

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Samia Yaqub for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education presented on June 30, 2010

Title: Latina Student Perceptions of Learning Communities

Abstract approved:

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The purpose of this study is to examine the learning that occurs in Latina students who enroll in learning communities designed for underprepared community college students. The research question guiding this study is: What are the experiences of Latina students enrolled in developmental learning community courses which have the greatest impact on their learning? The research design included an interpretive approach and phenomenological method. Thirteen Latina students enrolled in learning communities that paired developmental English with counseling classes at two rural northern California community colleges participated through open-ended interviews and a focus group.

Data from the interviews and focus group were coded and grouped into broad areas. These included students' first impressions of their learning communities, and first impressions of college for new students; how students felt about the learning community environment; the contrasts between their experiences in their learning community classes and other classes; and, finally, student perceptions of learning that took place in their learning community classes. Themes were identified within each of these areas.

Findings from this study indicate that Latina community college students found great value in learning communities. The linked course structure helped relieve anxiety about being in a new and sometimes alien environment. Students expressed a need to feel comfortable and supported to learn, and when they felt comfortable, they were more apt to participate actively. Students saw their learning community courses as providing the academic support and social connections needed for them to learn.

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Latina Student Perceptions of Learning Communities

by  
Samia Yaqub

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degree of

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

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Samia Yaqub, Author

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I am deeply grateful to the thirteen women who generously shared their academic experiences with me. Each enriched my understanding of how Latina students experience college and will, I hope, pave the way to better educational structures for future students.

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## DEDICATION

To Alexander Yaqub Shmatovich  
My pride and joy

## LATINA STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

### CHAPTER ONE: FOCUS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Maribel begins her day at 5:00 a.m. Twenty-four years old and the oldest of seven, she prepares breakfast for her father before he heads to the almond orchard where he has worked for the past 20 years. She packs lunches for her three younger sisters who are still in grade school, finishes her homework, and then rushes to catch the 7:00 a.m. bus to the local community college. Maribel takes classes in the morning and works as a student assistant in the afternoon. Her weekends are spent alongside her father in the orchards, earning money for the family's rent and food. "I decided to go to school because sorting almonds is boring," Maribel admits. "I want to learn new things. I want to get a good job in the future. I want to be a preschool teacher."

Maribel's decision to attend a community college as a means to improve her circumstances is not unusual. The primary entrée into higher education for Latinos/Latinas is through the community college system (Chapa & Schink, 2006; Manzo, 2005). Nationwide, 52% of Latinos/Latinas in higher education are enrolled in community colleges (Santiago, 2007); in California this number swells to 70% (Santiago, 2006). Of the Latino/Latina students enrolled in the California community college system, 55% are women (California community college chancellor's office, 2008). Indeed, Latinas make up the second largest student demographic group in California community colleges after white women (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2008).

Many Latino/Latina students, especially those who are first-generation like Maribel, are coming to college sorely underprepared for college work (Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres, & Talbot, 2000). Two of the fundamental causes of academic underpreparedness among Latino/Latina students are the lack of basic skills, especially in reading and writing, and an "unfamiliarity with the social and educational systems necessary to navigate the path to higher education" (Puente, 2010b, p. 8).

While these causes for underpreparedness affect both men and women, many first-generation Latinas in California face additional barriers to their education. Through

15 years of teaching English as a Second Language, developmental reading, and basic writing at a rural community college in northern California, I have met many students like Maribel and learned of the pressures Latina students struggle against in their educational journeys. Many have competing identities, each with its attendant responsibilities. At school, they are students, but at home they are mothers, daughters, wives, and sisters first. The demands of the family compete with many Latinas' academic dreams. Latinas who live in rural communities with traditional Latino family values often struggle against patriarchal norms that place less value on educating women than men. The weight of taking care of the home and family rests squarely on their shoulders. Financial barriers loom large as well since many Latinas are expected to help support their families and much of the work available to them is in the fields and packing houses or as maids and nannies. Work is often complicated by immigration issues. Those without legal status are relegated to jobs with the lowest pay and the most arduous conditions. In addition, achieving legal status for many undocumented Latinas is often determined by their husbands, fathers, and brothers. And finally, for many there is the daunting task of learning a new language. These findings from my personal experience are echoed in recent research (Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986; Cuadraz, 2005; González, Jovel, & Stoner, 2004; Rendón, 1996; Rodriguez et al., 2000; Vasquez, 1982).

Given the great need for better academic preparation for Latino/Latina students in general and given the additional challenges that Latina students face in achieving educational success, is there a pedagogical model that shows promise in narrowing the achievement gap and addressing these challenges? Some community college practitioners, such as Ricardo Ramirez, Dean of Student Services at Fullerton College, have encouraged colleges to adopt teaching methods that are in keeping with the learning styles of many Latino/Latina students (Fisher, 2007). These include group-oriented methodologies that build off of the family-oriented culture with which many Latino/Latina students are comfortable (Brown, 2008; Fisher, 2007; Melendez & Petrovich, 1989).

In 2007, the Center for Student Success under contract with the California Community College System's Office released a report entitled *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community Colleges* (Boroch et al., 2007). This report includes an extensive review of the literature of best practices for underprepared students. One of the practices identified in this report as effective for underprepared students is learning communities. A well-structured learning community experience may provide Latina students with the type of learning environment that fits their group orientation.

### **Definition of Terms**

Four terms used throughout this study will benefit from explicit definitions. These definitions will help the reader understand the scope and limitations of this study and provide a common understanding of concepts that often have different meanings for different readers. These terms are: *Latina students*, *underprepared students*, *developmental education*, and *learning communities*.

### **Latina Students**

Labeling ethnic groups is often problematic and fraught with political significance (Rendón, Garcia, & Person, 2004). The United States government uses the term *Hispanic* to refer to people of Central and South American, Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Spanish background. However, this term is associated by many with colonial histories, conquests of indigenous populations, and current practices of political dominance by the United States over people of Latin-American descent (Gines, 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2000). The term *Latino* has its roots in the communities themselves. It is viewed as more encompassing of indigenous people and is often how members of these communities choose to identify themselves (Rendón et al., 2004; Vazquez, 2004). In California, a review of official Web sites reveals the term *Latino* is preferred in most governmental, educational, and public policy resources. It is more closely identified with liberal, grassroots movements (Vazquez, 2004). Furthermore, gender can be identified using the term *Latino* or *Latina*. While *Latino* can refer to boys and men or describe a mixed-gender group, *Latina* refers exclusively to girls and women.

I have chosen to use the term *Latina* throughout this study because it is a self-identified term, it is most common in California where this study takes place, and because I am able to use this term to distinguish between genders which is useful because this study looks specifically at women. I define *Latinas* as women of Mexican, Central or South American, Cuban, or Puerto Rican descent. I use the terms *Hispanic* or *Chicano/Chicana* when discussing studies where these terms are used specifically.

### **Underprepared Students**

The term *underprepared* describes students who enroll in colleges and universities in need of extra academic assistance to be successful in college-level courses. Grubbs et al. (1999) describe underprepared students as “students who initially do not have the skills, experience, or orientation necessary to perform at a level that the institution or instructor recognizes as ‘regular’ for those students” (p. 174). In California community colleges, formal assessment of a student’s academic skills in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics has been mandated since passage of the Matriculation Act of 1988 (Marwick, 2004). For the purposes of this study, *underprepared students* are those who assess below college or transfer-level courses when they enroll in a community college.

### **Developmental Education**

Developmental education refers to the academic courses and programs designed to prepare students for the academically rigorous courses needed for certificate completion, an associate’s degree, or to transfer to university. Good developmental programs address the intellectual, social, and emotional needs of student using a process-oriented approach that strives to make all learning relevant, build upon the student’s known strengths and interests, and include the student’s affective as well as intellectual and social domains. A developmental program that reflects this approach merges student services such as tutoring, career exploration, and counseling with academic efforts to promote student success (Casazza, 1999).

