creating a network for students to explore their unique identities.

From this subjectivity, I largely assumed participants in this study engaged in meaningful practices during their learning community experiences. The research sought to discover if the practices I find the most meaningful take place on a grander scale throughout the learning communities program. Fortunately, some of the ways I perceived learning communities as meaningful experiences are supported by research explored in Chapter Two. The study expected to find ways the students experienced other positive forms of learning that I had not considered because of the limits my own subjectivity places on my ability to understand effective learning communities.

Research Design

Based on the current model of appreciative inquiry (David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry, 2019), the research design included the *definition*, *discovery*, and *dream* stages. The *design* and *delivery* stages were intentionally excluded as the purpose of the research was to understand student perspectives of learning communities from an affirmative framework. Learning community participants during the 2016-2017 academic year were invited to participate in focus groups to *define* and *discover* effective learning practices in learning communities in the FYLCP. Participants from the focus groups who were enthusiastic and reported many gains from their learning community experiences were also invited to complete written reflections to help in *dreaming* of future learning community possibilities to further engage students.

Institutional Profile

The study site was the FYLCP at a south Texas university. The university is a regional, Hispanic Serving Institution with approximately 12,200 students in undergraduate and graduate

level degree programs. Approximately, 2,000 are first time in college students. The faculty to student ratio is 23:1. (Fast Facts, 2016).

Research Site

The FYLCP builds learning communities for students by co-requiring core curriculum or major specific courses and first-year seminar as the anchor course. All first-year, first time in college students are required to enroll in two semesters of first-year seminar, and, therefore, are required to take two semesters of learning communities. Learning communities in the FYLCP may consist of anywhere from two to six courses (including labs) that students take in a cluster. The embedded courses host a variety of topics including, but not limited to, biology, chemistry, writing and rhetoric, foundations of communication, political science, and history.

Participant Selection

Due to the importance of specific participant experiences in qualitative research, purposive sampling was used to select participants. This approach was appropriate to ensure participants had direct experiences in learning communities during the 2016-2017 academic year. Researchers using purposive sampling select participants based on the breadth and depth of their knowledge and ability to answer questions (Given, 2008). The university campus representative for building student data reports was contacted to develop a report to include the current semester, current enrollment at the university, and participation in first-year seminar in fall 2016 and spring 2017. Reports were run in August, November, and January to invite students for focus groups during those time periods.

First, the students who enrolled in courses taught by the researcher were excluded from the solicitation email to avoid participant bias (Given, 2008). Next, students who did not participate in learning communities in both fall 2016 and spring 2017 were excluded from the

email list. This decision was made to ensure each participant had more than one learning community experience to discuss during the focus group.

For the August focus group, students who participated in two semesters of learning communities were emailed an invitation to participate in a focus group about what worked best during their learning community experience. Subsequent respondents received invitations based on the order of their response if a spot in the focus group became available. The first eight respondents were invited to participate. Of the eight participants invited to the August focus group, five participants attended and were awarded gift cards at the completion of the session. It is important to note that the students in the August focus group were enrolled in summer courses, which may have implications for the achiever status of the student. Focus groups took place in classrooms on the university campus reserved through the registrar's office.

November and February focus groups were formed with the same protocol. Of the eight invited focus group participants, three participated in the collaborative discussion. During the month of February, two focus groups were scheduled. The first, scheduled for February 2, 2018, was cancelled at the beginning of the focus group session when only two participants showed. The two were invited to a second date on February 7, 2018. The other six were invited from the same email report run for the February focus group. Of the eight scheduled, one participant invited a peer participant for a total of nine participants. Through trial and error, it was discovered the best way to increase participation was to send an invite no more than a week before the focus group date and to remind participants by text message the night before. The three focus groups combined for a total of 17 FYLCP participant experiences. Each focus group was recorded, transcribed and analyzed to contribute to an affirmative understanding of the most effective practices in learning communities in the FYLCP.

To conduct a *dream* stage reflection, six of the focus group participants were contacted due to stated interest at the completion of their focus group or based on their enthusiasm about their learning community experience and were offered \$10 Starbucks gift cards for completing the task. Email invitations, reminders, and communication about the *dream* stage were sent out beginning on January 24, 2018 through February 25, 2018. Of the six invited, four reflections were collected on or before March 7, 2018 through email.

The table below represents the participants in the study. Letters depict the student code and the month of participation in a focus group is included. In the *dream stage* column, a “yes” indicates if the participant submitted a reflection and a “no” indicates that the participant did not complete a written reflection. Finally, Table 3.1 reflects participant fall 2016 and spring 2017 learning community enrollment.

Table 3.1. Participant Data Collection and Learning Community Enrollment

| | Student Code & Month of Focus Group | Dream Stage | Fall 2016 Learning Community | Spring 2017 Learning Community |
|---|---|----------------|--|--|
| 1 | JT, February | Yes | Biology I, Chemistry I, Writing & Rhetoric, and First- Year Seminar | State and Local Government, Foundations of Communication, and First- Year Seminar |
| 2 | AR, February | Yes | US History, Foundations of Communication, and First- Year Seminar | Biology I, Chemistry I, Writing & Rhetoric, and First-Year Seminar |
| 3 | AB, August | No | Introduction to Philosophy and First-Year Seminar | Understanding and Enjoying Music and First-Year Seminar |
| 4 | KT, August | No | Anatomy and Physiology I, Writing and Rhetoric, and First-Year Seminar | Anatomy and Physiology II, Foundations of Communication, and First- Year Seminar |

| | | | | |
|----|--------------|-----|--|---|
| 5 | PB, August | No | US Government, Foundations of Communication, and First-Year Seminar | US History, Writing & Rhetoric, First-Year Seminar |
| 6 | WL, November | No | US History, Writing & Rhetoric, and First-Year Seminar | US History, Foundations of Communication, and First-Year Seminar |
| 7 | OB, November | No | US History, Foundations of Communication, and First-Year Seminar | US History, Writing & Rhetoric, and First-Year Seminar |
| 8 | MA, November | No | US Government, Foundations of Communication, and First-Year Seminar | US History, Writing & Rhetoric, and First-Year Seminar |
| 9 | MC, February | No | Sociology, Writing & Rhetoric, Developmental Reading/Writing, and First-Year Seminar | US History, Foundations of Communication, and First-Year Seminar |
| 10 | CA, February | No | US History, Writing & Rhetoric, and First-Year Seminar | US Government, Foundations of Communication, and First-Year Seminar |
| 11 | SH, February | No | State and Local Government and First-Year Seminar | US Government and First-Year Seminar |
| 12 | KA, February | Yes | Understanding and Enjoying Music, Foundations of Communication, and First-Year Seminar | State and Local Government and First-Year Seminar |
| 13 | MT, February | No | US History, Foundations of Communication, and First-Year Seminar | US Government, Writing & Rhetoric, and First-Year Seminar |
| 14 | LN, February | No | Sociology, Writing & Rhetoric, and First-Year Seminar | US History, Foundations of Communication, and First-Year Seminar |
| 15 | SA, February | No | Biology I, Chemistry I, and First-Year Seminar | Biology II, Chemistry II, and First-Year Seminar |

| | | | | |
|----|--------------|-----|---|---|
| 16 | RK, February | Yes | Sociology, Writing & Rhetoric, and First-Year Seminar | Music, Foundations of Communication, and First-Year Seminar |
| 17 | AL, February | No | US History and First-Year Seminar | US History, Writing & Rhetoric, and First-Year Seminar |

Data Collection Procedures

Before the researcher pursued data collection methods, permission from the university's Internal Review Board (IRB) was obtained. Their support of the proposed research design indicated high levels of ethical consideration in the study of human subjects. Signed permission was obtained from all participants before conducting focus groups, and in both stages of the research, participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation. Permission from the FYLCP Coordinator to analyze student perspectives of learning community participation was granted.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were selected as the main method to *discover* how students describe their participation in the FYLCP. The decision to include collaborative dialogue as part of the inquiry process was especially important to the constructionist principles of appreciative inquiry (Bushe, 2011; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). A collective conversation about the best elements of the FYLCP led to the socially constructed concept about what makes learning communities effective at a south Texas university. Focus group interviews were conducted on August 3, 2017, November 28, 2017, February 2, 2018, and February 7, 2018 (See Figure 3.1). No data was collected on February 2 because too few of the volunteers showed up for the focus group. The two participants who did show were invited to attend the February 7 focus group.

Focus group questions. With the goal of understanding how students perceive the outcomes of their participation in learning communities and first-year seminars, focus group questions were adopted from a study by Finley and McNair (2013) about high-impact practice participation. The questions were designed to elicit conversations about the key elements Kuh (2013) recognized as necessary for effective high-impact practices. Because one of the goals of the study was to identify if students recognized the key elements in learning communities in the FYLCP, Finley and McNair's (2013) questions were revised and adopted. The questions are replicated below (p. 51-53).

The first four questions that I posed to participants helped frame the conversation and developed student-generated definitions for what it meant to learn and to engage. This achieved the beginning step of the 5D AI model (Bushe, 2011).

1. What do you believe potential employers are looking for in college graduates?
 - a. What are the specific skills that you are learning (or hope to learn) in college that are important in the professional world?
 - b. The personal world?
2. Thinking about your experiences as a student, how would you describe what it means to be engaged in your learning?
3. How do you know when you're engaged in learning versus simply learning?
4. Students often learn better in particular types of environments or doing particular types of activities. In your college experience so far, what certain activities or situations (inside or outside the classroom) allowed you to be more engaged in your learning?

The next six questions I asked attempted to elicit answers to generate understanding about the key elements of learning communities at the south Texas university. Following the AI

framework of inquiry, focus group participants were asked to generate meaning based on the recollections of what worked best in their experience to achieve the goals of the discovery stage (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001).

5. You all share in common that you have participated in particular types of learning activities or programs. Each one of you participated in a learning community centered around a first-year seminar. In what ways did being involved in this experience have an impact on your learning?
6. In what ways did this experience influence the ways in which you interacted with people around you?
 - a. For example, how did this experience shape your interactions with your peers?
 - b. What about with faculty?
 - c. What about the services staff at the university?
7. In what ways did these experiences encourage you to participate in a public demonstration of learning and knowledge?
8. What did you learn about yourself through participating in the learning communities and first-year seminars?
 - a. What more did you learn about your peers?
 - b. In what ways did this experience have an impact on your understanding of the community or the larger world?
9. In what ways have these types of learning experiences encouraged you to think differently about what you might do on or off campus or after you leave the university?
 - a. How did these experiences influence your interests or goals, short term or long term?

- b. Has your engagement in these activities contributed to your social and ethical development?

The final question aimed to reframe the purpose of a college experience and to discover how participants view their experiences at a south Texas university.

10. Finally, thinking about your view of college overall:

View A: The most important goal of a college education should be to provide students with a broad, well-rounded education that enriches them to discover their interests and abilities, in order to help them realize their full potential in life.

View B: The most important goal of a college education should be to provide students with specific career knowledge and skills to help them realize their full potential in the workforce.

Probe: Which of these statements would you say comes closer to describing the emphasis of your college education thus far?

Participant Documents: FYLCP Dreams Reflections

The second data set collected was in the form of personal reflections. In this phase, select participants were invited to expand on conversations begun in the *discovery* stage and write about *dreams* to make learning communities more engaging than their own experience.

Originally intended as interviews, the choice to invite students to write their ideas in private was made to avoid adding pressure for potential participant bias in the *dream* stage. Having participants write about their *dreams* for the program away from a practitioner gave them more freedom to express themselves honestly. Participants were invited to participate via email. They, in return, emailed their reflective writing and it was placed in a password-protected folder. Four

participants completed reflections and turned them in through email (See Figure 3.2). A copy of the email can be found in Appendix B.

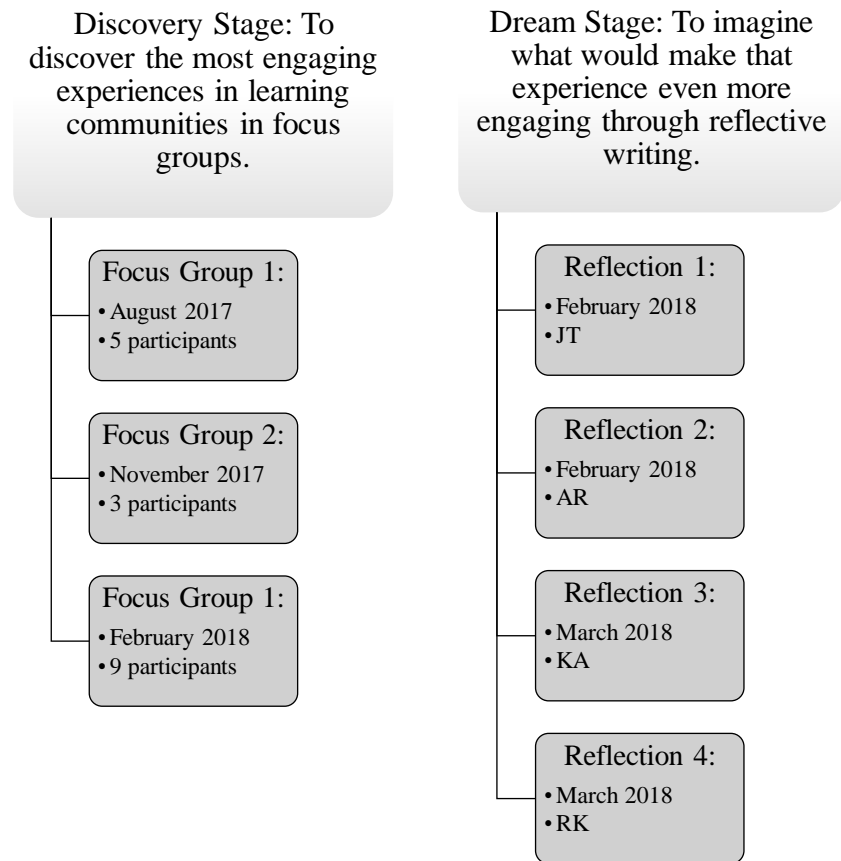


Figure 3.2. Data Collection Stages and Timeline

Transcription and Coding Software

MAXQDA, a computer-based, qualitative software, was used as a tool to help transcribe and code focus group and document data. All audio recordings, transcriptions, and documents were stored in a folder on a password-protected computer.

Data Transformations and Representation

Thematic coding and analysis were utilized as a reductionist strategy for the qualitative research (Given, 2008). Thematic analysis is different from that of axial and open coding strategies in grounded theory that complicate codes by introducing analytic insights. For thematic analysis, in contrast, the collected data begins with a suspected set of codes and themes to be further explored. Other codes generate from “beginnings of conceptual models, through reviewing the literature, or professional experience” (p. 867).

The product of a thematic analysis, like any qualitative analysis, includes both the important concepts and processes identified in the study and the overarching patterns of experience by which those concepts and processes are manifested. Ideally, a thematic analysis takes into account both patterns of commonality across all cases and the contextual aspects of the phenomenon that account for differences among participants (Given, 2008, p. 868).