## **Learning Communities**

Learning communities are structured experiences in which learning is approached as a shared, rather than isolated, practice. For the purposes of this study, I will adopt a definition frequently cited in the literature: Learning communities are

any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses – or actually restructure the curricular material entirely – so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise. (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990, p. 19)

This definition is fleshed out in more detail in chapter two of this proposal.

## **Research Focus and Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of learning that occurs in Latina students who enroll in learning communities designed for underprepared community college students. The research question guiding this study is: What are the experiences of Latina students enrolled in developmental learning community courses which have the greatest impact on their learning? This open-ended question gives voice to Latina students' who are enrolled in a learning community that is specifically designed for underprepared students and pairs developmental English with counseling classes. Responses provide rich description of the lived experience of Latina students participating in learning community courses. Responses also provide a fine-grained understanding of those aspects of a specific type of learning community structure that impact academic growth in Latina students.

## **Significance**

This topic is significant for three compelling reasons: (a) There is a significant educational achievement gap between Latinos/Latinas and other populations, (b) traditional methods of teaching developmental education in community colleges have met with limited success, and (c) there is a need for more research on learning communities that include developmental education.



### **Educational Achievement Gap Between Latinos/Latinas and Other Populations**

While Latinos/Latinas make up the largest minority group of the United States at 13%, their educational achievement lags behind that of other demographic groups (United State Census Bureau, 2008). Only 11% of Latinos/Latinas over the age of 25 have bachelor's degrees, compared to 17% of African-Americans, 27% whites, and 47% Asian-Americans in the same age range (Schmidt, 2006). Census data show that Latinos/Latinas born in the United States have lower rates of enrollment in higher education than any other US-born segment of the population (Chapa & Schink, 2006). While 42% of whites and 32% of African-Americans enrolled in higher education in 2005, only 25% of 18 to 24 year-old Latinos/Latinas enrolled (Santiago, 2007). Consequently, although they are the largest college-age group, Latinos/Latinas make up only nine percent of students enrolled in higher education (Chapa & Schink, 2006). Latino/Latinas are more likely than any other demographic group to leave college without a degree (Fry, 2004; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006).

Mirroring national trends, demographic data in California indicate that Latino/Latinas are the fastest growing ethnic group in the state, and they have the lowest level of education attainment among all ethnic groups (Santiago, 2006). The disparity between the number of Latinos/Latinas in California who are college-age (42%) and the number who have bachelor's degrees (less than eight percent) is the highest in the nation (Chapa & Schink, 2006). Over 50% of the California Latino/Latina population aged 25-35 did not graduate from high school (United State Census Bureau, 2008).

This education achievement gap comes at great economic cost to individuals and society. In a recent report on Latino/Latina success in higher education, Santiago (2006) outlines some of these costs. Latinos/Latinas with high school diplomas earn half as much as their counterparts with bachelor's degrees and those who do not complete high school only earn one third as much as college graduates. Furthermore, full-time Latino/Latina workers earn approximately 80 cents per dollar earned by white workers; however, if Latinos/Latinas had the same distribution of education as white workers, they would earn 93 cents per dollar. In addition to personal economic cost, there is a

societal economic cost to this educational achievement gap. As well-educated baby boomers reach retirement age, there is a need for a highly educated workforce to fill their places. Demographically speaking, Latinos/Latinas will be the ones taking these places, especially in states like California where they are projected to represent 38% of the workforce by the year 2020. However, unless the educational achievement gap is narrowed, the skill level of this workforce will not match the needs of the state (Santiago, 2006).

### **Traditional Methods of Teaching Developmental Education Have Limited Success**

Many students entering community colleges are underprepared for college-level work and in need of developmental education courses. In California alone, 70% of the entering students are underprepared for college-level reading, English, and/or math (Woodruff, 2007). Many colleges still use antiquated “drill and kill” methods of instruction in their developmental education programs, methods that focus entirely on repeated practice of discrete skills until mastery with little attention to contextualizing or applying these skills (Grubb et al., 1999, p. 28). These methods have had limited success. In fact, only 10% of students who enroll in developmental classes without special intervention attain college degrees (Brittenham et al., 2003). Given the demographic shift that is bringing more academically underprepared Latina/Latino students into college, it is imperative that community colleges find better methods to engage students in their learning and lead to higher rates of success.

State legislatures have recently exerted pressure on community colleges to address this growing need more effectively than they have in the past. In 2007, California launched a statewide initiative to address the needs of underprepared students in community colleges. The legislature approved \$33 million in on-going funding to support this initiative. One of the initiative’s goals is to identify successful “boutique” programs, those that are innovative but small, and develop ways to scale them up to affect larger numbers of students. Since learning communities have been identified as an effective approach for underprepared students (Grubb, 2001; Grubb et al., 1999), they have been identified as a best practice in this initiative (Boroch et al., 2007).

### **Need for More Research on Developmental Education Learning Communities in Community Colleges**

There are few research studies that focus on learning communities for underprepared community college students, and none that specifically addresses the perceptions of Latina students in learning communities. This gap in the literature has been commented on by others. Bailey et al. (2004) noted that most research on the effectiveness of learning communities has occurred at four-year, residential institutions and that there are limited data on learning communities at the community college level. Moreover, a recent report by the Center for Student Success that reviewed the last 30 years of developmental education research in community colleges called for more research to be done to study the impact of learning communities at the two-year college level (Boroch et al., 2007).

Perhaps most striking is a recent review of learning communities research conducted by Taylor, Moore, MacGregor, and Lindblad (2003). In the most comprehensive meta-analysis of learning community research to date, the authors reviewed 32 formal research studies including dissertations. Of these studies, 12 addressed learning communities at the community college level, but only three focused on learning communities for underprepared students. None focused on Latina students. In addition, the authors analyzed data from 119 single institution assessment reports. Of these, 23 reports were from community colleges and 13 of these focused on underprepared students. Many were unpublished reports intended solely for internal purposes of the college, and the quality varied widely. Indeed, only one of these community college assessment reports was considered “notable” by the authors as defined by having a lucid explanation of the learning community program’s intended outcomes, aligning assessment with these outcomes, and clearly describing the program’s results (p. 27).

Taylor et al. (2003) comment that most research on learning communities focuses on easily measured outcomes such as grade attainment, retention, and persistence. In addition, there is a body of literature that explores students’ perceptions

of their experiences in learning communities. Few studies explore the learning that is occurring in underprepared students and none do so for Latina students.

### **Summary of Focus and Significance**

As Latina students enter community colleges underprepared for college-level work, many are placed into developmental education programs. Unfortunately, many do not matriculate out of the developmental education programs into general education and career programs, and few transfer to four-year institutions. Researchers and practitioners in developmental education have acknowledged this challenge and identified innovative practices to better meet the needs of developmental students (Boylan & Saxon, 1999). One such practice is linking courses together into learning communities. By creating a cohort community and integrating curriculum, learning communities help students find their place in academia and purposefully make connections in their learning. Unfortunately, there is very little research that focuses on the experiences of underprepared students in community college learning community programs and even less that explores the experiences of Latina students enrolled in such programs. The purpose of this study is to better understand the perceptions Latina students have of their learning community courses. The insights gained from the participants will be meaningful to those who design and implement learning experiences for Latina community college students.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a context for the proposed study, to substantiate its rationale, and to guide its design. This includes understanding the ways community colleges respond to the needs of underprepared students; the origins, theoretical underpinnings, and recent research in learning communities; and the challenges and experiences of Latina students in community colleges.

### **Approach to Review of Literature**

Databases in the Oregon State University Library were searched for articles and dissertations on learning communities, developmental education, and Latino/Latina students. The databases included Education Research Complete, Academic Search Premier, Dissertation Abstracts, and ERIC (EBSCOhost). The key words used with the most success were: Latino students, Latina students, Hispanic students, learning communities, developmental education, developmental programs, basic skills, underprepared students, and community colleges. Although a date limiter was not put on the search, all articles and dissertations uncovered were written in the past 30 years. All issues of the *Journal of Learning Community Research*, a journal created in 2006 to publish scholarly research on all aspects of learning communities, were reviewed for the most recent and pertinent research. The websites of several educational organizations were accessed for literature, both published and unpublished, related to recent developments in learning communities and Latinos/Latinas in higher education. These included the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, The Center for Student Success of the Research and Planning Group, The California Community College Chancellor's Office, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Excelencia* in Education, and the Pew Hispanic Center. The references cited in seminal articles led to additional books, articles, and monographs on learning communities, developmental education, and Latino/Latina students in higher education.