Values coding was employed for first round coding to develop codes representative of what participants labeled as their most meaningful experiences in learning communities (Saldaña, 2011). The process of coding included simultaneously reading and listening to transcripts to develop codes. Codes were managed in MAXQDA. Figure 3.2 is a code cloud generated at the completion of the values coding phase to represent the most frequent engaging elements of FYLCP participation.

reach so they can push you easier than your parents” (SA, February, 330). To represent the value SA attributed to the mentorship role of faculty, it was coded as “faculty as guides on the side,” which was one of the most frequent codes used to represent participant values in their FYLCP experience (See Figure 3.3). Through eclectic coding, which is open to the researcher’s interpretation, “faculty as guides on the side” was included within the subtheme of *Leader* the overarching *Islander Accountability Group* theme described in Chapter Four.

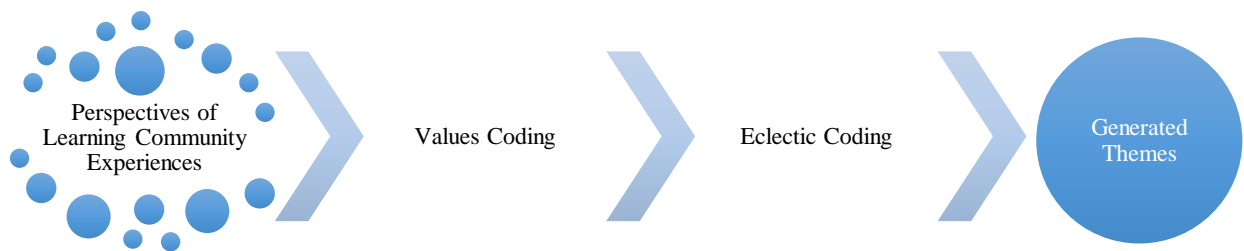


Figure 3.4. Process of Participant Experiences to Themes

Description of Codes Related to Themes Summary

After the initial development of the themes, a document was generated to describe each of the codes in relation to the themes. The document served as a glossary and was the beginning of the structured recommendations to learning community practitioners. Table 3.2 represents an inventory of the data collected for the study.

Table 3.2. Data Inventory

| Source of data | Number of pages per event | Number of pages in total | Time investment |
|---|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| 3 focus groups (50 min, 75 minutes, and 86 minutes) | 15-30 pages per focus group | 75 pages | 211 minutes of focus groups. One hour to transcribe 10 minutes of focus group. 21.1 hours. 2 hours to code each focus group. 6 hours. |
| 4 student essays | 3 pages per essay | 3 x 4 = 12 pages | One hour to code four reflections. |
| Researcher Journal | 25 journal entries | 1-5 x 25 = 94 pages | |
| Researcher Memos | 29 memos | < 1 page x 29 = 29 pages | |
| Summary Description of Codes Related to Themes | | 32 pages | 432 total codes. 6 codes per hour. 72 hours. |
| | Total pages | 146 pages | 100 hours |

Reciprocity and Ethics

According to Glesne (2011), ethical codes should be the basis of all qualitative research. Ethics in qualitative research can be more plainly written as the relationship the researcher forms with her participants (Given, 2008). Appropriate ethical considerations in qualitative research “depend on continual communication and interaction with research participants throughout the study” (Glesne, 2011, p. 181). Ethical research standards are becoming more collaboratively based so that it is not up to one person to make the ethical decisions. For this reason, all research was approved by the IRB before data collection began.

A major concern in qualitative research is the need to protect participant anonymity (Given, 2008). For this reason, pseudonyms were created to protect participant identities. In addition, participants’ identities were not included in the description of the data collected. Their stories were represented in a collective story and were written in a way to avoid incorrect representations of their perception.

Openly discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the study also contributed to the ethics and reciprocity of the findings (Given, 2008). As qualitative research is the product of a new conceptual frame developed by the researcher, candid discussion of the research process, the findings, and their connections to new realities enhance the ethics and reciprocity of the study.

Academic Rigor and Trustworthiness

Academic rigor is extremely important in the context of qualitative research. According to Bhattacharya (2007), many times qualitative research can be read like a story and seem subjective, rather than academic. To avoid the possibility of a qualitative study seeming to lack academic rigor, the research must align the representation of their research with “epistemology, research purpose and questions, and theoretical and methodological frameworks that are considered academically rigorous” (Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 117). In addition, ways to gain

credibility are to cite key scholars and be very specific about the duration and specifics of the fieldwork (Saldaña, 2011).

Other strategies that add to the academic rigor and trustworthiness of a qualitative study according to Saldaña (2011) include time spent on research and the number of participants involved in the study. More participants lead to more time spent transcribing and developing themes, but the research becomes better represented by more perspectives and better understanding of their memories. Incorporating multiple methods of data collection also adds to the academic rigor of a qualitative study. Many qualitative researchers aim to triangulate their research, which means the incorporation of interviews, observations, surveys, etc. to have enough data to support the developed themes (Glesne, 2011; Saldaña 2011).

Triangulation for the study was achieved through data collection and data analysis. The components of triangulation for data collection included the number of learning community students as participants, three focus groups, and four reflections. The data analysis components included two coding phases, peer debriefing, member checking (See Appendix D), and inter-rater reliability.

The overall number of participants included in the study contributed to the rigor and trustworthiness of the study. Three focus groups were conducted with a total of 17 participants. Including a second phase of reflection provided deeper insights to the understanding that four participants developed about their learning community participation.

Adhering to qualitative recommendations for coding processes promoted further trustworthiness. Two coding phases were used in the development of themes to ensure participant perspectives were represented as the participants intended. Member checking was used to maintain transparency and accuracy with participants about how their recollections were

transcribed (Given, 2008). This procedure required the researcher to give data analysis materials to the participants in the study to ensure that the researcher is representing them as they wish to be represented. This procedure aided in establishing the ethics of the research. Participants were emailed transcripts of their respective focus groups and offered an opportunity to read and comment about their representation. (See Appendix D).

Researchers can incorporate inter-rater reliability by inviting others to examine and affirm coding processes (Given, 2008). This was completed during the study by consulting with a former FYS faculty member. In addition, peer debriefing to validate the themes created represented participant perspectives was conducted with the same former FYS practitioner.

Summary

A qualitative appreciative inquiry was selected for the study to highlight positive recollections of participant participation in a combined first-year seminar and learning communities program at a south Texas university. With constructivist inquiry at the basis of the methodological framework, knowledge generated by participants in the study represents a conceptualization of first-year seminars and learning communities based on their unique situation within the world as first-year university students. Data were collected through focus groups and participant reflections to discover how students describe their FYLCP participation as engaging. First round values coding and second round eclectic coding was used to generate themes to represent participant recollections. Measures were followed to ensure academic rigor and trustworthiness to represent meaning intended by the participants in an ethical manner.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand student perspectives of learning community participation in the First-Year Learning Communities Program (FYLCP). To generate data that could ignite positivity and improvements within the organization, appreciative inquiry was selected as the methodology. The qualitative data collected from using appreciative inquiry as a methodology is strengths based, collaborative, inclusive, artful, and generative (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001). The data was a result of focus group interviews and written reflections designed to elicit participant elaboration on the most effective experiences of their learning community participation. Participants were asked to discuss impactful learning experiences that led to deeper learning, interaction with others, demonstration of understanding, and personal growth and development. Building on those experiences, the data includes recommendations students had for learning community improvement.

The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What perspectives do participants express regarding their learning community participation?
2. What understanding or meaning emerges about participation in learning communities?
3. How do participants envision an engaging learning community experience?

Appreciative Inquiry

Using the appreciative inquiry approach, participants provided generative feedback about what worked best from their own perspectives and experiences during the discovery stage. Three different focus groups with students who participated in the FYLCP the 2016-2017 academic year were conducted spanning the 2017-2018 academic year. Focus groups took place in August 2017, November 2017, and February 2018. The following describes the aspects participants found to be the best contributors to their engagement and learning in the FYLCP.

Themes to represent student perspectives of the best of learning community participation at TAMU-CC were generated and are as follows:

- **Masterminded Blueprints** - the administrative and pedagogical elements of learning communities that participants recognized as beneficial to their learning experience.
- **Islander Accountability Group** - the ways participants view first-year seminar and learning communities as a support group based on their interaction with professors and peers.
- **Impostor to Islander** - the academic and social skills achievements participants describe because of their learning community participation.
- **Dreamwork** - the structures, activities, and skill sets participants believe should be enhanced for future first-year cohorts.

Description of Visual Representation of Themes

Masterminded Blueprints represents the structural and best practice components of learning communities. In Figure 4.1, it is represented as the largest circle of the image to represent the structure the learning community provides for the growth of the student. Within that circle is a circle to represent *Islander Accountability Group*, which refers to the impactful relationships participants made from their learning community experience. *Impostor to Islander* is represented by two arrows. One leading students into learning communities and one directing them out. The theme describes the skills participants felt they gained from their participation in first-year seminar and learning communities. Finally, *Dreamwork* makes up the participants' recommendations to increase learning community engagement for future students. It is represented as an arrow to represent that the ideas will filter in to the design for the next cohort of learning community students.

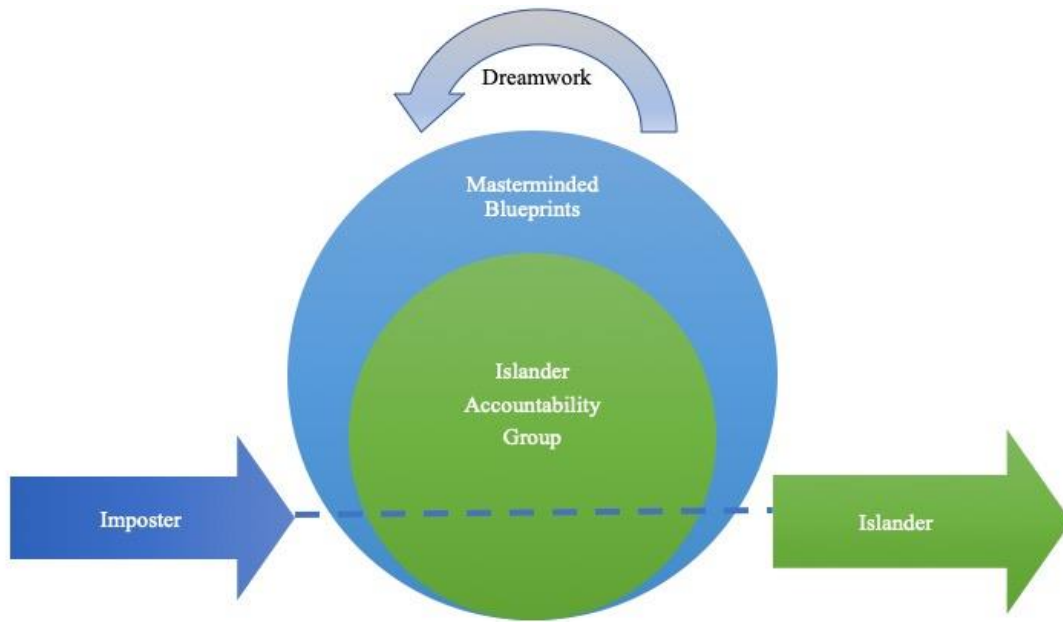


Figure 4.1. Visual Representation of Themes

Because the goal of appreciative inquiry is to continuously build on previous structures within existing organizations, the visual representation of themes is compared to the 5-D cycle of appreciative inquiry (see Figure 4.2). The main structure of the visual representation of the themes consisting of *Masterminded Blueprints*, *Islander Accountability Group*, and *Impostor to Islander* represent participants' prior experience and fit within the *definition* and *discovery* stages of the 5-D cycle. As the *discovery* stage represents the result of a previous program *design*, it can be assumed that the *discovery* stage, or the discussion of the best structures of an organization, also speak to the previous *design* and *delivery* stages of the model. This suggests *Masterminded Blueprints*, *Islander Accountability Group*, and *Impostor to Islander* represent the *design*, *delivery*, *definition*, and *discovery* stages. Then *Dreamwork*, the *dream* stage, is represented by an arrow that funnels the new understanding of the best of what was and hopes for the future of the organization back into the *design* and *delivery* of the learning communities program.

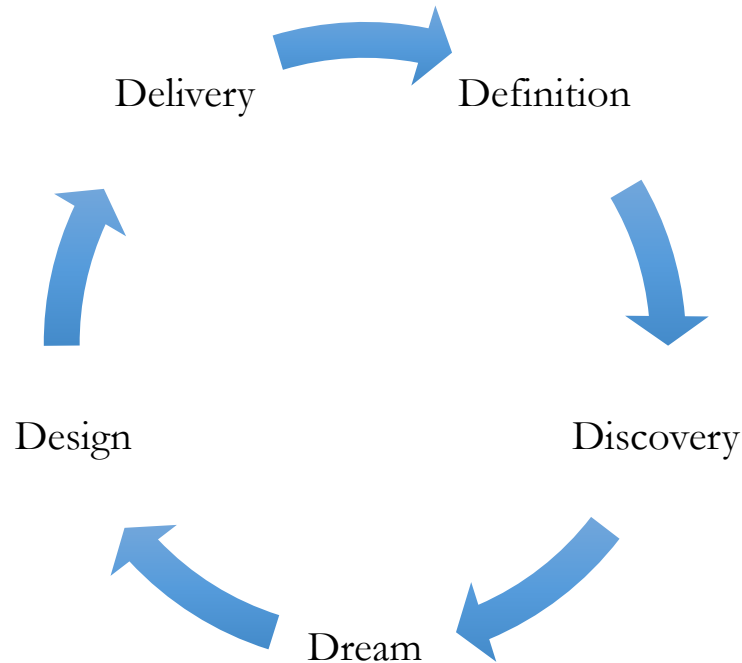


Figure 4.2. The 5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry.

Masterminded Blueprints

Student perception of learning communities as *Masterminded Blueprints* reinforced the assumption that participants recognized the intentionality of the FYLCP structure and curriculum. One participant who completed two general education learning communities stated “I feel like there is some mastermind behind the whole thing. Like they’re encouraging, but not too much and they really push you [...] I feel like there’s a mastermind.” (CA, February, 184). When it came to learning communities, PB thought “it just helped balance [her] life a little more [...] it just made it easier (PB, August, 223). To many, the design and purpose of learning communities was not fully realized, but seemed beneficial nonetheless. Before MT started college and entered his first learning community, he “was on a different path [...] and can’t say specifically how [learning communities] directed [him], but it directed [him] along a better path”

(MT, February, 296). *Masterminded Blueprints* are the design of learning communities and the courses they entail, including the planned experiences for both first-year seminar and learning community courses. The building term “blueprints” signifies that the theme and subthemes reflect the building of learning community structures, course linkages and programming completed by learning community administration. In addition, it reflects the elements from planning that learning community and first-year seminar faculty conduct, individually and in teams, before the semester and learning community begins.

Learning Community Structures

Participants referred to administrative decisions, structures, and programs within their FYLCP experiences that led to higher levels of engagement. The structures and programs that seemed to suggest increased engagement included support from professional first-year seminar faculty, participation in major-specific learning communities, and First-Year Symposium.

First-year seminar faculty teaching experience was identified as impactful to participant recollections of FYLCP participation. As explored in Chapter Two, the FYLCP began hiring professional track faculty to teach first-year seminar based on evidence that first-year students benefited more from full-time first-year seminar faculty (Jozwiak & Hartlaub, 2010). Suggesting the findings still apply, participants found first-year seminar faculty who had a history teaching in learning communities and in teaching first-year seminar with the connected learning community content to be more engaging. From her two-semester learning community experience, SA thought that because “both [first-year seminar professors] had their doctor degrees ... they kn[ew] how to engage the students” (SA, February, 180). JT felt her professional first-year seminar professor’s prior knowledge and ability to guide her in what she needed to know to be successful on exams in linked courses led to a learning community that was “very

greatly intertwined” (JT, August, 73). In the following semester, JT felt less engaged by her less experienced first-year seminar professor who she felt was not as knowledgeable about the content which made her less successful in helping students prepare for linked courses. To JT, this experience felt like “the blind were leading the blind” (JT, August, 73). Forthcoming themes will reveal the ways in which participants found strong connections to their first-year seminar professor, which they implied are better supported by experienced first-year seminar faculty.

First-Year Symposium was another administrative and structural component of the FYLCP that participants remembered as important to their experience. At the end of the fall semester, first-year students are expected to prepare a short presentation about a concept they have explored in their learning community for First-Year Symposium. Presentations are completed both individually or in teams and are typically in poster or electronic format. The format of the symposium is similar to that of a poster session at an academic conference or a science fair. Participants perceived First-Year Symposium as an opportunity to be competitive with their peers and to learn to work together. RK recognized the value of “just being put out there to present what [they] did research on definitely was good and was good experience” (RK, February, 227). PB thought that because all first-year students were required to participate, there was a calming factor. Being surrounded by her peers in an intimidating setting helped her to see everybody was “in this together” (PB, August, 198). Because of the challenge posed in completing a project for First-Year Symposium, AB was thankful her peers “learn[ed] how to work together in that aspect” (AB, August, 29). Finally, MT and his friends turned it into a competition and thought that it “was pretty nice to have something like that” (MT, February, 231).

Participants were thankful for the support offered in first-year seminar leading up to the First-Year Symposium. AR recalled that practicing for the event “with [her] seminar leader in a private setting where she could correct [her] without humiliating [her] in front of the entire class [...] was really important” (AR, August, 193).

SH saw her First-Year Symposium experience as a direct benefit to her communication skills and thought it helped to prepare her for an interview she had earlier in the day.

I feel like symposium made it lot easier to talk to future employers [...] Today I had an interview and [the practice] just helped cause [at First-Year Symposium] a lot of people just came up to me and were like what’s your thing about and I had to explain my section. (SH, February, 241)

Instead of presenting at First-Year Symposium, AL was required to view her peers work and take notes. She found that by walking around and viewing student work, she made connections with other first-year students. “I went up to like a group of people and said “so tell me about your poster” and I actually made a lot more friends just talking and asking them what is your thing about” (AL, February, 233).

Overall, participants found that First-Year Symposium helped them to practice important skills like collaboration and oral communication. They also recognized that it gave them a space to share and learn from their peers.

As another administrative and structural component of the FYLCP, participants made many references to the impact major-specific learning communities had on their academic journeys. The reported values of major-specific learning communities included support in evaluating their graduation goals and connections to major-specific work ethic and faculty. JT credited the major-specific science learning community section with helping her realize that she

was pursuing the wrong major. She entered the university as a biology major, but, from her participation in the pre-professional science learning community, she quickly realized it was not a good choice for her.

At first I was going to be a bio major, but once I took [the pre-professional science learning community], because I was with other people, I was seeing how they were thinking, kind of, and what type of setting I would eventually in the future be in and it opened my eyes to that. Maybe that actually wasn't what I wanted. (JT, August, 126)

Even though science ended up not being the path she pursued, her major-specific learning community helped her to discover communication as a field of study. SH found theatre as new degree path she was interested in following from her enrollment in a theatre-specific first-year seminar course embedded within a general education political science learning community.

So I feel like being in the first-year seminar really helped me see [the bonds of the theatre department] because like all of the theater students were in it together and they would all be like hey so this is due and they were all like really involved with it so I feel like that really helped me realize what I wanted to do and gave me the confidence to like go for it [...] So I became some of the theater major student's friends. And that made me want to change my major too. (SH, February, 300)

More than just helping SH realize she was pursuing the wrong major, the learning community demonstrated to her that feelings of social connectedness are important and that they should be present in potential career paths.

In addition, the faculty in major-specific learning communities opened doors for participants to make connections with their upper division, major-specific faculty. When asked about how learning communities helped to encourage relationships with faculty, SA described an

experience with the faculty in the pre-professional science learning community to reaffirm her goals as a scientist. Without the urging of her first-year seminar professor, she may have never reached out to her biology professor who she now identifies as an important mentor in her field of study.

My second seminar teacher, I like approached her about stuff I was going through professionally wise. [...] cause she seemed more approachable than my biology teacher [...] And she was like, “you know as much as I’d love to help you, why don’t you go talk to your biology professor?” [...] [Meeting with the biology professor] became like a weekly thing where we’d sit down and do like annotate articles together and then it became like last fall semester I took a senior class with him as a sophomore [...] and I loved that class and he became almost like a mentor to me to figure out what I wanted to do, but had she not told me, I would have never gone to [the biology professor]. (SA, February, 219)

Not only did SA appreciate the insight her learning community gave her into forming relationships with biology faculty, she recalled the intense rigor of her major-specific learning community courses adding to her first-year experience. SA explained that the challenging assignments in her pre-professional science learning community “made [her] have a drive” (SA, February, 180) that she continues to use to achieve her academic goals.

The outcomes of major-specific learning community participation such as discovering new career paths and creating bonds with like-minded individuals are similarly represented by overall FYLCP participation. However, the unique feature of the structure of major-specific learning communities gives students a career-specific commonality and intentional shared experience with which to begin integrating their college experience.

Participants recognized three important “masterminded” administrative structures in the FYLCP; professional development to support the development of experienced first-year seminar faculty, the operation of First-Year Symposium at the end of the first semester, and the configuration of learning communities built for major-specific populations. These components can be considered some of the foundational administration blueprints of engaging learning communities recognized by participants. Next the ways in which learning community faculty and courses engaged participants will be explored.

Learning Community Planned Experiences

In addition to administrative structures, *Masterminded Blueprints* represents the structural decisions faculty make about the operation of their courses within learning communities. Participants recalled specific practices in their linked learning community courses that engaged them as students. *Learning Community Planned Experiences* is an overview of what participants revealed to be key elements of engagement. These experiences included faculty and student interactions, assignments that made explicit real world connections, and activities that were designed with a high level of expectation, which are all student-centered teaching pedagogies. The “planned experiences” are the “blueprints” faculty construct before the beginning of the first day like a syllabus or course plan. *Learning Community Planned Experiences* call for faculty to adopt learner-centered teaching philosophies, which is why they are “masterminded.”

Participants appreciated faculty who embedded opportunities or activities in their courses that supported faculty and student interactions. When participants were encouraged by their learning community faculty to meet with them outside of class they were surprised by their welcoming and helpful nature. Participants recalled enjoying assignments where learning communities required students to visit faculty office hours as part of an assignment. MT found

his office hours' experience with his learning community history professor "kind of cool because [they] just sat there and talked for a little while and hung out for like twenty minutes or whatever and got to know [each other]" (MT, February, 213). The result of this encounter led MT to see faculty in a different light.

[The learning community] kind of broke the ice as far as relationships with the professors cause I had always seen professors as almost like antagonist almost. But they're people obviously so the learning community... they weren't as I don't want to say like crass...they weren't as intimidating...the learning community part helped with that. (MT, February, 167)

AR also enjoyed the office hour requirement in her first-year seminar course because it made her more comfortable to bring up issues she was facing as a student in the course. AR thought it was helpful that her first-year seminar professor included visiting office hours as part of her grade because when she had communication issues with a member of her peer group, she felt more comfortable talking to her professor about the issue. She remembered it "really helps having that support from your professor and being able to go to their office hours so easily" (AR, August, 104).

Support and respect from faculty was something participants found impactful to their learning community experience. This important component of faculty and student interactions was brought up by KA. She discussed the respect she was offered from her learning community faculty as a strong source of encouragement. She "found [her] first year learning community professors, all of them, were putting [her] on their level almost" and was thankful because she felt like with this respect she could become "a forward thinking human" (KA, February, 172). LN agreed this treatment was beneficial because

“when you get treated like an adult, then you start acting like and becoming an adult.
(LN, February, 174).

Masterminded Blueprints represents embedding activities to support faculty and student interaction with the spirit of support and respect in learning communities because faculty must follow “masterminded” student-centered pedagogies to make meaningful connections with students.

Participants reported that opportunities to make real world connections to academic learning were an important component of learning community design. They recalled engaging in activities that helped connect learning in the academic classroom to their personal lives and community. PB remembers learning theories of communication in the context of her own personal conversations in her learning community.

Every couple of weeks we had to do a paragraph for [a communications course] and you would take a conversation you had in real life, summarize it, and apply one of the types of communication that we studied to it. So you were actually taking something from your personal life and applying what you’ve been learning in class. (P, August, 89)

In CA’s political science learning community, her professor spent time in class talking about the local mayor’s recent resignation. Because her professor discussed the event in class, she “gained a whole respect for government like how involved you can actually be” (CA, February, 286). Similarly, WL recalled an assignment from his history learning community that helped him to make a personal connection to his local community.

We had to look at three historical markers in Corpus Christi and write a paper about how those history topics applied to the global scale. It kind of got us engaged because history

is here in Corpus Christi and it reflects what the United States was going through at the time. (WL, November, 54)

Masterminded Blueprints represents faculty's inclusion of assignments and activities that connect academic learning to students' real world experiences, again, because of the understanding of student-centered pedagogies required to guide students in making meaningful connections.

Participants found that when their professors set their expectations at appropriately high-levels, they had more engaging experiences. Despite the admitted hard work that came along with learning community enrollment, many participants saw the challenge as essential to their growth and development as college students. CA even suggested incorporating more work for future students. She said "I don't want to say like in future learning communities I'd like to see more work, but it helped. It helped to bust my butt those first years" (CA, February, 186). SA also recognized that the high expectations structured in her learning community were intended to inspire her to aim for higher goals.

I didn't understand it at first, but I think my professors taught me how to go a step beyond the natural learning community in the sense that they pretty much made us have a drive, otherwise we'd get a bad grade. So like them forcing us to do the research proposals and really vigorous work in Seminar helped us learn that we're going to have to take it a step up in college. (SA, February, 180)

The ability to develop assignments and set expectations at appropriately high levels is represented by *Masterminded Blueprints* because of the precision it takes to design such activities for students. *Learning Community Planned Experiences* require intentional planning to provide a meaningful integrative experience for students.

First-Year Seminar Planned Experiences

In addition to the *Masterminded Blueprints* of learning community courses, participants recognized specific planned experiences in the first-year seminar course that led to greater levels of engagement. In fact, perspectives of their learning community experiences were largely viewed from the focal point of their first-year seminar experience. Focus group discussion centered around activities designed and implemented into first-year seminar that were especially impactful to their learning. While the recollections of first-year seminar experiences varied from participant to participant, each was included in *Masterminded Blueprints* because they required intentional planning by the first-year seminar faculty member to be included into course curriculum.

Participants valued first-year seminar when time was spent enhancing their understanding of content in linked courses. In some cases, this meant students appreciated exam review activities to support their success in linked courses. For example, MA recalls preparing for Kahoot in first-year seminar and that students went “home and stud[ied] to make sure we were number one” (MA, November, 56). Kahoot is an online service where instructors can pose multiple choice questions for students to simultaneously answer using computers or smart phones. The flexibility of first-year seminar to support the linked courses was something PB found beneficial to her experience.

My seminar class was very engaging because he would try and figure out, like okay, you have these two other classes so what’s going to help you and what can I do and then he’d like adjust what he was doing based on that. So one day we’d have a review that was a game that we could all do that would help people become more engaged. (PB, August, 59)

AB saw the two hours she dedicated to first-year seminar each week as an asset in deepening her learning experience with the learning community courses. Some days she saw the support as traditional studying, on others she found conversations about the content to help her process her understanding of linked course content.

[First-year seminar] is like two hours... So it's like a really good two hours you have to study. It kinda ... Not really study, but basically the more you see the information, the more you are going to retain it. (AB, August, 113)

Similar to AB, AR appreciated the time spent in first-year seminar going over concepts she was expected to understand in her linked courses. Her comment below reinforces the idea AB began above in that conversations about course content lead to deeper interpretations and meaning of course content. She thought spending time on that was a great way for first-year seminar to support her in the learning community.

My first semester in my learning community, we had history and communication. For history, we'd have to read novels. I'd go home and read chapters and then I'd come to Seminar. Instead of not doing anything with that, we'd have a full-on discussion about it. You know you can read something and you can read it twice or three times and still not comprehend it. But the nice thing out that was that like our seminar teacher and other students put in their input so then we/ I was able to see, oh that's the interpretation of the reading, which I think that was really helpful. (AR, August, 67)

In addition to deeper understanding, first-year seminar as a check for understanding was a valuable experience for JT. She found the low-stakes assessment opportunities to test for understanding in her first-year seminar class as an effective way to keep track of how well she was understood linked course content.

[My Seminar professor] would make sure that if you didn't understand it, she would always make herself available for me to go in and ask her something related to Chemistry. She also would do a quiz so you have to actually engage because not that she would grade it, but that would let you know where you stood for the test that next day. The questions that were given to her. Her and the professor were very greatly intertwined. (JT, August, 73)

First-year seminar as the integrative anchor of learning communities falls under *Masterminded Blueprints* because of the constant collaboration and flexibility required of the professor to help students successfully integrate their understanding to other academic and social contexts.

Participants liked when first-year seminar embedded activities to support self-care and management. When asked how being in first-year seminar impacted her learning, RK recalled her first-year seminar professor using class time to help students manage their time more effectively and practice self-awareness. RK discovered “in college, there are ... so many distractions, especially if you work or you have extracurricular activities. You kind of get lost in it. So [the first-year seminar professor] was like there to like guide us [with time management activities] to make sure we were like doing everything correctly” (RK, February 155). Her first-year seminar professor's emphasis on mindful moments in first-year seminar helped her to “calm down and relax” and become “a more self-aware person” Finally, RK appreciated help she received with issues surrounding time management from her first-year seminar professor.

Well first she was like draw your day to day life and what you do. And then she also put what do you want to do? And she also set time to go party or hang out with friends. And

she basically printed us all calendars for the month to just write down and pre-plan everything with us. (RK, February, 320)

KA and MT also spoke coming closer to self-actualization from their participation in learning communities, but RK was the only one that highlighted activities supported by her first-year seminar experience. Self-care activities are an option that first-year seminar faculty might include in their semester “blueprints.”

Participants found activities of support teamwork as a way first-year seminar increased their levels of engagement. They noted a distaste for working on projects in teams because of the challenges they present, but also recognized the experience as valuable to their future. The way first-year seminar professors guided them with teamwork strategies helped students feel more comfortable working in teams.

For both of my seminar professors, they both were like I need to see documentation so that would force the people who didn’t want to be there to actually have to come and have to participate. It made them more accountable. That way it wasn’t just one person’s ideas were out there...It forced everyone to participate. (JT, August, 98)

Career-focused activities were another way participants found first-year seminar to increase the impact of their learning community. SA remembered an activity asking her to think about her passions which was significantly influential to her success. In this activity, students were asked to go to the board and draw a visual representation of who or what they want to help after college. This forces students to think beyond their initial goals of economic security as their main priority. By asking students to draw who they expect to help in their lifetime, it also forces them to slow down to consider implications of their career choice. In this activity, the career choice becomes less abstract and more connected to their life experience. In this process and in

similar activities where students discussed their goals with one another, SA recalled students who “ended up going different routes” and she “thought that was pretty cool” (SA, February, 141).