Since this study focuses on the efficacy of learning communities for underprepared Latina students, articles about faculty learning communities, organizational learning communities, or learning communities that focused on

academically accomplished students at highly selective universities were not included. In addition, the literature on residential learning communities was not addressed. Although these learning communities show great promise for many students, they are not common on community college campuses. Research from four-year institutions was included in this review when the characteristics of the student population studied matched those of community college students, when the learning communities studied were designed for underprepared students, or when the results appeared relevant to the experiences of Latina students.

### **Organization of Review of the Literature**

This literature review is organized around three main research domains: (a) responding to underprepared students, (b) learning communities, and (c) Latina students in community colleges. The rationale behind choosing these three domains is to provide a context for studying the experiences of Latina students participating in learning communities designed for underprepared students. Specifically, the purpose of reviewing literature on responding to the needs of underprepared students is to explore the history of developmental education in higher education and to explore the types of programs community colleges have adopted to prepare students for college-level work. The purpose of reviewing literature on learning communities is to understand how this pedagogical model has been used with underprepared students. Since this study looks at student experiences in learning communities specifically designed for underprepared students, it is important to situate this pedagogical model within the broader landscape of developmental education strategies for underprepared students. And finally, the purpose of the section on Latina students in community colleges is to better understand their experiences in higher education and to build a case for the importance of including the voices of these students as colleges design programs to meet their needs.

### **Responding to Underprepared Students**

Many Latina students enter community colleges underprepared for college-level academics (Brown, 2008). How do community colleges respond to the educational needs of these students? It is helpful to answer this question by looking first at the

history and then at current practices colleges have adopted to address the needs of underprepared students.

### **Historical Context**

Students have arrived at American colleges underprepared for the curriculum since the founding of Harvard College in 1636. Instruction at the time was in Latin and most students had no means to learn the language before enrolling, so the college provided Latin tutors for incoming students. This was, for all intents and purposes, the first remedial education program in North America (White, 2003b). Early remedial efforts centered on individual tutoring until the Jacksonian Era. This period in the early 1800s was characterized by an appreciation of the common man and an emphasis on education opportunity for more citizens. It brought about the establishment of many state colleges and universities across the country, often in communities with no secondary schools. Students flocked to these new institutions, but many of these sons of merchants and tradesmen only had elementary education. Individualized tutoring was no longer practical or possible with this great influx of underprepared students. The University of Wisconsin was the first to offer a college preparatory curriculum of remedial reading, writing, and arithmetic in 1849 (White, 2003b).

College preparatory programs mushroomed across the country, especially after the passage of the Morrill Federal Land Grant Act of 1862. In 1889, a mere forty years after the first college preparatory department was created at the University of Wisconsin, the National Council on Education reported that 80% of American colleges and universities had programs to help underprepared students (White, 2003b). In fact, the college preparatory programs were often the largest departments on many state and land grant university campuses. In spite of their pervasiveness, preparatory programs and the students enrolled in them were not popular at many universities. Looking for a system that would both address the needs of underprepared students and protect the university image as academically elite, William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, established Joliet College, the first junior college in 1901 (White, 2003a).

The twentieth century saw the nation move from an educational policy that favored meritocracy to one that espoused universal education (Cross, 1971; Richardson, Fisk, & Okun, 1983). The role of the two-year college was pivotal to this new development. The forward-thinking Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education (Alexander, n.d.), better known as the Truman Commission Report, called for "education for all," recommending that the first two years of college be as available to all citizens as high school. Open-door policies at community colleges became commonplace in the decades that followed the report (Bragg, 2001).

Given their genesis, it is not surprising that a fundamental thrust of the mission of community colleges has always been to prepare students for college-level academic work. Indeed, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many universities curtailed their college preparatory offerings and diverted their underprepared students to these new two-year colleges that were springing up across the nation. Working-class soldiers returning home from World War II took advantage of the GI Bill of 1944 to enroll in local community colleges; many were underprepared for the academic rigors of college (Freeland, 1997). The passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965, with its unprecedented student financial aid provisions, made attending college an option for populations that historically had been left out. These included low income students, older, working students, and students of color (Roebuck & Murty, 1997). Again, many of these students who chose community colleges came underprepared for college-level work. Community colleges responded by making the instructional and support services for this growing population of underprepared students a core component to their comprehensive mission (Bragg, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Latino and Latina students were among the many who turned to community colleges after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Cuadraz, 2005). The majority came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and many came underprepared for college-level academics (Brown, 2008).

The first national study of developmental education programs at community colleges was conducted by John Roueche in 1968 (Malnarich, Dusenberry, Sloan, Swinton, & Slyck, 2003). The findings were not positive. Almost 90% of community



college students placed in remedial programs either withdrew or failed. This led many to refer to the community college open door policy as a revolving door: Underprepared students enrolled, languished without adequate or appropriate support, and left. In a later study, Roueche and Roueche argued that many approaches in place to address underprepared students were designed to work with “mostly white males” and yet the students filing these programs were increasingly neither white nor male (as cited in Malnarich et al., 2003, p. 21).

These early programs approached remediation through self-paced workbooks that addressed specific academic skills, such as spelling and comma rules. Throughout the 1970s, however, educators familiar with new scholarship in human and social development turned against a deficit model of education and developed a new paradigm that focused on student potential (Malnarich et al., 2003). Both old and new paradigms still shape existing programs designed to help underprepared students. These are described more fully in the next section.

### **Remedial Versus Developmental Education**

The two terms most often used to describe the college preparatory curriculum offered to underprepared students are *remedial* and *developmental*. Each term is attached to a philosophical approach towards learning. A *remedial* approach first finds its roots in a medical model. A student is diagnosed with a deficiency and then prescribed with a remedy to fix the problem. The remedy, in this case a specific class or set of curricula, is designed to narrowly focus on the diagnosed problem area (Casazza, 1999; Higbee, 1993). For example, if a student has difficulty with spelling, she would be prescribed to take a spelling course or given self-paced spelling materials to work on in a lab setting. If the student failed to progress adequately, she would repeat the material, i.e., her prescription would be refilled. It is a one-size-fits-all approach that focuses on the mastery of discrete skills. Assumptions that are often attached to this approach include the belief that underprepared students are not as capable as prepared students and they lack the same ability to learn as prepared students (Roueche & Roueche, 1999).

A *developmental* approach, on the other hand, is holistic and comprehensive. This approach has its origins in the student personnel movement and draws from human development theories that are growth-oriented and focus on possibilities rather than deficits (Clowes, 1980). This approach addresses the intellectual, social, and emotional needs of the student. It is a process-oriented approach that strives to make all learning relevant, build upon the student's known strengths and interests, and include the student's affective as well as intellectual and social domains. Students move towards accomplishing increasingly complex tasks and becoming self-directed and interdependent. Unlike the remedial approach which focuses on students' deficiencies, a developmental approach focuses on acknowledging and building upon the competencies and talents students bring to college. A developmental program that reflects this approach merges student services such as tutoring, career exploration, and counseling with academic efforts to promote student success (Casazza, 1999).

In the most comprehensive look at community college teaching to date, Grubb et al. (1999) interviewed 260 faculty and 60 administrators working in community colleges across the nation. Of those faculty working with underprepared students, two thirds adopted a remedial approach. Some described their students as "hopeless" and "not college material" (p. 172). These teachers were more likely to rely on "drill and kill" methods in the classroom: lectures on grammar and punctuation rules followed by worksheet practice drills. In many cases, the structure of basic skills education kept students in skill-based remedial classes for one to two years of sequenced courses that did not require them to do any meaningful reading and writing. In one college, students were expected to take 20 units of grammar coursework before enrolling in a course where they wrote "actual paragraphs" (p. 182). Such courses focus solely on the technical aspects of reading and writing – grammar, punctuation, and spelling – rather than content and communication. In fact, programs that espoused a remedial approach expected students to complete remediation before taking content courses, effectively divorcing form from content and keeping students removed from the academic and occupational courses they needed to complete their academic goals (Grubb et al., 1999).