Participants appreciated the support in first-year seminar for academic advising. They found it beneficial to receive registration support from both first-year seminar faculty and advisors. An administrative task in the FYLCP is to assign each first-year seminar section with at least one academic advisor who is available for visits and for faculty and student questions. First-year seminar faculty reminders about registration dates and who students should talk to if they had questions about their course load helped OB feel prepared and knowledgeable about her degree plan. Time spent with her advisor during first-year seminar encouraged AR to take on a heavier course load and have confidence in herself.

While enrolled in the LC, I loved having the advisors visit during registration. Advisors visiting during registration is awesome! I benefited from them walking through step-by-step on how to register for classes. Advisors also motivating us to register for bigger loads from what we think we can handle. For example, when registering for my second semester of college, I was terrified to take more than one STEM class a semester. My advisor encouraged me to sign up for Chemistry and Biology together in one semester. Doing this, I learned how strong I really am and how successful I can be. I think when students are encouraged to take on challenges they perform better because they realize how strong they really are. (AR, Reflection, 26)

Many faculty have incorporated projects in their first-year seminar course to encourage students to become socially integrated to the campus community. Participants recalled positive experiences from this requirement.

So our seminar leader made us go to an event every single month. Whether we went to one or all of them. I felt like that was really cool because, one, we got a grade for it and we had to reflect on it. Two, we were able to meet more people outside of our seminar or we had somebody to go with from seminar. Our whole group would, my little friend clique in my seminar class, we'd go to these events and then we'd like talk about it and how we were going to write about it. I feel like that's really neat when your seminar teacher will also not only want you to focus on academics, but also wants you to focus on the social aspect of college. (AR, August, 181)

The elements of first-year seminar that participants recalled are not consistent in each student experience, but were included to reflect what students described while thinking about the best of their first-year seminar experience. According to students, first-year seminar faculty should consider incorporating opportunities and activities to support integrative learning, self-care, teamwork, careers, registration, and social engagement within their *Masterminded Blueprint*.

According to participants, the *Masterminded Blueprints* theme asserts that there are important administrative and pedagogical decisions to be made about programs and student learning outcomes for learning communities to be engaging.

Islander Accountability Group

The *Islander Accountability Group* represents perspectives of first year accountability structured into learning communities and the first-year seminar curriculum where students established relationships with mentors, friendships, and received benefits in pursuit of a university identity. Accountability groups exist to support members who

have a common and specific goal. Participants found the *Islander Accountability Group* to helped them find a secure place within the university. Within the *Islander Accountability Group*, participants recognized the first-year seminar faculty as the accountability *Leader* and their peers and sometimes their peer mentor as their accountability *Partners*.

The first year of college often poses surprising challenges for hopeful high-school graduates. Tinto (1993) argued that navigating student success should be shared between the institution and new students. With the new responsibility of juggling course work, developing new relationships, and, in many cases, learning to live outside of their parents' homes for the first time, participants recognized the embedded support group in first-year seminar was essential to their success at the university. They found learning communities, particularly their first-year seminar course, to be a place where they received individualized attention and formed relationships with their professors and peers.

An accountability group offers a space of comfort for members and can support individuals to persist to successful completion of college courses and graduation. SA discovered that she was more likely to accept challenges from her first-year seminar and learning community professors because they were not her parents.

So it's having somebody else really engage you in more of an education setting to where they understand what your goal you're trying to reach so they can push you easier than your parents [...] it's better to take that advice from somebody you can relate more to because your parents have been telling you stuff your entire life. So hearing it from a different set of people, it's like okay well it's not just my parents, it's multiple people

wanting to have me do better. I think that's pretty cool about the learning community.
(SA, February, 330)

When asked how learning communities influenced the way participants interacted with others, RK suggested First-year seminar felt “like a homeroom for high school” where she felt comfortable and nurtured (RK, February, 178). Participants cited the reality of first year dropout rates, but felt “the seminar [...] kept [them] all together” (WL, November, 124). While learning communities fostered accountability, most participants cited their first-year seminar professor as their main support and motivator.

Leader

For an accountability group to provide nurture and comfort for its members, there must be a designated leader who facilitates meetings and activities associated with the pursuit of an established common goal. This person builds relationships with all members to help keep them accountable to their goal. Within the *Islander Accountability Group*, the first-year seminar professor was cited as the main leader for the accountability group who organized opportunities for students to build their network of support at the university.

For many participants, the first-year seminar professor became their first mentor because of the time allocated for faculty-student relationships. One reason for this was the “one-on-one time” participants felt they had with their professor which helped form more personal and helpful relationships (MA, November, 180-181). Students perceived professor availability as a major factor of their engagement.

My second seminar teacher was like really available. Not only during office hours, but I don't know. She just seemed really approachable and you could ask her a question no

matter what it was. Along with teaching you how to be a college student, she helped just coming in to this new world with being alone. (LN, February, 161)

The perceived level of availability of the first-year seminar professor led participants to feel as though were given individualized support for things like goal realignment, motivation, and personal care. For example, MA found herself struggling to adjust to the expectations of a university student. After her first-year seminar professor began noticing her absences, her professor requested a one-on-one meeting and “was able to explain better ways to study and time management and things [she] hadn’t necessarily gotten the hang of and was very helpful like that” (MA, November, 180-181). MT recalled his first-year seminar professor recognizing his lack of a college mindset so “she helped [him] accordingly and helped [him] get through and learn more (MT, February, 331). PB’s first-year seminar professor spent time working with students to maintain mental health through personal awareness. She remembered him telling her “you need to know what you’re good at, what you want to do, and your goals,” which helped her to focus on what she really wanted from her education (PB, August, 249). Further, AB credited her first-year seminar professor with helping her to discover her heart was not in nursing so she set a newer and more inspiring goal.

Participants acknowledged that the individual attention from first-year seminar faculty was nonjudgmental, which led them to feel more comfortable in the university setting. KA remembered that her first-year seminar professor was “really good about making sure that even though you have more needs or a little more of a struggle starting out, you’re not any lesser” (KA, February, 339). From this treatment, KA discovered that she could become “great or even better than [she thought].

The mentor relationship established by the first-year seminar professor led participants to sometimes feel particularly close to their professors. AR considered her first-year seminar professor to be like a parent in her first year of college.

I got really close to my seminar teacher. I go to her if I have any problems. You know problems at home, problems with friends, problems at work[...]that really helps in feeling like you have somebody. A school parent. Somebody there to help you. (AR, August, 131)

For many, the first-year seminar professor is the first person they ask when they need a letter of recommendation. AB was confident that “if she ever need[ed] a letter of recommendation, she [would] go to her first-year [seminar professor]” because they would know more about what to write for her than most of her other professors (AB, August, 138).

Partners

Accountability groups are made up of several members so that pairs can branch off to form accountability partnerships. In an accountability partnership, two or more people coach each other based on a commitment they have each made to one another. In some partnerships, one partner is more knowledgeable about a process than the other and can provide support to the other(s). In his model, Tinto (1993) emphasizes the importance of social connections for college success. Participants found social connections in the form of friendships occurring within their first-year seminar classes. Participants recalled the structure of first-year seminar and learning communities as something that helped them to make their first connections to lifelong friendships.

First-year seminar is a smaller student cohort, or accountability group, from which students are more likely to make connections. CA remembered that “it was nice

knowing somebody right off the bat [from] introductions on the first day in the seminar class” (CA, February, 163). She knew first hand [which] five [would become her] best buds.” AR compared her ability to form partnerships with other students in the FYS/LC structure versus courses outside of her learning community.

In your standalone classes, it’s so hard to make friends. Because in seminar you sit down and you say “Hi. My name is blah blah blah. I’m from here.” And you can relate to people and in your [linked] large lectures. You don’t have that [in standalone classes]. So I feel like seminar really does help you, you know, make friends. (AR, August, 144)

OB agreed that first-year seminar “allowed [her] to make a good friend group that [she] could count on” and “because it’s a smaller classroom, people felt more comfortable talking to other people and reaching out if they needed help and stuff” (OB, November, 84).

Participants also credited the overall FYS/LC structure as one of the key factors to the bonds they made with their peers. In addition to making their initial connections in first-year seminar, the other embedded learning community structures enhanced the friendships they developed.

Being in all three classes with the same group of people, you weren’t always alone when you went to your large lecture class. There were people from your SI session or from your other class so you all got the same things. And since we were all scared freshmen, we were all having the same struggles. We were all having trouble studying so we’d all get together. We’d have quizzes and all get together and quiz each other before. Then we’d take it and call each other to see how everybody did. (MA, November, 76)

PB found the bonds created from this structure her accountability group by stating that first-year seminar and learning communities were “really good in keeping [her] accountable” (P, August, 154). Her accountability partnerships helped each other by:

Getting notes from each other and being able to just text each other and being like “Oh hey... Did you get this? Do you know what happened?” Or if somebody wasn’t there for one period, you’d be like “Are you okay?” (PB, August, 154)

CA appreciated that her accountability partnerships made up of students in her first-year seminar course who were nursing majors. For her, “it was [her] and those five buddies and they were all nursing majors. [They] were all going through this together and were all pushing each other to get further and to get those better grades” (CA, February, 165). LN’s accountability partnership went beyond striving for his academic goals as a first-year college student and included leisure. In his first-year seminar group, LN made friends with a peer because he “recognized him from around and [he] wanted to study with somebody” (LN, February, 192). LN remembers studying “with him once and after that [they] played pool like every night.”

For some participants, the first-year accountability groups have extended past their first-year experience. WL is “friends with the people in [his] seminar from last year. Some of them transferred, but [they] still talk to each other” (WL, November, 88). MT also made accountability partnerships that lasted beyond his first year. She and her partners are “in the same classes together again. It’s like [they] all have each other’s back and if [they] hadn’t gone into that learning community, [she] wouldn’t have met those awesome friends” (MA, November, 86).

With accountability groups, members are best supported when they are given the chance to succeed. MT was particularly grateful for the opportunities his learning communities created for him.

I would say the learning communities, is what it sounds like. It's a community. If I didn't have the communities in the first two semester, I probably wouldn't even be here right now because they kind of gave me chances. You know. You know I had to take my second chance, third chance, fourth chance maybe. But the point is that, she's going to help me get through it as long as I'm willing. So that was really helpful. (MT, February, 143)

In addition to forming accountability bonds with their peers, some participants identified peer mentors as somebody with whom they could create partnerships. Beginning in spring 2017, the FYLCP partnered with the Center for Student Engagement and Success (CASA) to incorporate peer mentors into the learning community design. Each first-year seminar section was assigned a peer mentor to help students make academic and social connections to the campus. In separate focus groups, participants remembered the program being beneficial to their success as students. AR argued "some students feel more comfortable talking to somebody who is more their age versus somebody who is a little bit older" in support of the peer mentor program (AR, August, 94). She liked that, during her first-year, the peer mentor "did the same learning community [she] did" and could hold added exam review sessions for their chemistry final, which "was one of the hardest tests [she had] ever taken in her life." AB's peer mentor had not previously enrolled in her learning community, but liked that he was able to help make her schedule for the following semester (AB, August, 187).

Peer mentors were likely to help their peers with accountability issues through lessons about time management. SH liked that her first-year seminar professor gave students extra credit for meeting with their peer mentor. During the semester that she considered changing her major to theatre, she thought that her theatre major peer mentor "was really cool" (SH, February 223).

She found his support with time management to be beneficial and helped her plan her “whole day.” SH concluded that without first-year seminar inviting peer mentors to class, she “wouldn’t have known anything about them.” AB’s peer mentor visited her first-year seminar class and passed out a weekly planner that taught her the importance of planning ahead. She remembered that “he actually came in and gave us a sheet that was like a weekly planner. [...] After that, I had to invest in a planner. The planner is my life. That was really cool that he came in and taught us how to do that. (AB, August, 225).

The *Islander Accountability Group* theme represents the networks developed by participants. Participation in their first-year seminar course led to most of the connections discussed. In many cases, participants found the networks they created helped them to understand the importance of asking others for help. The next theme explores other ways they recognized that first-year seminar and learning community participation to transform their identities as college students.

Impostor to Islander

Impostor to Islander represents the ways learning communities transformed how students saw themselves and interacted with the university. In pursuit of their university identity, participants recalled that first-year seminar and learning communities provided opportunities to learn and practice skills that could help them navigate the academic and social environments at the south Texas university. The FYS/LC structure helped eliminate the impostor phenomenon that had many of them believing they might not belong on a college campus. The impostor phenomenon happens when a person’s success is accompanied with fear and self-doubt that they will be recognized as an impostor (Hoang, 2013). In an overview of research about the impostor phenomenon, Hoang

(2013) identified that the impostor phenomenon affects both females and males. Research about the impostor phenomenon is mostly related to graduate or doctoral students, but the underlying commonality of those who suffer from the impostor phenomenon is placing too strong of an emphasis on luck or biological ability and not enough focus on the elaborate practice of different skill sets.

In *Impostor to Islander*, participants describe skills they learned from their FYLCP experience that shifted their mindset into believing they were in control of their success in college. *Identification* represents the ways their experience helped them to feel a sense of belonging, *Navigation* includes how the ways they learned to interact with their campus, and *Transformation* describes how the FYLCP helped them to change from “impostor” to “islander.”

Identification

When participants developed a stronger sense of belonging, they felt more confident in their abilities to be successful college students. FYLCP participation led to a strong sense of belonging within the campus community. MA noted that the closeness among peers developed in her learning community helped her feel more at home within the larger university. She thought that “the community feel of being in the learning community transfers to the whole campus. So walking around campus just feels like home” (MA, November, 101). SA was surprised her lack of identify when she first arrived at the university and found that the learning community was essential in helping her find her place within the university.

When I came to college, the learning community helped me focus in on who I was and what I wanted to become. So it wasn't like you have to fit in with anybody anymore. Just go do your thing. (SA, February, 251)

SH found the camaraderie in first-year seminar for theatre students to help her feel like she belonged at the university.

I feel like being in the first-year seminar really helped me see that because like all of the theater students were in it together and they would all be like hey so this is due and they were all like really involved with it so I feel like that really helped me realize what I wanted to do and gave me the confidence to like go for it. (SH, February, 300)

KA also reported that learning communities gave her a sense of confidence as a college student.

I think after both the semesters [of learning communities] were over I felt like I knew a lot more about myself and having some self-actualization. And I felt like I was a lot more like my ideas of where I wanted to go were much more concrete [...] I felt like you know I was competent enough to make the right decisions. (KA, February, 255)

The sense of belonging participants reported from their FYLCP participation fits with the theme *Impostor to Islander* because it was a necessary component for participants to feel like they belonged on campus before they could consider themselves a successful college students.

Navigation

First-year seminar taught participants many important things about how to *Navigate* their curricular experiences. An important step toward becoming an insider of a group is understanding the rules of organization. The higher education “navigation” participants noted as especially important included knowing how to communicate with professors, how to utilize campus resources, how to reflect on their own learning, and how to learn other critical skills for

college success. For many, first-year seminar was the main initiator in helping students to navigate their campus experience. PB remembers that “in seminar they tell you to get involved and know what’s there. And then doing that...you know what [you] really like [...] and start to realize the campus” (PB, August, 239).

Participants saw first-year seminar as an opportunity to learn how to communicate with their college professors. MA remembered that “when [she was] in a learning community, [her] seminar professor was always encouraging [her] to ask questions so now it’s easier to go to a professor, be respectful, and then ask them questions” (MA, November, 97). AB also had a first-year seminar professor who also encouraged her to visit with her professors and inspired her to meet with a professor she was afraid to meet with out of class.

I can go to my chemistry professor who is not even related to my seminar class. And she was... I thought she was terrifying at first. She literally scared the crap out of me. [From first-year seminar], I learned that she is there to help me. So now I go to her office hours all the time. (AB, August, 167)

Participants recalled that first-year seminar gave them insight and helped them to communicate with their professors through email, too. MT appreciated that his first-year seminar professor helped his class learn proper email etiquette.

It kind of helped you understand that if you wanted help from your professors, you had to be respectful and polite. My seminar professor put up an email she got saying “hey I don’t know the answer can you help me.” And that was it. She was trying to teach us how to send a proper email and that was that. (MA, November, 150)

First-year seminar prompted students to utilize academic support services available at the Center for Academic Student Achievement (CASA). OB said she “use[d] CASA more because

[her] seminar teacher really encouraged [her] to use those resources” (OB, November 168).

Through first-year seminar, WL discovered that CASA exists to help students of all types and backgrounds.

The seminar professors were good at helping to funnel us to CASA for help so it made it more approachable and like there wasn’t that I’m stupid because I have to go there, but what you do when you get help. (WL, November, 99)

JT remembers first-year seminar encouraging her to take advantage of social groups. She “learned that when [she] was in seminar [...] that there’s all kinds of groups on campus that although you may not be that major, you can still be with them (JT, August, 232).

Participants found the structure of first-year seminar helped them feel more comfortable asking for help and connecting with each other. LN complained “there are a lot of people who are so self-conscious and just it’s like what’s the point? If everybody is so self-conscious then what’s the point of everybody being so self-conscious?” (LN, February, 265). Recognizing that the learning communities helped her get past her own self-consciousness, she said “being with the same group of people in those same classes just helped [her] be more social because [she had] the comfort of the familiar faces and [she was] able to talk to them (R, February, 310). SA and CA appreciated how first-year seminar helped them to build relationships with people with whom they did not expect to connect.

Seminar it helped me establish how to, I guess, not be like forced into groups, but be forced to communicate with people because then I really learn. [...] I get along better with boys because I have brothers, so it kind of like put me in a group that I did work with all girls and I did get to see that a lot of them were similar to my interests and stuff. (SA, February, 306)

CA also found that first-year seminar helped her to develop bonds with sorority members with whom she did not expect to find commonalities. She was enlightened that she could make connections with people she assumed she were too different.

My second semester though it kind of clicked in that you know [my learning community] had a lot of different people and they were all my major and they were all these sorority girls. You know it's cool to accept and learn something about another person. (Ca, February 194)

First-year seminar taught one participant to reach out to their peers for help. When remembering a peer review activity, WL stated the exercise was not “that revolutionary, but [he] would have never asked someone to read [his] stuff before that. [He] did that in the seminar and it was normal to can ask [his] peers for help (WL, November, 164). And with that extra support, AB completed her first year with a higher GPA than she thought she would have earned. She credited first-year seminar as “the reason [she] made an A in philosophy” in her first year of college (AB, August, 247).

The many lessons on how to *Navigate* the campus that participants described from their FYLCP participation are represented in *Impostor to Islander*. Without access to understanding how to go about connecting with faculty, other students, and resources on campus, a student is less likely to succeed.

Transformation

Transformation represents the ways participants described themselves emulating behaviors of successful college students that they learned from participating in the FYLCP. These are the ways that participants became different people because of their learning community participation. Some of the “transformations” include finding

confidence in themselves and in their major or by beginning to build support networks of their own after FYLCP participation. JT was a skeptic of the learning communities because she wanted to figure things out on her own. However, after completing the FYLCP program, she recognized their importance to her confidence right away.

I battled with if I liked the learning community or not because I wanted to do my own thing, but I'm really glad that I had it because it gave me that foundation that if I didn't have it, I'd probably still be stuck in biology and like failing, but now I'm happy because I had just that one class, 50 minutes, two days a week, to help guide me [...] But now I have that confidence that I know what I want. (JT, August, 291)

Other participants were also grateful for their FYLCP experience due to the way it helped them to consider if they were pursuing the most suitable degree. AB recognized that her learning community “definitely had a bigger role to play because [she] wouldn't have changed [her] major and [she] would have stuck with nursing and be applying to nursing right now (AB, August, 247). In his learning community experience, WL realized that he was pursuing his first major choice for the wrong reasons.

In the learning communities, we'd talk about what we wanted to do afterward and I decided something more selfless to me. I realized life wasn't just about making money. I needed to be excited and motivated everyday to do something so that's why I switched to criminal justice. (WL, November, 146)

From those same conversations in her first-year seminar, OB discovered her original major did not seem like it would bring her happiness. She remembered “different activities where [they] talked about [their] futures” and decided to explore other options and ended up in Marketing (OB, November, 144).

In addition to helping students find their educational purpose, learning communities helped participants discover how to select and build their own communities in future semesters. WL found his first-year seminar course as a great model for learning to connect with other students.

I went to a smaller high school so I was with the same people for four years and here it gets mixed up every single semester. So kind of getting comfortable with people in my seminar then moving on. I know I can make friends easily. (WL, November, 154)

AB took what she learned in first-year seminar a step further and found herself becoming the accountability leader among her friend group.

The friends I've made outside of seminar class, it definitely made me hold them accountable. Like hey are you in class? Even some of us like share our locations on our phones and I can be like "Hey. Aren't you supposed to be in class right now? Get to class!" And like I hold them accountable. They hold me accountable. And it's just like we hold more serious conversations. More in depth conversations. (AB, August, 156)

WL valued the connections and feeling of community cultivated in first-year seminar and learning communities so much that he "looks for the same community aspect in [his] other classes" (WL, November, 92). He thought the way students in first-year seminar all worked together was a great model to replicate throughout his college career.

The ways that the FYLCP taught participants to build an identity as university students; to navigate and seek support from faculty, students, and other services; and to transform into confident college students are represented by *Impostor to Islander*. *Imposter to Islander* represents the last theme generated from the discovery stage of the research.

Dreamwork

After discovering the benefits of their learning community participation in focus groups, seven participants were invited by email to make recommendations in the *dream* stage of the appreciative inquiry. In this stage, participants were to make suggestions about what might make a learning community experience more engaging. JT, AR, AB, CA, KA, MT, and RK were selected to participate based on their enthusiasm about their learning community experience from the focus group interviews. JT, AR, KA, and RK responded to the invitation by submitting a response through email. The reflection instructions asked them to imagine what a learning community would look like in a perfect world and to not let time and money restraints limit their vision (See Appendix B). The purpose of the dream stage was to invite participants to imagine an ideal FYS/LC program without considering how much a program would cost or how likely it would be to put into practice. The goal in collecting the dream stage data is for the design stage where it is determined which dreams are practical enough to put into practice. Participants responses provided many recommendations to improve first-year seminar and learning communities including ideas for structures and skill sets.

Suggested Structures

Reflections had recommendations for adjustments and enhancements to structures and best practices in the FYLCP. Participant suggestions included ways faculty could increase student learning. AR suggested that professors take the time to learn student names to help keep students accountable for information in class. While this tactic in her chemistry class made AR a little nervous, she found she was better able “to learn the material” with a little added pressure (AR, August, 90). KA recalled that when she

encountered experiences with high expectations in learning communities, she learned more.

Within the learning communities, when put in situations that seem daunting or uncomfortable (such as giving a big presentation, working with a large group of people, etc.), I was unknowingly being trained to face and overcome my insecurities head-on.

More activities of this nature would yield students that are not only confident but better prepared to pursue their goals throughout and beyond college. (KA, Reflection, 5)

As in Kuh and O'Donnell (2013), the dream stage participants recognize the benefits when expectations are set at appropriately high levels.

As cited previously, participants appreciated the connections first-year seminar helped them to make during their first year on campus. AR found it so beneficial that she thought first-year seminar should be increased in the amount of credit it is worth on her degree plan. She suggested that “if the “seminar” courses were worth two to three hours instead of just one and met for a longer period of time instead of just one hour, the professors could have more time to help students learn” (AR, Reflection, 5).

While SA only participated in focus groups, she expressed an important recommendation about first-year seminar. In her focus group, SA reflected on the benefits first-year seminar had on her ability to form academic and social groups. At the time of her focus group, she was a second-year student and wished she had a second-year seminar class to support her in her coursework.

I kind of wish I still had Seminar because all the people I met in Seminar all went to different universities so I'm like dang I want seminar again to help me get into groups I

thought it was really cool socially and professionally. That it helps in both aspects of your life. (SA, February, 306)

During her focus group discussion, AR recalled positive relationships with the peer mentor assigned to her learning community. To increase the connections peer mentors can make, she suggested they should consider themselves friends to learning community students and attempt to relate on a personal level. AR thought “if a student was missing home or going through a bad break-up, having someone they can relate to and talk to is important” and a peer mentor would be a great resource for students to utilize (AR, Reflection, 24).

The most original suggestion to increase learning community engagement was the desire to implement an end-of-year celebration for first year students to recognize the accomplishments they made throughout the year. At the time of the focus groups, the FYLCP was restructured into the Department of Undergraduate Studies, which describes what AR meant by DUGS in the quote.

The FYI community would benefit from a “DUGS” mixer at the end of the semester. It would be neat for all the communities to get together by majors (biology, computer science, engineering, etc.) and have a mixer for each major. At the mixer, professors for higher level courses could attend, so students can have an opportunity to meet their professors and make connections. Also, at the mixer, students would be able to meet other students in their major to hopefully form successful study groups in the future. I think the mixer should be a required event, so the attendance would be high, but also would be a good way to increase students grades in a fun and engaging way. At the mixer, there could fun activities, food, t-shirts, etc. which would make the students more excited about going, plus it would be a nice break for finals. (AR, Reflection, 8)

While AR's suggestion for an end of semester gathering sounds more like a celebration, the First-Year Research Conference already exists as a culminating event for first-year students at the end of the first year. In the spring semester, students are invited to apply to present their work to a captive audience like they would if they were applying and presenting at an academic conference. Like First-Year Symposium, all students are expected to attend, but only those who are accepted present their work. AR's dream suggests the event is not perceived as a celebration for all first-year students and could be enhanced as a way for students to acknowledge their first-year accomplishments. In her reflection, KA recognized the value of an event like First-Year Research Conference, but suggested faculty should spend more time scaffolding activities to prepare students to present at the event.

While the learning communities were successful in gearing students towards healthy collaboration with the First-Year Research Conference, more activities throughout the semester would help prepare students for this big debut towards the end of the semester.

(KA, Reflection, 5)

Suggested Skill Sets

In addition to structural recommendations, participants had suggestions about what students should gain from their learning community participation. Participants noted a desire for learning community outcomes and activities that center around building first-year student confidence. In guiding students to find more types of intrinsic motivation, participants believe learning communities have even more potential to help students be successful in college and life. The skill sets and aligned activities participants suggested in their reflections are discussed in order of ease of implementation into learning community curriculum, starting with basic

understanding of required computer software to skills to a framework from which students can understand how to manage their mental health.

One of the more straightforward learning outcome suggestions was to implement instruction about some of the computer programs first-year students are expected to use. AR found that most of her peers “were unable to use [Excel, Word, and PowerPoint] causing the entire group to be less successful” (AR, Reflection, 4). By providing guidance for Microsoft Office products in learning community courses, AR believed student experiences would be enhanced.

Another desired skill was time management. Participants thought future learning community students would benefit from more exposure to time management theories and strategies. AR found that many of her peers lacked a basic understanding of how to divide their responsibilities, which led to their failure. She thinks some basic instruction would help.

What I think should be added on to the skills we learn in our first semester (fall) is how to manage our time. When coming into college, I worked full time and took full time classes. It was difficult to learn how to manage my time, but once I learned, I was more successful. Most of my classmates had an extremely difficult time learning how to manage their time, which caused them to fail. (AR, Reflection, 2)

AR believed incorporating time management assignment and goal tracking activities in first-year seminar might save students from failing their classes and dropping out.

The FYI community would benefit from a daily/weekly reflection. For me, I write a daily reflection in my planner which helps me realize how much I accomplished throughout the week. I feel that if more students were able to see how much they are accomplishing, they will be less likely to give up so easily. Most of the people I met in my FYI Learning

Community dropped out of college or were put on Academic Probation because they felt they were accomplishing anything and that their hard work was worthless... Before writing these reflections in my planner, I felt the same way. It's amazing how small things can make a huge difference. (AR, Reflection, 6)

Even though MT was tasked with discovering the best of his learning community experience during focus groups and was did not complete a *dream* stage reflection, he had ideas to share about what he thought should be incorporated into all learning communities. When another participant mentioned how her first-year seminar had incorporated activities to support time management, MT said he wished all learning communities would implement similar support for all students because it feels time management is a skill that is necessary “to survive college and in the professional world” (MT, February, 374).

Communication and networking skills were also cited as important for future learning community students. As a communications major, JT thought more emphasis should be placed on communication in order for students to become more employable.

Not only at [this university] but a lot of universities get complaints that their students cannot get jobs because students lack basic communication rules when emailing, creating a resume and even just their handshake. I think more FYLCs should include a heavier importance on communication and being active in groups that can benefit both their courses and involvement on campus. (JT, Reflection, 2)

Other learning outcomes suggestions would be a bit more complex and challenging to implement and deliver. For example, RK suggested learning community faculty should build curricula that helps students locate intrinsic motivation. She suggested that “encouraging

students to strive for high standards of intrinsic achievement and fulfillment will set them up to strive for these same standards in their lives throughout and beyond college” (RK, Reflection, 3).

Building opportunities for students to develop confidence may help them locate their intrinsic motivation. KA thought that getting students connected to the local community would help increase confidence and combat loneliness.

Another thing that I would have liked to see was a bigger push towards campus AND community involvement. While most classes required you attend a minimum number of on-campus events throughout the semester, it would have been far more engaging if these events could be both on and off campus to familiarize new students with the area and the community they now live in. Fellow students from out of town often expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness due to and a sense of unfamiliarity with going outside campus grounds. (KA, Reflection, 5)

In her reflection, KA wrote about the community assignments she discussed during her focus group that pushed her to make connections between what she was learning and her local community. She believed that “pushing students to explore the community around them could help diminish the anxieties that come with being a first-year student teaching them to let go of their insecurities and replace them with confidence” (KA, Reflection, 5). JT saw campus engagement as important and thought students would be more likely to take that first step if faculty provided extra credit for attendance (JT, Reflection, 3).

JT thought that introducing students to a personality test, where students could answer a series of questions to identify themselves as one of sixteen different personality types, would help students realize more about their own personalities and skill sets to build confidence.

I feel that students should take an assessment like the Myers-Briggs personality test or be given a list of skills that they feel they are good with and with ones that they are not.