Grubb et al. (1999) also found many promising practices in community college teaching. One third of the faculty working with underprepared students adopted a developmental approach to their work. Unlike their colleagues who worked from a remedial paradigm, these faculty recognized that students came to their classes rich in experiences, talents, and abilities. They acknowledged that students had a lot to learn to be successful in academia but approached that task by building on what students brought to the classroom and focusing on potential. As one mathematics instructor explained, “I want them to be active and I want them to be reading and writing and listening to each other, as well as talking” (p. 192). A fundamental difference between those faculty who took a remedial approach and those who took a developmental approach to working with underprepared students was their concept of literacy. Faculty coming from a remedial approach viewed literacy as the acquisition of discrete skills. Faculty coming from a developmental approach, on the other hand, viewed literacy as a social practice in which meaning is made through negotiation, interpretation, and interaction. They saw the technical aspects of literacy, such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation, as secondary to conveying meaning of a text. Unfortunately, many underprepared students have internalized the reductive view of literacy as an acquisition of discrete skills and are convinced that what is holding them back in their academic pursuits is a lack of mastery of spelling and grammar rules (Yaqub, 1989).

Grubb et al.’s findings that so many community college faculty still adopt a deficit theory approach to their work with underprepared students is all the more surprising because there is an established body of research supporting a developmental approach. Roueche and Roueche (1999) recommend a holistic approach that brings child care, financial aid, instruction, and learning labs together in a seamless web of services for students. Cross (1971) recommends integrating skills training with other college activities and experiences to insure the transfer of skills from one context to another. She also insists that underprepared students must be challenged as well as supported. And finally, many researchers argue for integrating basic skills instruction with college-level courses (Malnarich et al., 2003)

## **Summary**

There is a long and rich history in American higher education of serving academically underprepared students. The demographics of these students have changed over the years. For most of this country's history, underprepared students were primarily white and male. As the country has become increasingly diverse and public policy has dictated an egalitarian rather than meritocratic approach to higher education, the percentage of college students who are female and ethnically diverse has grown rapidly. Many of these new students who are academically underprepared for the rigors of college curriculum are enrolling in community colleges, the institutions that are close to home, financially affordable, and open access. Many Latina college students fit into this new demographic.

These demographic changes in student population and level of academic preparedness have propelled community colleges to create extensive college preparatory programs. Some of these programs take a remedial approach to preparing students for college level academics while others take a developmental approach. A careful look at research by Grubbs et al. shows that many community college faculty teach from a deficit model that has yielded limited success. This is surprising given that most scholars writing about underprepared students for the last thirty years have espoused a holistic and integrated developmental approach.

## **Learning Communities**

The last ten years have seen several compendia of best practices in educating underprepared college students (Boroch et al., 2007; Boylan & Saxon, 1999; Kozeracki, 2002; McCabe, 2000; Roueche & Roueche, 1999). Learning community programs are recommended in every compilation as a best practice for underprepared students. How successful is this pedagogy for underprepared students? Is this a pedagogy that shows promise for underprepared Latina students? This section will explore recent research in learning communities to help answer these questions.

## **What Are Learning Communities?**

Learning communities are structured experiences in which learning is approached as a shared, rather than isolated, practice. One definition often cited in the literature is

. . . any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses – or actually restructure the curricular material entirely – so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise. (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 19)

Learning communities are characterized by several common practices. These include organizing students and instructors into small groups, integrating curricula, establishing social and academic support networks for students, and bringing instructors together in consequential ways (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004). The four most common learning community models include: (a) residential programs in which students live together and take common courses, (b) team-taught programs in which teams of instructors work together in two or more classes with the same group of students, (c) cohorts in large courses in which a small subset of students enrolled in a large class have an additional learning experience, and (d) paired or clustered courses in which a group of students co-enroll in a set of courses that are linked by theme. The level of integration in each of these models can vary from simply having students co-enroll in discrete courses that cover the same topics to full integration across courses of assignments, syllabi, and activities (Price, 2005).

The type of learning community that is most common in community colleges are paired sets of courses in which students co-enroll. Residential learning community programs are rare in community colleges because few community colleges have on-campus living arrangements for students. Team-taught programs are also rare because the shoestring budgets of most colleges preclude extensive use of team-teaching. Cohort models in which a subset of students from a large class has additional learning experiences is a model that is gaining popularity but is still not common.

**Historical context.** The learning communities concept grew out of the writings of Dewey (1938) and Meiklejohn (1932). Meiklejohn created the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927 to counteract what he believed was a fragmented approach to higher education in the United States. The Experimental College was a residential learning community in which common themes were infused throughout all courses in a two-year curriculum. With an emphasis on experiential and cooperative learning, the Experimental College taught students “how to think, not what to think” (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). In the 1970s, learning communities grew beyond being a unique experiment in universities scattered across the nation into a fledgling reform movement. In the 1980s and 1990s, learning communities became a common practice in many colleges and universities (Fogerty et al., 2003).

The first learning community in a community college was offered at La Guardia Community College in the 1970s. Daytona Beach Community College and Seattle Central Community College developed learning community programs in 1984 (Minkler, 2002). As of 2002, over 10% of the 1190 two-year colleges in the nation offered first-year learning communities to at least 10% of their students (Smith et al., 2004). Currently, there are 112 two-year college learning communities registered at The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education (Evergreen State College Washington Center, 2010). Since this is a voluntary registry, it is reasonable to assume that many more community colleges have learning community programs than are listed there.

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing trend to design learning communities for underprepared community college students. Federal programs, such as the United States Department of Education’s TRiO, Title III, and Title V, emerged to increase access to higher education for underrepresented students. These programs encouraged the development of learning communities as a best practice for targeted populations (Smith et al., 2004). Early adopters of learning communities designed specifically for underprepared students include La Guardia Community College in New York, Seattle Central and South Seattle Community Colleges in Washington State, and De Anza College in California.

Scholars of underprepared students have consistently identified learning communities as an effective and innovative pedagogical model to engage such students in their learning and in academic life (Boroch et al., 2007; Boylan & Saxon, 1999; Grubb, 2001; Grubb et al., 1999; Perin, 1999). Moreover, scholars of learning communities have argued that learning communities are best placed where students meet the most difficult challenges in their academic work; this is often during their first year at the developmental levels (Malnarich et al., 2003).

**Theoretical framework.** Learning community scholars and practitioners situate their work in a theory of student retention developed by Vincent Tinto (Price, 2005). Tinto's (1987) social and academic integration model postulates that a student moves through three stages in her/his college career. The first stage is separating from a home community which requires personal and social disassociation that is often isolating and stressful. The second stage is one of transition from the home environment to the college environment. At this stage the student has pulled away from the norms and behaviors of the home community but has not fully adopted those of the new environment. The final stage is "becoming integrated into the communities of the college" (p. 98). Tinto argued that this integration needs to happen on both social and academic levels, and if it does not, students will leave college. For those students whose home communities have patterns of behavior that are vastly different from those of academia, this integration can be very difficult. Many leave when they do not become socially and academically integrated into their new environment, yet historically, colleges and universities have done little to formally provide ways for students to achieve this integration (Tinto, 1987). Many Latina students come from home environments that are very different from academia, and they are at risk of staying disengaged and ultimately leaving college if structured experiences designed to foster social and academic integration are not available. Developing a better understanding of how Latina students experience college in order to address potential obstacles to their learning is a primary motivation for this study.