From there have the students be grouped with a mix of people with different skills and give a task that requires the students to display both sets of skills. From there have the students network amongst themselves and be given peer-reviews of what skills maybe they themselves could improve on or what they were good at and possibly never considered that being one of their good skills. (JT, Reflection 3)

According to RK, students need support to become self-aware and to monitor their mental health. Recalling that her first-year seminar professor encouraged students to meditate and provided opportunities for meditation in the classroom, RK would like for stress management activities to be incorporated on a bigger scale. She remembered that “being able to [meditate] in a classroom environment and classmates/peers do it together was comforting” (RK, Reflection, 7). In addition, she thought it would be helpful to implement periodic mental health checkpoints throughout the semester to make sure students are healthy. Returning the checkpoints at the end of the semester would help students “to see how they’ve grown and changed, and maybe if they need help as well” (RK, Reflection, 7).

Participants thought learning communities could increase their effectiveness by incorporating activities to help students build skills surrounding leadership, social responsibility, critical thinking, active listening, and other cognition strategies. Although participants in the dream stage did not offer specific ideas on how to better implement other skill sets, it seems they mostly described opportunities and experiences that were already discovered during the focus group interviews. This implies that dream stage participants believed first-year seminar and

learning community practices that already exist within the FYLCP were effective, but need more development.

Summary

Participants found first-year seminars and learning communities to be engaging and effective in helping participants feel like college students. *Masterminded Blueprints* outlined specific structures and practices that take place in first-year seminar and learning communities that set the stage for first-year student engagement. The *Islander Accountability Group* established that the professor and the peer connections in first-year seminar play a significant role in helping students to feel as though they belong at the university. *Masterminded Blueprints* and the *Islander Accountability Group* served as a sort of first year student incubator that gave students an opportunity to grow their college student confidence and shed their impostor syndrome before moving on to the second year and as an Islander. Finally, *Dreamwork* included the suggestions participants had to make future students find learning communities to be even more helpful in their transition to the university.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The intent of the qualitative study was to explore student perspectives of learning community participation during the first year of college at a south Texas university. Understanding that emerged from the way participants described learning community participation as engaging was the desired outcome. This study is relevant because learning communities are considered a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008), but there is much to be learned about what makes learning communities effective (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). There is minimal research about best practices and structural designs specifically within the First-Year

Seminar/Learning Community (FYS/LC) model of learning communities (Skipper, 2017; Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016; Henscheid, 2004).

The following questions guided the research:

1. What perspectives do participants express regarding their learning community participation?
2. What understanding or meaning emerges about participation in learning communities?
3. How do participants envision an engaging learning community experience?

Overall, the research questions for the study sought to understand what students found to be engaging in learning communities at a south Texas university. The FYS/LC model of learning communities is referred to as the First-Year Learning Communities Program (FYLCP) at the south Texas university and is a combination of first-year seminar and learning communities. The choice to use appreciative inquiry, a strengths-based approach to organizational change, to guide the methodology assumed that FYLCP participants would report increased levels of engaged learning from experiences they encountered in their first-year seminar and learning community courses. By asking former FYLCP participants to elaborate on the most effective elements of their experience, a new understanding of the FYLCP may lead to increased opportunities for future student engagement.

Summary of the Study

In the discovery stage of research, participants were gathered into focus groups to describe what they found most engaging about different components of their FYLCP experience. Three focus groups were conducted and included a total of 17 participants. The analysis of their responses was to discover what they found to be the most effective elements of the FYLCP. In the dream stage, four of the focus group participants completed written reflections to answer

what they believed would have enhanced their learning community experience. The hope was that by analyzing participant recommendations understanding would emerge about what could be improved.

The ways participants FYS/LC discoveries and dreams divided into four main themes. The use of values coding revealed the essence of participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs about their learning community participation and revealed why students viewed the program as impactful (Saldaña, 2011). The themes provided adequate conclusion for the three research questions that were the basis of the study. Table 5.1 provides an overview of the major themes and subthemes defined in Chapter Four.

Table 5.1. Appreciative Inquiry Generated Themes and Subthemes

| The Discovery Stage | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Theme | Subtheme |
| Masterminded Blueprints | Learning Community Structures Learning Community Planned Experiences First-Year Seminar Planned Experiences |
| Islander Accountability Group | Leader Partners |
| Impostor to Islander | Identification Navigation Transformation |
| The Dream Stage | |
| Theme | Subtheme |
| Dreamwork | Suggested Structures Suggested Skill Sets |

Tinto's (1993) model of student departure was the theoretical framework for understanding participant experiences. The model presupposes that the way first year students engage with the campus has an impact on their success. Tinto argued that the university has a responsibility to guide students to success. The current study was concerned with the sections in his model titled "Institutional Experiences" and "Integration" and sought to discover what specifically about the FYLCP meaningfully connects students to the successful academic and social integration. His model of student departure can be found in the top left corner of Figure 5.1.

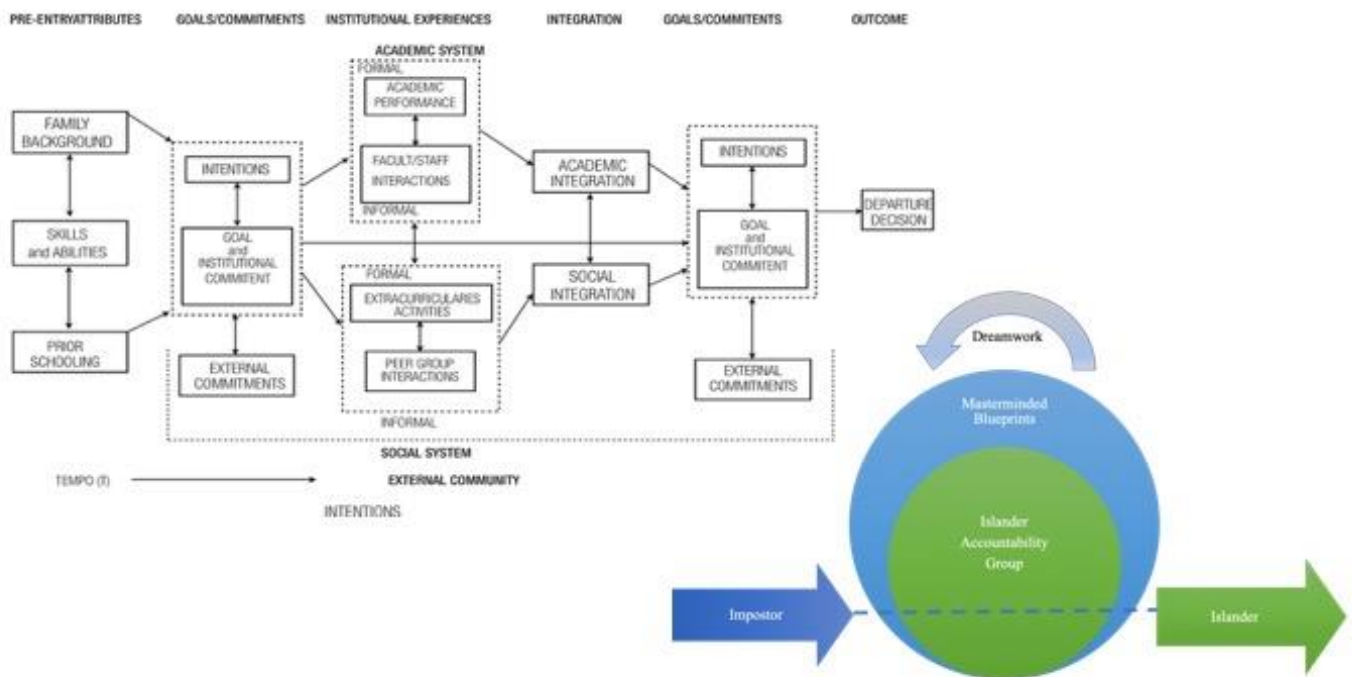


Figure 5.1. Tinto (1993) Model of Student Departure and the Visual Representation of Themes

The visual representation of the themes generated to represent student perspectives of FYLCP participation can be found on the bottom right of Figure 5.1. Participants recalled three

main ways they found their experience engaging. The overall structure of the FYLCP is a *Masterminded Blueprint* meaning that participants recognized how many of the structures and experiences are intricately planned by administrators, faculty, and staff. *Masterminded Blueprints* is represented by the largest circle in the image because it is the main structure from which the FYLCP operates. The circle within *Masterminded Blueprints* is the theme *Islander Accountability Group*, which symbolize the ways participants found the faculty, staff, and peers from the learning community to be their accountability system. The arrows and dotted line across the bottom of the figure portrays *Impostor to Islander*, which is the process of skill acquisition during FYLCP participation. The signifier *Islander* represents the mascot at the south Texas university and implies that students become part of the university after the completion of learning communities. The curved arrow at the top represents *Dreamwork*, which includes the recommendations participants had for FYLCP improvement and are funneled back by the arrow into the *Masterminded Blueprints* of structural design.

Figure 5.2 represents how the generated themes from the study fit within the theoretical framework. The visual representation of themes that describes the institutional structures and processes participants encountered in the FYLCP can be situated over the second half of Tinto's (1993) model of student departure. To Tinto, this is the period that students academically and socially interact with their institution, when they make choices about integrating into the campus environment, and when they adjust their goals based on initial experiences. Based on participant feedback about their FYLCP participation, the FYLCP can have a major impact on a student's decision to adopt the characteristics needed for a successful college student identity.

were transformative by containing certain engaging practices similar to those imagined by the originators of the FYLCP; (3) and first-year seminar, in the FYLCP, may attempt to incorporate too many student outcomes.

One of the most important discoveries was that what set out to become an understanding of effective practices in learning communities turned into a highlight on the profound role first-year seminar has on student experience in the FYLCP. The way participants described first-year seminar at the forefront of their learning community experience is typical as it is usually a “curricular anchor for other first-year initiatives” (Greenfield, Keup & Gardner, 2013, p. xxxv). While the research intended to discover the effectiveness of learning community participation, much was discovered about the elaborate role first-year seminar plays within learning communities at the south Texas university.

Interestingly, when participants were prompted to report engaging practices they recalled from their learning community participation, many responded with experiences from or feelings about first-year seminar. The term learning community seemed to be synonymous with first-year seminar. In the dialogue between the researcher and a focus group participant, it became obvious the term *learning community* means *first-year seminar* to some of the participants.

Interviewer: What about the learning communities was most beneficial to you?

MA: The one-on-one time with the professor. It was such a small group, you were able to actually wait after class and talk to her and not have 50 kids behind you waiting to do the same thing. They got to know you personally and were better able to help you. When I did my learning community second semester, I was having a little bit of problems with my grades. And she had noticed that not just in the class she was responsible for, but

when I explained the classes outside of the learning community, she was able to explain better ways to study and time management (MA, November, 180-181).

Even though MA was asked to talk about what was most beneficial from learning community participation, she responded that the one-on-one time with “the” professor was the main benefit. She goes on to describe an experience where the individual meetings with her first-year seminar professor were the most meaningful component of her learning community experience. MC also viewed her first-year seminar professor as her learning community when she responded, “my second learning community, she was like approachable so I could talk to her about other things besides the class or like the triad or other homework” (MC, February, 207). MC refers to the learning community as “she,” meaning her first-year seminar professor.

Participant perspectives that first-year seminar is synonymous with the learning community in the FYLCP has implications for the role of the first-year seminar professor in the FYLCP. If it is the case that students recognize first-year seminar as the learning community, first-year seminar faculty might have a greater responsibility for managing the intentional academic and social integration in learning communities. With an increased responsibility to manage learning community integration added to the work of incorporating individualized attention and engaging pedagogies for first-year students, first-year seminar faculty workload is perhaps too heavy.

The workload and issues of institutional respect for first-year seminar faculty have a long history within the FYLCP (Blalock, Harper, & Piker, 2004; Jozwiak & Hartlaub, 2010). First-year seminar faculty struggle to rid themselves of the lingering graduate teaching assistant persona from the origins of the FYLCP. When graduate students took over the primary responsibility for teaching first-year seminar, they also became the graders for the learning

community. Today, first-year seminar faculty are still expected to serve as graders for the linked learning community content faculty in liberal arts courses. This can sometimes cause first-year seminar faculty to have feelings of subordination to the linked professor and can lead to the perceived role of first-year seminar faculty as teaching assistants for learning community courses.

The developing professional identity of the first-year seminar professor may be related to the way that participants did not know what to call their first-year seminar professors. When participants did specifically refer to first-year seminar in the focus groups, they had a difficult time knowing what to call the course or the professor. AB demonstrated this when she said, “I think my first-year learning community seminar *thingy* (emphasis added) definitely had a big role in me changing my major” (AB, August, 247). Throughout, participants use a variety of labels to refer to their first-year seminar faculty as “seminar leader,” “seminar teacher,” or “seminar professor” not really knowing what to label this role. It could be the case that first-year seminar faculty also do not know how to refer to themselves, which could be remedied with a more specific understanding of the role of first-year seminar in learning communities.

Notwithstanding, according to participants, first-year seminar is the focal point of the learning community. Learning communities have a unique opportunity to highlight first-year seminar as the center of integration for central learning outcomes. First-year seminar faculty can lead complex and active integrative learning experiences for students if learning community faculty are willing to collaborate on a weekly basis, if faculty who share sections within a learning community are willing to build a common curriculum together, and if all learning community faculty are willing to take risks within their courses for the sake of designing meaningful student experiences.

Next, participants recognized that learning communities were transformative by containing certain engaging practices. From the research question that sought to understand participant perspectives of FYLCP participation, the main goal was to discover if the participants recognized practices defined by Kuh and O'Donnell (2013) in their FYLCP experiences. Kuh and O'Donnell suggest that the inclusion of the following elements is necessary for a high-impact practice to be high quality. The key elements of high-impact practices include:

- “Performance expectations set at appropriately high levels;
- Significant investment of time and effort by students over an extended period of time;
- Interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters;
- Experiences with diversity;
- Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback;
- Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning;
- Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world application; and
- Public demonstration of competence” (p. 8).

From the way participants described their learning community experience, the FYLCP incorporates many important characteristics of successful high-impact practices. Within the subtheme of *Learning Community Planned Experience of Masterminded Blueprints*, participants recalled that their learning communities incorporated three key elements of high-impact practices: interactions with faculty about substantive matters, opportunities to discover real world relevance, and performance expectations set at appropriately high levels. As part of the subtheme *Learning Community Structures in Masterminded Blueprints*, participants found First-Year Symposium as a venue to demonstrate their learning in a public forum. Similarly, the assignment sequences leading up to the end of the semester were viewed as an opportunity for students to

invest a significant amount of time and effort throughout the semester. Opportunities to reflect on learning and to receive regular, constructive feedback were represented in the subtheme *First-Year Seminar Planned Experiences*. Participants reported that their first-year seminar professor was readily available for one-on-one mentoring and got to know participants on an individual basis. This practice represents the inclusion of frequent feedback from their first-year seminar professor which is another key element of high-impact practices (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013).

Instances where participants recalled working extensively with ideas of diversity were limited. In *Impostor to Islander: Navigation*, participants spoke about some encounters with diversity, such as CA finding she could be friends with other women even though she formerly identified herself as a “tomboy” (CA, February, 194). In addition, participants spoke broadly about being open to other perspectives, but did not elaborate about what that meant. This suggests there is room for improvement in the FYLCP for encouraging exposure to and conversations about diversity.