Learning communities are examples of a pedagogical model that encourages high levels of social and academic integration (Brittenham et al., 2003; Price, 2005;

Smith, 2001; Tinto, 1998). The assumption, based on Tinto's theory, is that retention, persistence, and completion rates all improve when learning groups are small, curriculum is interdisciplinary, and students feel connected to one another and to the faculty and support staff at their college. For underprepared students, in particular, learning communities offers a model that not only keeps them enrolled in college, but also helps them contextualize their learning (Grubb, 2001).

Assuming that the above is true, Latina students may benefit greatly from participating in learning communities. Many come from what Bordas has described as "We culture," a worldview that values the concepts of *la familia*: interdependence, cooperation, and mutual assistance (2007). The group-oriented methodologies that characterize learning communities dovetail considerably with these values. The assertions that a learning community experience helps students feel connected to each other, to their teachers, and to the institution as a whole, and that this experience helps contextualize learning guide the framework for the questions asked of the Latina students participating in this study.

### **Learning Communities for Underprepared Students**

The purpose of this section is to highlight studies of student performance in learning communities that have relevance to this study. A summary of the one meta-analysis that has been conducted on learning community research in higher education is provided to give an overview of the research that has been conducted to date and the gaps therein. Following the meta-analysis are sub-sections on national studies, pertinent university studies, and community college studies of learning communities. These are organized to move from broad-based research using national data sets to smaller studies with specific relevance to the this study.

In their comprehensive meta-analysis of learning community research, Taylor et al. (2003) attribute many positive trends to learning communities. Assessment reports from colleges across the United States revealed overwhelmingly encouraging results in the areas of student and faculty satisfaction, retention, and academic success regardless of the size or scope of the learning community programs. Most relevant to this project,



the majority of reports of learning communities that targeted underprepared students showed positive gains in retention and completion of subsequent college-level courses.

In addition to these positive trends, Taylor et al.'s (2003) review revealed areas where the research is inconclusive or lacking. The shortcomings in the research included little detail on how curriculum was coordinated across learning community classes, what teaching methods were used, and how connections among students were explicitly cultivated. The authors found little research on the leadership and processes required to launch learning communities at institutions or the planning and support needed by faculty to sustain this practice. The focus of most studies was on student success as measured through increased retention rates, persistence, and course completion as well as students' perceptions of their experiences. These key variables showed up repeatedly in all the studies reviewed. There was little research on how students construct knowledge and grow cognitively as a result of this pedagogical model. This study partially fills this gap by inviting students to examine their learning and their perceptions of how specific aspects of their learning community experience shape their learning. Students explored how connections were fostered in the learning community: connections among students, with faculty, and with the content of the linked courses.

The focus of Taylor et al.'s (2003) meta-analysis was on proving the efficacy of learning communities through extensive review of past studies. By asking the very question—Are learning communities effective?—the researchers focused on studies that yielded measurable data: retention rates, persistence rates, grade attainment, and degree completion. This study, however, looks deeply at the perceptions of learning in a select population, underprepared Latina students enrolled in learning community courses. How do these students construct knowledge and make sense of the interdisciplinarity that is a hallmark of learning community classrooms? What is the lived experience of Latina students participating in learning community programs? This study adds to the existing literature by bringing in the voices of the students who are experiencing learning communities. It puts a human face to the numbers Taylor et al. found so prevalent in the current research.

**National studies.** The purpose of this section is to review the three large-scale national studies that have been conducted on learning communities to date. The studies are introduced in chronological order, briefly summarized, and critiqued.

The first national research study was the three-year National Learning Communities Dissemination Project that concluded in 1999 (Minkler, 2002). This study of learning communities in seven community colleges and 12 universities analyzed retention rates, grade point average (GPA), and student survey data. The researchers concluded that participation in learning communities produced equal or better grades than in stand-alone courses, students in community college learning communities had significantly higher retention rates than their counterparts in stand-alone courses, and survey data showed students in learning communities enjoyed their experience more than those in stand-alone courses (Price, 2005). The results from this study are compelling because the researchers did not rely solely on one measurement tool, but rather studied a variety of documents and databases from each institution, in addition to conducting a survey of participating students, to reach their conclusions.

The second study, conducted by Snider and Venable (2000), analyzed data from 5,000 students attending 10 colleges and universities using the Learning Community Effectiveness Questionnaire to determine whether learning communities bolster student interactions. The findings indicated that the responses from all students were negative, but the learning community students were less negative than non-learning community students. Taylor et al. (2003) suggested that these results point to a need to refine the measurement tool used in this study. Since the tool was not included in the description of the study, nor was there any discussion of what constituted a negative response, the validity of the claim that the responses of learning community students were less negative than others is difficult to assess. The measurement tool used for this study has not been mentioned in any subsequent study, leading to a possible conclusion that the tool has been deemed invalid.

The third study was conducted by Zhao and Kuh (2003) using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for 80,000 students attending 365 four-year colleges and universities. The authors found that participating in a learning

community was associated with greater collaboration, academic integration, and academic achievement. They concluded that learning communities are an effective educational practice. There were two limitations to the study. First, the wording on the survey made it unclear whether first-year students who filled it out had actually completed a learning community experience or were simply planning to enroll in one. Second, there was no way of knowing in what kind of learning community students had participated.

In summary, each of these national studies yields results that add to the understanding of how learning communities impact students, both in terms of students' own perceptions of the experience and in terms of measurable gains in retention. They provide a national framework in which this new study can be situated.

**Pertinent university studies.** The purpose of this section is to review four studies of learning communities conducted in four-year institutions. Each of the studies is summarized and briefly critiqued. The section is organized by student population. The first two studies focus on students of color and women, and the third study on underprepared students. The fourth study is the only one found that looks specifically at Latino/Latina students. These studies are relevant to the proposed study because the students selected match the profile of many underprepared community college students.

Hotchkiss, Moore, and Pitts (2006) used GPAs, Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) scores, and demographic data of 7,249 entering freshmen to ascertain whether academic performance and retention improved for students enrolled in first-year learning communities at an urban, non-residential four-year public university. After controlling for self-selection variables, the authors determined that students who were most likely to select learning communities were less academically prepared than students who selected stand-alone classes. However, enrolling in a learning community boosted all participating students' GPA except for those of white women. Enrolling in learning communities improved retention rates for African-American students, particularly African-American men. The authors concluded that learning communities should be tailored to the needs of African-American males as a means to better their performance in higher education. Two major limitations of this study were the lack of

information on the students' levels of academic preparedness and the lack of any substantive description of the courses in the learning communities.

Hothckiss et al.'s (2006) findings that academically underprepared students are more likely to enroll in learning communities than their better-prepared counterparts opens an interesting question: What about learning communities attracts underprepared students, especially underprepared students of color? This study provides some insight into that question.

Pistilli (2006) conducted a study at Purdue University that corroborates the findings of Hotchkiss, Moore, and Pitts. An analysis of retention and persistence data revealed that students of color and women were more likely to sign up for learning community courses and show a more positive retention rate than minority and female students in stand-alone courses. However, this improvement did not hold up over time. Second-to-third year retention rates for those students of color and women who had participated in learning communities their first year were no different from their non-participating counterparts. To address this, faculty created multicultural learning communities. Research of these communities also showed a higher first-to-second year retention rate for students of color than their non-participating counterparts. Unfortunately, the second-to-third year retention rates were not reported in this study, so it is inconclusive whether the multicultural learning communities were more effective than the previous structure or stand-alone courses. The findings by Pistilli are in keeping with Jenkins' (2006) research on high and low impact institutions in Florida. Jenkins determined that institutions with higher success rates for students of color were ones that developed programs specific to the needs of these students.

The studies conducted by Hotchkiss et al. (2006) and Pistilli (2006) suggest that students of color and women are attracted to learning community structures. However, neither explores possible reasons behind this tendency.

The third study examined in this section, conducted by Brittenham et al. (2003), included both quantitative and qualitative methods to look at the efficacy of learning communities at a non-residential public university that enrolled large numbers of underprepared students. Over 80% of the incoming freshmen at this un-named

university took developmental reading, writing, or mathematics, and 20% required developmental courses in both writing and mathematics. The students in the study were enrolled in the Connections Program which linked developmental writing and mathematics courses. The quantitative portion of the study looked at the students' academic success, based on grades achieved in the developmental classes and retention. These data were compared to that of several control groups using Z-tests. Results indicated that students in the Connections Program did significantly better than their counterparts enrolled in regular developmental courses. In addition, these students had a 15% higher persistence rate than all freshmen at that institution. Unfortunately, the researchers did not define persistence, so the significance of this statement is not clear.

The qualitative component of Brittenhem et al.'s (2003) study included evaluations by Connections Program staff members of their ongoing work, reflections on the patterns that emerged from the quantitative data, and surveys and course evaluations by students enrolled in the program and those of a control group. Four themes emerged from these data. First, freshmen in the Connections Program appeared to have a quicker social adjustment period than other students. They showed more enthusiasm, formed peer study groups more quickly, and appeared more comfortable working in groups than other students. Second, students in the Connections Program attended class and turned in homework more regularly than other students and this trait led to better participation in collaborative activities in the classroom. Third, the students in the Connections Program reported confidence in their preparation for the next level of coursework while other students reported difficulty in getting through their current coursework. And finally, the teachers reported that the structure of the program, which included built in time for tutoring and supplemental instruction, allowed students to see multiple approaches to solving problems as both instructors and tutors worked with them. The researchers claimed that students' seeing multiple approaches to a problem was one of the "habits of mind" encouraged by the instructors (p. 22). However, this habit of mind was reported by teachers and tutors, not exhibited by students. The study did not have methods in place to illustrate students' using multiple methods to solve problems.

One significant limitation of this study is the lack of description of the students to which the Connections Program students were being compared. The themes that emerged were expressed in comparative terms: Connections Program students were more enthusiastic, more collaborative than other students. It is not known if these other students were underprepared students enrolled in stand-alone courses or academically prepared freshmen enrolled in college-level courses or another group altogether.

The fourth study in this section conducted by Huerta and Bray (2008) is the one study that focused on Latino students. (The authors used the term “Latino” to refer to both male and female students.) Using data from a survey of students in the First-Year Learning Community Program at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, the authors used regression analysis to estimate the impact of learning communities on first-year Latino students. All incoming freshmen at this Title V Hispanic-serving institution were required to enroll in a learning community that included a large lecture class and smaller freshman seminars. Most were also linked with freshman composition. The sample size was 437 which represented 33% of the students in this program; 41% were Latino and 59% white.

Using responses to specific survey items, Huerta and Bray (2008) created indexes to measure the students’ perceptions of their classroom experiences, including integration of course material, collaborative learning, and active learning, and their perceptions of how the learning communities helped them achieve core curriculum outcomes and overall success in their first year of study. They also did a means analysis comparing Latino students with their white counterparts in first-year persistence, GPA, and pre-college traits, such as parent education, SAT scores, and Pell Grant awards.

Huerta and Bray (2008) determined that Latino students were statistically more likely than white students to attribute a positive connection between the learning community structure and achieving core curricular outcomes. In addition, the authors found the only statistically significant difference in classroom experiences between Latino and white students was in collaborative learning. Latino students were more likely to indicate that the learning community helped “improve [their] ability to learn in a group of students” (p. 7). Moreover, they were more likely than white students to

report that they experienced collaborative learning. The authors concluded that “collaborative learning is powerful . . . . The classroom experience that seems to have the broadest impact is collaborative learning, and Latinos seem especially to benefit from it” (p. 16).

In summary, these four university studies are included here because of their relevance to understanding the impact of learning communities on underprepared community college students. The student populations were ethnically diverse in the case of the first two studies, were identified as underprepared in the third, and were first-year Latino students in the fourth. More importantly, the findings of these studies, specifically that underprepared students and students of color were more likely to enroll in learning communities and more likely to reap benefits from this experience than academically prepared or white students, have definite implications for community colleges as the primary access point to higher education for Latina students. However, these studies do not look in depth at the experience of these students once enrolled in learning community courses. What learning is occurring? How are these students making sense of their experiences as they learn to connect and integrate new knowledge? The goal of this study is to expand upon the findings of these past studies to better understand the lived experience of Latina students participating in learning communities.

**Community college studies.** The purpose of this section is to review studies of learning communities involving community college students. The four studies included here are relevant to the proposed study because the perceptions and experiences of the students were an integral part of each study. Two of the studies include participants that are underprepared community college students and, thus, similar to the profile of the participants of this proposed study. Two studies attempt to gain understanding of the actual learning and intellectual growth experienced by community college students in learning community programs.

Tinto (1997) conducted a multi-method quantitative and qualitative study of Seattle Community College’s Coordinated Studies Program (CSP) to determine if the program made a difference in terms of student learning and achievement. CSP classes

were primarily humanities courses linked by theme. The quantitative portion of the study was a longitudinal study including samples of students in CSP classes and in regular classes. Questionnaires were given at the beginning of the term and the end. Student engagement measures were adapted from Pace's Quality of Student Effort Scales. The sampling method captured a range of students so the researchers were able to test for self-selection variables. Z-tests and regression analysis were used to ascertain how student experiences were related over time to behaviors and academic outcomes. Results indicated that students in the CSP classes reported greater involvement in both academic and social activities, perceived greater developmental gains, and expressed more positive attitudes towards their college, faculty, and other students than did students enrolled in stand-alone courses. In addition, students in CSP classes persisted to the next level of coursework and transferred to four-year institutions at a substantially higher rate than those students enrolled in regular classes.

The qualitative portion of Tinto's study included a case study of the CSP classes at Seattle Central Community College with a stated research purpose of understanding from a student's point of view, how participation in a collaborative learning program influenced students' learning experiences and how those learning experiences fit in with their broader experiences as first-year students. (Tinto, 1997, p. 605)

The researchers collected data through participant observation, document review, and informal open-ended interviews. Site visits were conducted at three points: the start of the fall term, the end of the fall term, and midway through the spring term. As the data were analyzed, the researchers developed working hypotheses and identified general themes. They modified these continually as they gathered more data using an inductive analysis process. The final themes that emerged were (a) building supportive peer groups, (b) shared learning that bridges the academic-social divide, and (c) gaining a voice in the construction of knowledge. The researchers provide adequate examples of student comments to support each theme, but there is no demographic information provided. Without knowing anything about the students interviewed, it is difficult to evaluate the conclusions drawn.



Tinto (1998) conducted a similar study of the New Student House program at La Guardia Community College. The New Student House program is a coordinated study program focusing on developmental reading, writing, and oral communication. Students take three linked developmental courses in addition to a freshman seminar. This study used the same case study method as in the Seattle Central Community College study. However, in this study Tinto provided sampling information that indicates students selected for observation and interviews were diverse in age, gender, race, and attitude towards the program. Using the same data collection and analysis methods as the study at Seattle Central Community College, the researchers identified three themes: (a) building supportive peer groups; (b) shared learning-studying together; and (c) involvement, learning, and persistence. The first two themes identified here are virtually identical to the ones that emerged from the Seattle Central Community College study. Tinto does not address this similarity in either study.

The significance of Tinto's research lies in his focus on the classroom as the nexus of student engagement. Four-year colleges and universities enroll primarily young, full-time students who can participate in residential programs and extensive co- and extra-curricular activities. Student engagement in such institutions can flourish in a number of venues. Community colleges, on the other hand, are often commuter campuses. Community college students are more likely to be older and attend part-time in greater numbers than their four-year university counterparts (American Association of Community Colleges, 2007). They are more likely to have extensive responsibilities outside of school with their families and work and are less likely to devote energy towards co- and extra-curricular activities that promote academic and social engagement. This is particularly true for Latina students who are even more likely to attend college on a part-time basis than other demographic groups because of work and family obligations (Griest-Devora, 2005). The opportunities for these students to become academically and socially engaged occur primarily, if not solely, in the classroom. Tinto's research at both Seattle Central Community College and La Guardia Community College sheds light on the social and academic integration that occurs specifically in developmental learning community classrooms for students in general. It

does not look specifically at the lived experiences of Latina students in these learning communities.