Based on the original intentions of the FYLCP, participant perspectives suggest that some of the core values held by the program's pioneers remain in action within the FYLCP today. Recall that the original program “made a commitment to a particular vision of student learning that was both deep and personal, valued integration and application, and resulted from active engagement with course content and with other learners” and understood this approach to learning was necessary to serve the students most likely to enroll in a regional, public university (Blalock, Harper, & Piker, 2004, p. 125). The original intention for learning communities was to commit to student-centered approaches to teaching and learning. Many of the ways participants described *Learning Community Planned Experiences* and *First-Year Seminar Planned*

Experiences are representative of the types of student-centered learning intended to take place in the FYLCP.

Participant perspectives reveal that first-year seminar attempts to incorporate both objectives presented by Henscheid (2004) as binary options, integrating student learning and building a strong sense of community. It seems the original intention of first-year seminar in learning communities was to focus on the academic integration of content. Tenured, university faculty led the course and served as the master learner from which students could model their own behavior. Their main priority was to help students integrate the content they were learning in their learning community courses. When first-year seminar became too expensive to assign tenured faculty to teach first-year seminar, the program turned to adjunct and graduate student faculty to lead the course. From my own journey from graduate student to professional first-year seminar faculty, I suspect that the reliance on part-time faculty to teach the course led to an increased focus on community-building related outcomes which may be easier to implement than academic integration of content for the course. The FYLCP should decide which goal is more important to the south Texas university experience.

Compared to the way that first-year seminar is defined as a program on its own and within learning communities in the literature, the first-year seminar program in the FYLCP strives to achieve outcomes for a variety of different seminar structures. Recall from Chapter Two that there are several basic first-year seminar structures: extended orientation seminars, academic seminars with uniform content across all sections, academic seminars on various topics, pre-professional or discipline-linked seminars, basic skills seminars, and hybrid models (Young & Hopp, 2014; Barefoot & Fidler, 1992). From participant recollections, it appears that the first-year seminar program in the FYLCP attempts to cover each representation of first-year

seminar. The FYLCP model may be referred to as the hybrid model of first-year seminar, but the meaning of a successful, hybrid FYS/LC model has yet to be substantially explored in first-year seminar research.

Masterminded Blueprints and *Islander Accountability Group* suggest first-year seminar seeks to promote the integration of concepts and to help students build a strong sense of community. The attempt to serve students in roles defined by each type of first-year seminar course conflicts with Brownell and Swaner's (2009) suggestion to be specific about the intentionality of first-year seminar in learning community programs. They recommend that first-year seminar programs select the model that most closely fits with the goals of the program and provide cross-campus instructional training.

Nearly all of the suggested roles of first-year seminar in learning communities were reported in participant recollections during focus group interviews. Chism Schmidt and Graziano (2016) provide a list of the variety of ways FYS/LC model practitioners use first-year seminar within learning communities. Their list is not a suggestion of practices that must appear in first-year seminar for it to be a successful practice, rather it is a list of some of the practices that do appear. Recall the ways in which first-year seminar might function within learning communities.

- “Share common readings, assignments, and projects;
- Pull together concepts from other courses;
- Serve as a place to process concepts from other courses and focus on metacognition, or learning about learning itself;
- Serve as a place for faculty members from other courses in the link to visit and discuss connections;

- Serve as a place to explicitly connect personal and/or social concepts with concepts learned in linked course(s);
- Serve as a place to discuss skills, behaviors, and dispositions important to achievement in linked course(s);
- Serve as a site for community building;
- Serve as a site for career exploration related to learning community themes and topics; and
- Serve as a site for service-learning connected to learning community themes and topics” (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016, p. 22-23).

Masterminded Blueprints, specifically, *First-Year Seminar Planned Experiences*, *Islander Accountability Group*, and *Impostor to Islander*, as generated themes from participant perspectives of FYLCP participation, represent most of the ways it is suggested that first-year seminar might operate in learning communities (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016). As a collection, they represent all but two from the list. *Impostor to Islander* embodies the learning community outcomes participants reported as most important to their college success. While participants cited learning communities as the overarching system of support, they more specifically referenced the way their first-year seminar class challenged them to take responsibility for their learning. In this role, first-year seminar “serve[s] as a place to discuss skills, behaviors, and dispositions important to achievement in linked course(s)” (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016, p. 23). In learning communities, first-year seminar helped participants find a sense of confidence and purpose as college students. It guided participants in the navigation of their college experience in helping them to understand how to communicate with other faculty, to use academic support services, to get involved in extracurricular academic and social

activities, to be open, to ask for help. First-year seminar solidified participants' career pathways and guided them in the discovery of how to build their own accountability groups for success beyond the first year. Participants recognized that learning communities, by their structure, supported relationships they made with their peers. The first-year seminar professor was recognized as the participants first mentor. First-year seminar as the *Islander Accountability Group* engaged students by "serv[ing] as a site for community building (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016, p. 23). The idea that learning community participation leads to community building in the form peer support groups is well supported in the literature (Sperry, 2015; Tinto, 2003). Participants did not report that their learning community faculty visited each other's courses or that they participated in service-learning experiences; however, it is an expectation that the first-year seminar faculty attend linked courses to serve as a master learner for students. Service-learning was not something explicitly recognized by participants as an engaging FYLCP experience, but that does not necessarily mean it was missing from student experiences in the FYLCP. Lack of participant awareness of these practices could be caused by practitioners who are not explicit in the purpose and identity of their programs. Because the FYLCP administers first-year seminar in all the ways recognized in the FYS/LC research but two, the first-year seminar curriculum is likely overwhelmed by an under-defined purpose.

The second research question examined participants' understanding of participation in the FYLCP. From participant perspectives of FYLCP participation, it was discovered that the FYLCP and the programs that exist within the overarching structure may not be institutionally defined so that faculty can differentiate the purposes of the programs to their students. Brownell and Swaner (2009) suggested learning community programs establish specific goals and share them widely. Therefore, the overall finding implies the need to intentionally define the purpose

and outcomes of different components of the FYLCP. This issue is echoed in research conducted by Finley and McNair (2013) where they found that students who participated in high-impact practices were sometimes unable to name the experience in which they participated. Through the research process, it was discovered that (1) the FYLCP follows a FYS/LC model for learning communities, (2) the role of First-Year Seminar in the FYLCP needs a more specific definition of purpose, and (3) intentionality of major-specific learning community outcomes led to an increase in perceived levels of engagement.

One of the major challenges of the study was defining the learning communities program at the south Texas university in the context of learning community research. It was discovered that the FYS/LC model for learning communities most closely defines the FYLCP. In this model, according to Chism Schmidt and Graziano (2016) first-year seminars and learning communities may have a bidirectional effect on each other or they may have limited impact on each other overall. Establishing a more consistent relationship between first-year seminar and learning communities for individual teams in the FYLCP may increase the likelihood that participants are able to discuss the intentional purposes of learning communities and first-year seminar.

In addition to understanding the specific role of first-year seminar in learning communities, it became clear that first-year seminar would benefit by aligning a more specific definition of course outcomes within the FYLCP. A more specific definition could not only support the delivery of intentional student outcomes, it could support defining the expectations of first-year seminar faculty. It is not surprising that the role of first-year seminar in learning communities has become so elaborate. Greenfield, Keup, and Gardner (2013) warn that first-year seminar often becomes the mainstay for all high-impact practice initiatives. Skipper (2017) provided a definition for first-year seminars in the FYS/LC model of learning communities that

continues for almost a full page. In a course that meets for only one hour twice per week, the expectations or suggestions for course learning outcomes seems to be overwhelming the course, students, and faculty. Without a clearly defined purpose, an over-packed first-year seminar curriculum may cause students to feel first-year seminar is a burden on their time. As stated above, the FYLCP will need to decide if the main goal is to support the integration of academic concepts, to focus on building community within the university, or if there is a way to support both outcomes without leading to student and faculty burnout.

My own subjective experiences as a first-year seminar professor combined with participant perception analyses led me to experience memories of an all-too-familiar exhaustion from the amount of time and effort spent on helping first-year students on an individual level. In each theme, first-year seminar drives participant perception of engagement. From the generated themes, participants recognized the variety of roles in which first-year seminar faculty serve their students. In *Masterminded Blueprints*, first-year seminar faculty design student-centered activities, which require extensive planning and coordination in learning communities. From *Impostor to Islander*, first-year seminar guides students to adopt important skills for college success. In *Islander Accountability Group*, first-year seminar faculty serve as mentors for individual students. During a typical semester a full-time, first-year seminar professor teaches approximately 125 students. With under-defined expectations of the first-year seminar course, the faculty are likely to suffer from other stress related maladies such as compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is a phenomenon noted in healthcare professions when the caretaker takes on the emotional trauma of her patient (Merriman, 2015). This can be applied to the first-year seminar faculty in her role as her students' first confidant. Therefore, the recommendation to provide clear definitions for first-year seminar is a significant finding in the study.

Finally, the second research question revealed that the explicitness and intentionality of purpose found in major-specific learning communities should be adopted by all learning communities with the FYLCP. The subtheme *Learning Community Structures* within *Masterminded Blueprints* suggested that participants found major-specific learning communities to be an effective way to increase student engagement. This may have been due to support they received in evaluating their career goals and in making connections to major-specific ways of thinking with major-specific faculty. The characteristics from major-specific learning communities that participants described were also characteristics of other learning community experiences found throughout the generated themes. For example, evaluating career goals was something participants noted in *Impostor to Islander*, and making connections to faculty was represented in the subtheme *Learning Community Planned Experiences*. However, major-specific learning communities were reported as an important structure in *Masterminded Blueprints* because of major-specific learning community participants' ability to name their experience.

The FYLCP would be enhanced if learning community teams spent time intentionally planning their purpose and student learning outcomes. Tinto (2003) called for learning communities to have “an organizing theme which gives meaning to their linkage” (p. 2). Visher et al. (2012) called it a targeted subject. When the targeted subject was their major, participants were able to describe the learning community as beneficial. Learning communities with explicit themes not related to a major were not identified in participant dialogue. It could be inferred that MT and KA's learning community experience that highlighted the history of the local community represented by the *Learning Community Planned Experiences* theme was the learning outcome designed by the learning community team. Even though participants were not

probed to discuss themes or learning outcomes they recognized from their learning communities, it can be assumed intentional and explicit learning community themes or outcomes would naturally appear in the focus group interviews. It is possible that learning communities could provide more support for the themes or specific learning outcomes for enrolled students with more administrative support of learning community teams through investments in faculty development and by use of common pedagogies and assignments in learning community teams.

The final research question sought to discover how participants envisioned a more engaging FYLCP experience for future participants. Participants in the dream stage requested the same opportunities and activities they reported during the discovery stage focus groups, but on a larger scale. In other words, participants believed the FYLCP should continue enhancing the practices already offered within its current structures. While this reflects well on the overall FYLCP structure at this university, it suggests the need for more professional development in the FYLCP to increase the likelihood that students will encounter meaningful and high quality learning opportunities.

While appreciate inquiry did not invite the participants to recall negative learning community experiences, they reported some negative experiences. The focus groups intended to discover the best elements of the FYLCP and avoided recognizing the negative components. However, in some cases, participants managed to express their frustrations with the FYLCP during focus group conversations. For example, MA claimed that her learning communities “didn’t do anything nearly that cool,” which reinforces the assumption that not all learning communities are engaging their students in equal ways (MA, November, 56). SH complained that the social engagement activities in first-year seminar that other participants found to be engaging were too stressful to add to her already over-packed schedule. KT remarked how

frustrated she felt by the amount of time and effort she put into creating and preparing her First-Year Symposium presentation because she only presented to her professor. She remembered she “put so much effort into it and then literally only [her] professor looked at it [...] and nobody else was there (KT, August, 283). These and other potential negative feedback that was not solicited about FYLCP participation are additional justification for increasing professional development opportunities for first-year seminar and learning community faculty.

Implications for Practice and Further Research

From the answers discovered about the way students perceive participation in the FYS/LC model of learning communities at the south Texas university, implications for practice and further research were identified. Most of the implications for practice revolve around the need to establish more specific outcomes for each component of the FYLCP and the need to increase professional development opportunities for first-year seminar and learning community faculty.

There are a few implications surrounding the discovery that first-year seminar is the focal point of the first-year experience. As a long-time FYLCP faculty member, the realization that first-year seminar drives the success of learning communities through the process of completing this study implies that other FYLCP faculty may not realize the potential of first-year seminar to drive learning community success. With the first-year seminar course at the forefront of the FYLCP experience, professional first-year seminar faculty have a unique opportunity to add to the collective understanding of integrative learning. Each first-year student has the common intellectual experience of a first-year seminar. This gives the first-year seminar faculty an opportunity to increase student access to engaging and integrative learning pedagogies. First-year seminar faculty could become recognized as integrative learning specialists, or a related learning

community leader title, which could mean that they should be trained in the most up-to-date approaches of integrative learning. In this role, they could lead learning community teams in the understanding of and best practices for integrative learning. It should be noted that many first-year seminar faculty already engage in this role within their learning communities in the FYLCP.

To encourage first-year seminar faculty into this leadership role, the FYLCP would need to invest time and resources into building a leader identity into the first-year seminar position. Some challenges in this process could include workload, structural considerations, department culture, and learning community team incentives to participate. First-year seminar faculty already face an overwhelming burden of responsibilities. Faculty would need more dedicated time to learn to guide and administer learning community projects that integrate content and concepts from multiple courses. In addition to structural decisions like which first-year seminar faculty member from individual teams will be the leader, the department culture might resist adding more levels of responsibility to a role that is already viewed as complex. If first-year seminar faculty assume the leadership role in learning communities, it may not solve the problem of learning community team buy-in. Because the FYLCP is required for all first-year students, faculty can be required to teach in learning communities instead of choosing to participate. Even so, learning community faculty are typically enthusiastic about working in learning communities due to the intrinsic rewards of teaching in a collaborative team and do so without significant incentives. Although, for some, this can mean that learning community faculty are not always willing to work as a team to promote shared student learning outcomes. In addition to promoting first-year seminar faculty to the role of an integrative learning specialist for learning communities, the FYLCP should discover ways to offer greater incentives for faculty who teach in learning communities.

Next, implications for practice for learning community teams include the need to identify more specific learning outcomes for students from semester to semester. Planning teams who meet regularly throughout the semester to discuss their aligned syllabi and to work together to teach common themes and assignments are the ones who create the most meaningful learning community experiences for students (Visher, Weiss, Weissman, Rudd, & Wathington, 2012). At the beginning of the semester, learning community teams should adopt central learning outcomes to facilitate learning experiences through assignment designs. In addition, they should meet weekly to discuss how each course will contribute to the learning community outcomes in the next few class periods. At the end of the semester, students should be able to demonstrate proficiency in the skills and outcomes selected by learning community faculty at the beginning of the semester. In fact, requesting that learning community faculty incorporate the skills in First-Year Symposium presentations at the end of the semester could increase the visibility of the purpose of the FYLCP and of individual learning communities.

Some of these concepts could become realized in the development of Team Integration Plans (TIPs). The TIP would request that learning communities select approximately five central learning community outcomes, provide descriptions of experiences and assignments that would support student understanding of those concepts, and plan to assess student integration of the learning community outcomes. Also, each learning community would select a person to be the “Learning Community Team Coordinator.” This would most likely be the most experienced first-year seminar faculty member in the group who would be responsible for the management responsibilities of the learning community. These responsibilities would include the completion of the TIP, overseeing assignment description development, and managing the continual formal and informal assessment of the selected central learning outcomes.