In recent critiques of current learning community research, it has been noted that there is scant qualitative research on student intellectual development and cognitive complexity (Smith et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2003). Mino (2007) addressed this in his study of interdisciplinary learning made visible and audible through a verbal think aloud protocol called Link Aloud. Mino interviewed 12 students in learning community courses at Holyoke Community College. Each student participated in this Link Aloud method by selecting a written assignment identified as interdisciplinary, reading the assignment aloud, and describing her or his thought processes verbally to the researcher while reading. In analyzing the students' written work and the verbal protocols, Mino identified 12 specific ways that students connect their learning, called "precise mechanisms of integration" (2007, p. 34). These include use of metaphor, integrative questioning, and embedded quotations among others. There were several limitations to this study. Students in this study were identified as belonging to one of three different course levels, and yet the researcher did not specify what these levels are. He did not link student use of the mechanisms of integration with the differing levels. And finally, there was very little context provided, something a reader expects in a purely qualitative study such as this.

Another study that attempted to capture intangible learning outcomes in community college students enrolled in learning communities was conducted at North Seattle Community College (Harnish, 2006). Using a mixed method approach, Harnish analyzed over 5200 written comments by students from end-of-term questionnaires administered in a series of learning community courses. In addition, the researcher administered the pre-/post-instrument Measure of Intellectual Development to evaluate cognitive development. Results indicated that students made gains in their intellectual growth as well as reporting high levels of satisfaction, self-confidence, and motivation for further learning. An interesting aspect of this study was the researcher's focus on the few (8%) negative responses received. A breakdown of these comments included dissatisfaction due to administrative issues, such as not enough sections offered,

disappointment in grading policies, and a preference for stand-alone courses without giving reasons. Curricular dissatisfactions included a sense that having multiple faculty in a course led to confusion, not enough time was spent on each discipline covered, and the coursework was too heavy.

In summary, the research of Tinto, Mino, and Harnish is significant to this study in both their methods and findings. Through open-ended interviews, observation, and document review, Tinto captured the experiences of underprepared students enrolled in developmental learning communities. Through a Link Aloud protocol, Mino was able to capture the cognitive connections, as well as metacognitive processes, students were making in interdisciplinary assignments. This study uses open-ended interviews to better understand the participants' perception of their own learning.

In terms of findings, Tinto showed that learning communities helped community college students experience supportive peer groups and share learning that bridges the academic-social divide, and that the students gained a voice in the construction of knowledge and increased their involvement and persistence. Mino identified 12 specific ways that students connected their learning, including the use of metaphor, integrative questioning, and embedded quotations. Harnish found that students made gains in intellectual acuity as well as in self-confidence and motivation. Each of these studies adds to our understanding of ways that learning communities help students learn. None of these studies, however, looked specifically at Latina students.

### **Summary**

The studies examined here have shown positive trends in the areas of retention, persistence, grade attainment, and social and academic integration for students who participate in learning communities. This has held true for national studies (Minkler, 2002) as well as studies of students in individual universities (Brittenham et al., 2003; Hotchkiss et al., 2006; Pistilli, 2006) and students in individual community colleges (Harnish, 2006; Mino, 2007; Tinto, 1997, 1998; Tinto & Russo, 1994).

Studies that have focused specifically on the experiences of underprepared students (Brittenham et al., 2003; Tinto, 1997, 1998; Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1994) have also shown positive trends in retention, persistence, and grade attainment. In

addition, these studies have shown that underprepared students in learning communities report greater self-confidence, comfort working in groups, and higher involvement in social and academic activities.

The key variables in virtually all of these studies have been increased retention, persistence, and course completion rates, all measurements that are easily accessible. Only two studies (Harnish, 2006; Mino, 2007) attempt to explore student growth in cognitive complexity and intellectual development, two areas that are important but difficult to study accurately. Brittenham et al. (2003) described the “habits of mind” that included complex critical thinking but fell short of studying its actual development. Perhaps it should not be surprising that those areas that are most difficult to understand are those that are least studied.

The studies that focused on underprepared students looked specifically at students enrolled in linked developmental level courses. None of these studies looked at the performance of Latina students in learning communities at the developmental level.

### **Latina Students in Community Colleges**

Latinas have been underrepresented in higher education throughout the history of this nation both in their participation and as a subject of academic research (Cuadraz, 2005). Academic interest in the experiences of Latina college students has paralleled, on a smaller scale, the rise of Chicana Studies as a legitimate field of study. Researchers schooled in the women’s movement and the Chicano movement used theories from both feminism and civil rights to better understand the sociological and historical contexts of the Latina experience. Some of these researchers have turned their attention to the experience of Latinas in higher education. Research on Latinas in higher education tends to be multidisciplinary in its approach, rely strongly on the autobiographical voice, and takes an activist stance with the goal of addressing longstanding educational inequities (Cuadraz, 2005). In spite of this interest, there is still much to learn about Latina college students (Brown, 2008; McKenna & Ortiz, 1988; Melendez & Petrovich, 1989).

### **Latinos and Latinas Access and Participation in Higher Education**

The purpose of this section is to provide data on the demographics and educational attainment of Latino and Latina college students in the United States. Most data available are not disaggregated by gender, so much of the information here includes both men and women. The lack of usable demographic data related specifically to Latina students' educational participation and attainment has been cited as a point of great concern among researchers (Brown, 2008; Cuadraz, 2005; McKenna & Ortiz, 1988).

Latinos/Latinas are a heterogeneous group, diverse in race, country of origin, socioeconomic background, generational status, and language ability. The group includes newcomers from Central and South America, the children of émigrés from Cuba, and families who have resided in the Southwest for centuries. The “composite” Latino/Latina student, however, is a “first-generation college student of Mexican descent, with developing English fluency, who enrolls in a college near his or her community” (Santiago, 2007, p. 4). At close to 50%, Latinos/Latinas of Mexican origin are the largest sub-group of Hispanics students enrolled in community colleges (Martinez & Fernández, 2004). Three percent are Cuban, 16% are Puerto Rican, and 28% categorize themselves as “other Hispanic” (Santiago, 2007). Two states, California and Texas, are home to half of the nation’s Latino/Latina population (Schmidt, 2006).

Latinos/Latinas are the youngest and fastest growing ethnic group in the nation (Chapa & Schink, 2006). This demographic reality has translated into rapid growth in Latino/Latina enrollments in higher education as compared to other ethnic groups. Growth in white college student enrollments between 2000 and 2005 was 10%, and Asian/Pacific Islanders increased by 16%. African-American enrollments increased by 28%. The growth in Latina/Latino enrollments during the same timeframe was the largest at 30% (Santiago, 2007). Indeed, since 1980, the number of Latinos/Latinas enrolled in college has tripled from less than half a million to 1.5 million students (Schmidt, 2006). It is important to note that this seemingly impressive growth in the rate of participation still represents a small percentage of the overall Latino/Latina population which stands at approximately 38.8 million (Schmidt, 2006).

Young Latinos/Latinas still lag behind other ethnic groups in attending and succeeding in college. While 42% of whites, 60% of Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 32% of African-Americans enrolled in higher education in 2005, only 25% of 18 to 24 year-old Latinos/Latinas enrolled (Santiago, 2007). Latinos/Latinas are the largest college-age group and yet they make up only nine percent of students enrolled in higher education (Chapa & Schink, 2006). In spite of the gains Latinos/Latinas have made in terms of participating in higher education, their levels of success remain low compared to other diverse populations (Gardella, Candales, & Ricardo-Rivera, 2005). Only 11% of Latinos/Latinas over the age of 25 have bachelor's degrees, compared to 17% of African-Americans, 27% whites, and 47% Asian-Americans in the same age range (Schmidt, 2006). In California, the disparity between the number of Latinos/Latinas who are college-age (42%) and the number who have bachelor's degrees (less than eight percent) is the highest in the nation (Chapa & Schink, 2006).