The importance of naming the specific purpose and outcomes of each element of the FYLCP was a significant finding of the study. Specifically, first-year seminar may be overwhelmed by the number of potential learning outcomes expressed in participant perspectives. The next step for defining the role of first-year seminar in the FYLCP is to discover what first-year seminar faculty find important about the first-year experience. First-year seminar faculty could be invited to a meeting where each member writes a separate learning outcome or experience they identify as salient to the first-year seminar curriculum on a separate note. Responses could be collected and then coded into categories and themes to represent different student learning outcomes for first-year seminar. When combined with student perspectives, the FYLCP could focus on building resources in the form of workshops, webinars, or other web resources to support the teaching of the defined learning outcomes.

To build a better campus-wide understanding of the purpose of the FYS/LC structure at the south Texas university, the FYLCP leadership team could host a book study with university and FYLCP faculty using Chism Schmidt and Graziano's (2016) *Building Synergy for High-Impact Educational Initiatives: First-Year Seminars and Learning Communities*. The intention of the book study would be to help the university and FYLCP faculty and staff view the program within the context of the FYS/LC model. The new shared understanding from the book study could inform teaching experiences for learning community faculty and enlighten other campus partners to its specific purpose and value.

Future learning community research about the FYLCP should continue to use the FYS/LC signifier to make a more immediate distinction about the learning community model. In addition, future studies might explore the effect of the various structures of learning communities within the FYLCP. For example, research questions exploring the differences between general

education and major-specific, or other intentional population, learning communities would enhance the overall understanding of significant features of each model.

While FYS/LC literature offers support about what successful programs do, it lacks research related to professional development for first-year seminar faculty. First-year seminar faculty in the FYLCP have the unique opportunity to define what it means to be a professional first-year seminar professor and to develop an understanding of the professionalization of first-year seminar faculty. Some of the research opportunities about the professionalization of first-year seminar faculty may include the exploration of administrative recommendations on how to structure professional first-year seminar faculty, a discovery of best practices for first-year seminar faculty in the FYS/LC model of learning communities from faculty and administrative perspectives, a search for strategies to deal with the compassion fatigue likely faced by first-year seminar faculty, or the application of frameworks about the impostor phenomenon to learning communities and the first-year student transition to college.

Based on the level of individual attention it appears first-year seminar faculty give their students, faculty may be experiencing compassion fatigue as they spend more and more time meeting with students. Because of these close-knit relationships, first-year seminar faculty are often made aware of personal crises that their students encounter such as homelessness, sexual assault, or family illnesses. Compassion fatigue is typically reported from individuals who work in the health and medical fields because of their constant interaction with people experiencing trauma (Merriman, 2015). However, compassion fatigue awareness training from the medical fields have been adopted by counselor educator programs to help educators avoid burnout. First-year seminar may be able to adopt compassion fatigue frameworks to study the phenomenon

within the FYS/LC model of learning communities. Implementing workshops to teach faculty about compassion fatigue frameworks might benefit faculty and student wellness.

Connecting the understanding of first-year experience research to the impostor phenomenon may also give insight into programming within the FYLCP. Hoang (2013) reported research that connected graduate students to the impostor phenomenon, but there is room to explore the implications of the impostor phenomenon on first-year students. Perhaps discoveries about overcoming the impostor phenomenon might be applied to the first-year student context.

A final implication for practice or further research is the situation of the peer mentor program in the FYLCP. The peer mentor program assigns an undergraduate student to a first-year seminar course for the purposes of monitoring student performance reports, reaching out to students about student related resources through email or by giving presentations in class, or attending the first-year seminar class to form relationships with first-year students. It is overseen by the university's Center for Student Engagement and Success. Participants referenced the value of having peer mentors in their first-year seminar classes for support with their college success. According to Keup (2016) peer mentorship is emerging as a high-impact practice. Peer mentors were part of a pilot program at the south Texas university in 2016-2017 so it was not surprising that a participant in the *dream* stage reflected upon how the ways students connected with peer mentors could be enhanced. Further defining the purpose and role of peer mentors in the FYLCP and developing protocols to administer the cross-departmental initiative may enhance the opportunities peer mentors have to connect with first-year students in first-year seminar.

Strengths and Limitations

The major strengths of the study are also its major weaknesses, namely the methodology and my subjectivity. Appreciative inquiry intentionally avoided soliciting negative feedback about learning community participation. The philosophical underpinnings of the methodology assume that focusing on problem-based thinking will most likely result in deficit-minded solutions. While appreciative inquiry helped to discover what participants found most engaging about learning communities, what they did not find engaging is not clear. The participants who submitted reflections by email provided adequate recommendations for the FYLCP, but it would have been viable to include the definition, discovery, and dream stages into the focus group format and may have produced richer data to highlight what participants thought the FYLCP lacked.

The subjectivity implicit in my assumptions is heavily influenced by the teaching and administering of first-year seminar at the south Texas university. My extended involvement and role as a first-year seminar professor may have caused me to make larger assumptions about first-year seminar in learning communities than about learning communities at large. However, my extensive understanding of the FYLCP from the perspective of a first-year student who enrolled in learning communities, my experiences as a graduate student who taught first-year seminar in learning communities during the completion of my master's degree, and my role as a professional first-year seminar faculty member since 2009 gave me a unique advantage to make meaningful connections about how participant perspectives can best inform current FYLCP practices.

Based on the voluntary nature of the study, participants who already had positive perspectives of learning community participation were more likely to volunteer. However, this

may not be a significant limitation based on the intent of the study to discover how students perceive the FYLCP as an engaging practice.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to discover what meaning emerged from participant perspectives of learning community participation at a south Texas university. The main expectation was to find that participants reported their experience to coincide with how research defines successful high-impact practices (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). In addition to the discovery that the FYLCP is, for the most part, engaging students in quality, high-impact practices, participant perspectives helped to magnify the significance of the role of first-year seminar in the FYLCP. Through the research process, the FYS/LC model was identified as the structure most closely connected to the structure at the south Texas university. In the context of the FYS/LC model of learning communities, it seems that first-year seminar in FYLCP may have too many goals and learning outcomes. It became clear from participant perspectives that the purpose of programs within the FYLCP may not always be defined or expressed to participants which could be due to the need for more first-year seminar and learning community professional development. Finally, when participants were asked to imagine a more engaging learning community experience, they mainly suggested to enhance the experiences already offered in the program.

The main conclusions from the research are that explicitly clear definitions of FYLCP programs and more professional development opportunities would enhance student experiences in learning communities. This includes providing communicated definitions of the role of first-year seminar as a course, the role of first-year seminar in learning communities, the role of learning communities to the institution, and the role of other related FYLCP programs.

The research conducted is important to future student and faculty experiences in the FYLCP at the south Texas university. With a more specifically defined purpose and clear understanding of engaging elements of learning community practice, faculty may be more likely to present their purpose to students in an engaging way.

Future research about the FYS/LC model should clearly define the structure so that collective understanding about the administration of and best practices within the model will be properly coded for generalizability. The role of first-year seminar as the focal point of learning communities at the south Texas university and that it is taught by professional first-year seminar faculty is not common in learning community literature. The role of the first-year seminar faculty as the main point of contact for first-year students and the implications this may have for compassion fatigue should be explored. In addition, the concept that first-year students may experience the impostor phenomenon could be explored in greater depth to inform the first-year student transition to college.

Beyond developing more a widely shared understanding of FYLCP programs, a focal recommendation for practice is the need for continuous and elaborate professional development and programming to support the purpose and value of the FYLCP programs that exist. By having continued conversations about what participants found to be engaging, coupled with the intentional design of learning community outcomes, faculty and students are more like to engage in meaningful experiences.

The learning communities program at the south Texas university possesses many important characteristics that participants identified as engaging. The understanding developed from the way that participants described learning communities as impactful can enhance the

FYCLP by helping it to build upon its strengths and to maintain the best practices in FYS/LC research.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

| APPENDIX | PAGE |
|--|------|
| Appendix 1: Focus Group Question Study Incorporation Permission..... | 160 |
| Appendix 2: Participant Document Invitation Email..... | 161 |
| Appendix 3: Permission to Replicate Appreciative Inquiry Image..... | 162 |
| Appendix 4: Focus Group Participation Follow-Up..... | 163 |

Appendix 1: Focus Group Question Study Incorporation Permission

1/27/2019

Re: Focus Group Questions - Hawkinson, Chelsie

Re: Focus Group Questions

Ashley Finley <ashley.finley@dominican.edu>

Wed 4/19/2017 11:16 AM

To: Hawkinson, Chelsie <Chelsie.Hawkinson@tamucc.edu>; Tia McNair <McNair@aacu.org>;

Hi Chelsie,
I'm happy to give permission as well. Let us know if you need anything else or clarification on any of the questions. Best wishes for your research!
Ashley

On Wed, Apr 19, 2017 at 4:19 AM Tia McNair <McNair@aacu.org> wrote:
Good morning, Chelsie,

Yes, of course, you may use our focus group questions for your dissertation. We give permission for you to tweak them to better serve your study.

All the best, Tia

On Apr 18, 2017, at 5:42 PM, Hawkinson, Chelsie <Chelsie.Hawkinson@tamucc.edu> wrote:

Hello, Dr. Finley and Dr. McNair -

I work at Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi in the First-Year Learning Communities Program. I have been following your work at AAC&U for several years and have attended conferences where I have heard both of you speak. I love your work because it helps me continue to do a better job at mine!

I am in the process of completing my doctoral work in the Curriculum & Instruction program at TAMUCC. My qualitative dissertation research will use appreciative inquiry to assess if our first-year seminars and learning communities possess the key features of the two high-impact educational practices we highlight during our first-year experience. As I gathered my research and began working on focus group questions, I found your study. The focus group questions that you used in Assessing Underserved Student Engagement in High Impact Practices are nearly perfect for the information I am seeking to learn from my participants. With appreciative inquiry, if you gave me permission to use your questions, I would need to tweak a few questions.

Instead of simply citing your questions, my advisor and I decided it would be more appropriate to ask for permission instead. Would you mind sharing your focus group questions for my research?

Thank you so much for your consideration

Sincerely,

<https://outlook.office.com/owa/?viewmodel=ReadMessageItem&ItemID=AAMkADZjZmMwNjhjLTk5NWMTNDhhMy1hZGJLWNjNzk4N2Q5MWJmMABGAA...> 1/2

Appendix 2: Participant Document Invitation Email

Dear [participant]:

Thank you for your participation in my focus group and your interest in the second phase of my research.

In Appreciative Inquiry, the dream stage asks people involved in the organization under study to imagine a scenario of the most optimal organization. Because I am asking you to consider student engagement in First-Year Learning Communities Program (FYLCP), you should imagine a world where learning community participation would be even more engaging.

As a continuing Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi student, please spend time thinking about your level of engagement at TAMUCC regarding various experiences. In a dreamworld, where there are no constraints (disregard limitations of money, time, attitudes), what and how could the FYLCP incorporate even more engagement for first-year college students?

- Discuss student skills you think should be targeted for development in learning communities,
- describe specific activities, experiences, or assignments that should be incorporated into the program,
- define the most engaging professors and staff (lecture, communication, composition, seminar, supplemental instructor, peer mentor, advisor) and, finally,
- identify the characteristics and behaviors of the most engaged students.

By describing a utopian learning community, you may help us figure out a way to incorporate your ideas into future learning communities to further engage first-year students.

The product of this brainstorming will be in the form of a personal academic essay. My formatting preference is APA, but is not essential. While there isn't a page requirement, the more elaborate and inventive you are with your program enhancements, the better the results of the study. An essay exceeding two or more pages is ideal. Upon your completion, please email a copy and set a time to come by to pick up your hard-earned Starbucks (\$10) gift card. The due date for this phase of research is Wednesday, March 7 by 10pm. If the timeline does not work for you, let me know and we can pick a different due date.

Let me know if you have any questions!

Chelsie

Appendix 3: Permission to Replicate Appreciative Inquiry Image

3/30/2019

Mail - Hawkinson, Chelsie - Outlook

 Delete  Junk  Block ...

Re: Appreciative Inquiry Graphic

① Flag for follow up. Start by 1/30/2019. Due by 1/30/2019.

CA Commons, AI <aicommons@champlain.edu>
Wed 1/30/2019 11:19 AM
Hawkinson, Chelsie ✉

    ...

Hello Chelsie,

Yes, you have permission to replicate the image and reference the AI Commons website. Best to you in your doctoral research!

William Hancy
Director of Operations, David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry

On Sun, Jan 27, 2019 at 4:26 PM Hawkinson, Chelsie <Chelsie.Hawkinson@tamucc.edu> wrote:

Hi -

I am emailing to request permission to replicate your image of the Appreciative Inquiry protocol found [here](#) in my doctoral dissertations. I value that your model includes the definition stage of the process and want to portray the importance of that step to my readers. If granted permission, I would give credit to your organization and website.

5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry - The Appreciative Inquiry Commons

appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu

While the principles represent the underlying philosophy of AI work, the 5-D cycle offers generative yet practical, process model for approaching change at all levels within a system, from one-on-one coaching, to team building, to system-wide change.

Thank you for your consideration.

Chelsie Hawkinson
First-Year Seminar Coordinator
First-Year Learning Communities Program
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi
chelsie.hawkinson@tamucc.edu | (361) 825-3603 | FC 120

<https://outlook.office.com/mail/deeplink?popoutv2=1&version=2019031801.05>

1/1

Appendix 4: Focus Group Participation Follow-Up

5/20/2019

Mail - Hawkinson, Chelsie - Outlook

Focus Group Participation Follow-Up | February 2018

Hawkinson, Chelsie

Mon 5/20/2019 5:04 PM

To: Balleza, Marcie <mballeza@islander.tamucc.edu>; Ringel, Catherine <cringel@islander.tamucc.edu>; Reed, Sharra <sreed2@islander.tamucc.edu>; Garrett, Catharina <cgarrett5@islander.tamucc.edu>; Ochoa, Matthew <mocha6@islander.tamucc.edu>; Worrell, London <lworrell@islander.tamucc.edu>; Huron, Samantha <shuron1@islander.tamucc.edu>; Kiyoshi, RoseTherese <rkiyoshi@islander.tamucc.edu>; Cofresi, Alisa <acofresi@islander.tamucc.edu>

1 attachments (115 KB)

Focus Group - February 7, 2018.pdf;

Good afternoon -

I hope this email finds you well. I must admit that I am a little embarrassed that it has taken me so long to get back to you as I have been slowly, but steadily, chugging along in the completion of my dissertation for the fulfillment of a doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instruction.

One of the ways I can increase the trustworthiness of my study is by conducting member checks. What that means for your participation in my study is that you are invited to take a look at my transcription of your focus group to make sure that I accurately represented what you said. I spent countless hours attempting to capture, word-for-word, your experiences in learning communities so I hope you agree that it represents your intended meaning well.

If you find any cases where you disagree that I represented you in the way that you intended, please respond to this email before next **Monday, May 27 by 5pm**.

My current goal is to turn in my completed written dissertation before **Friday, June 14**. If you are at all interested in discussing my overall findings, please don't hesitate to reach out to set up a meeting. I could not have made a claim about learning communities in the way that I have without your participation. Please know that you are such an important part of my journey and I enjoyed getting to know each of you.

Best,

Chelsie Hawkinson

First-Year Seminar Coordinator

First-Year Learning Communities Program

Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi

chelsie.hawkinson@tamucc.edu | (361) 825-3603 | FC 120

[Click here](#) to learn more about the First-Year Learning Communities Program at TAMUCC!