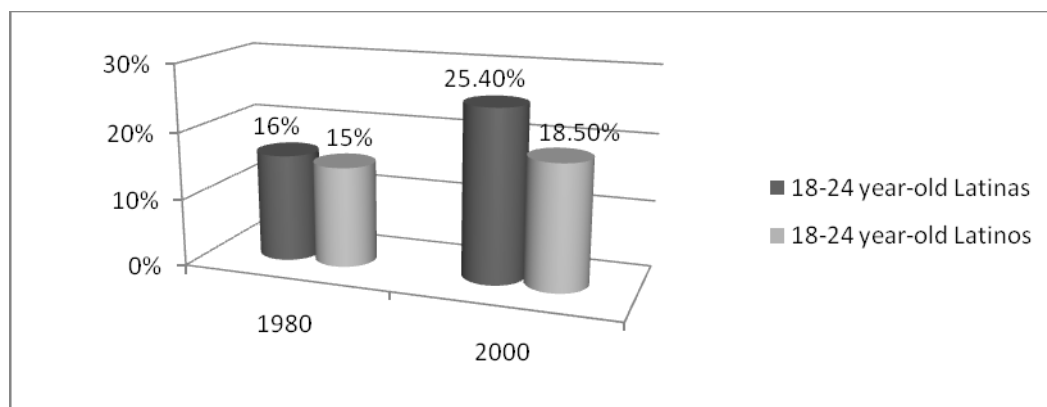
More than any other ethnic group, Latinos/Latinas turn to community colleges as their point of entry into higher education. Sixty percent of Latinos/Latinas in higher education attend community colleges (Martinez & Fernández, 2004). The majority of these students aspire to transfer to four-year universities to complete bachelor's degrees; they view their experience in community colleges is a pathway to that goal (Martinez & Fernández, 2004). Unfortunately, most do not make the transition (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Fry, 2002; Martinez & Fernández, 2004).

Based on demographic data, the typical profile of a Latina college student is a U.S. citizen enrolled part-time at a local community college in California or Texas. She is young and still lives at home. She is most likely to be the first in her family to attend college. She works outside the home to help support her family. In most cases, she has not completed the necessary coursework in high school to prepare her for the academic rigors of college classes (Fry, 2002; Santiago, 2007).

It is difficult to obtain data on the enrollment and attainment patterns specific to Latina college students. Most data on Latino/Latina students are not disaggregated by gender. For example, *Excelencia* in Education and the Pew Hispanic Center, non-profit organizations dedicated to providing data-driven analysis of educational status of Latino

students in the United States, rarely disaggregate their data by gender (Fry, 2002, 2004; Santiago, 2006, 2007; Santiago & Brown, 2004). The only information disaggregated by gender they provide is the breakdown of Latino/Latina students enrolled in college: In 2000, 57% of Hispanic college students were women and 43% men (Fry, 2004). By 2004, the percentage of Latinas in higher education had climbed to 60% (Santiago, 2007). This paucity of relevant demographic data specific to Latina students is an area of concern for researchers (Brown, 2008; Cuadraz, 2005; McKenna & Ortiz, 1988).

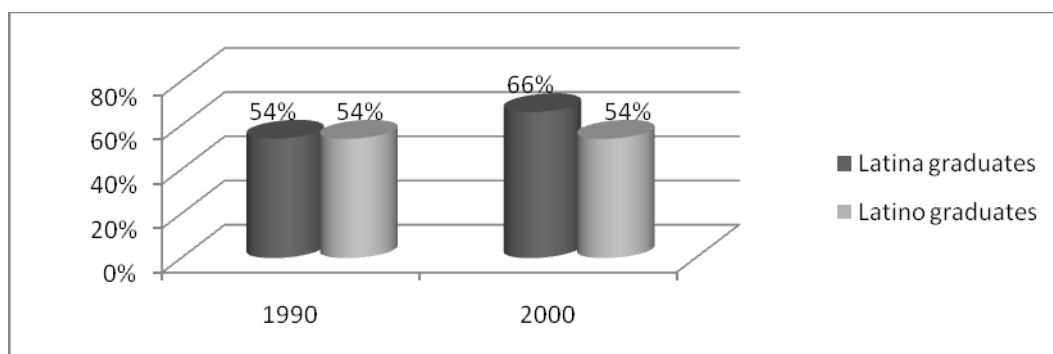
One exception to this lack of gender-specific data is offered by González et al. (2004) who looked at statistics from the American Council on Education on Latina students. The authors determined that the number of young Latinas attending and completing college increased significantly during the 1990s, giving them reason to declare this “the decade of the Latina” (p. 18). In the 1970s, the number of Latinas who completed college was only half that of their male counterparts (Cuadraz, 2005). This inequality shifted in the 1980s and 1990s. The percentage of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old Latinas who enrolled in higher education jumped from 16% in 1980 to 25.4% in 2000. In contrast, Latino males increased their participation in higher education only three percentage points in the same timeframe, from 15.3 to 18.5%. See Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Participation of Latinas and Latinos in higher education 1980 to 2000.

In addition, the percentage of Latinas graduating from college grew from almost 54% in 1990 to close to 66% in 2000 while the percentage of graduating Latino male students remained static at 54% over the same time period. See Figure 2. Latinas have

also experienced an increase in the number of conferred associate, bachelors, and masters degrees over the same decade (González et al., 2004). In spite of these gains, Latinas continue to be one of the most economically disadvantaged and least educated major population in the nation (Melendez & Petrovich, 1989).



*Figure 2. Percentage of Latinas and Latinos graduating from college.*

In summary, although it is difficult to obtain relevant data specific to Latina college students, the data that are available point to increased participation and success by Latina college students over the last two decades as they compare to their male counterparts.

### **Challenges Facing Latina College Students**

A number of studies identify challenges facing Latino and Latina students as they enter and navigate their college experience (Gardella et al., 2005; Hernandez, 2002; Hurtado, Carter, Spuler, Dale, & Pipkin, 1994; Rendón & Nora, 1994; Rodriguez et al., 2000). The purpose of this section is to synthesize and critique those studies that address the challenges Latina students face in higher education that are pertinent to this research study.

The earliest commissioned study of Latinas in higher education was conducted by the Center for Research on Women at Stanford University in 1978 (Cuadraz, 2005). Focusing on Chicanas (defined in that study as women of Mexican origin), this study identified three barriers to academic success. These included (a) spending long hours on domestic work, (b) receiving less support from their mothers than their Chicano male counterparts, and (c) experiencing greater stress than Chicano men (Cuadraz, 2005).



Many researchers who write about the challenges facing Latino/Latina students rely on the findings of one seminal study. Rendón and Nora (1994) conducted a comprehensive study of six community colleges with large Latino/Latina student populations in Arizona, Texas, and California. They conducted a series of interviews of faculty, administrators, and counselors to identify barriers students faced that impeded their ability to transfer to four-year institutions. Barriers included a lack of academic preparation, a reluctance to leave family and local communities, limited understanding of the true cost and benefits of higher education on the part of the students and their families, and a need to hold jobs to contribute to the family's income. Interviews also revealed that some faculty and counselors were reluctant to work with academically underprepared Latino/Latina students and that many programs, including basic skills programs, failed to help students progress (Rendón & Nora, 1994).

Rendón and Nora's study also included a student survey component whereby the researchers gathered data on Latino/Latina student perceptions of their ability to transfer. Information from these surveys that is pertinent to this study is that few Latino/Latina students participated in extracurricular activities or sought out faculty outside of class. In addition, those students who did transfer successfully showed high levels of social and academic integration and very positive attitudes towards their education and academic abilities (Rendón & Nora, 1994).

This study clearly identifies key barriers to Latino/Latina student in transferring to four-year institutions; however, it does not disaggregate its data by gender, so the specific barriers that impede the progress of Latina students are not clear. In addition, the focus is on transfer, so the question of how Latina students are experiencing the community college classroom, something this particular study seeks to illuminate, is left unexplored.

A study by Hernandez (2002) looked at the perceptions of first-year Latino/Latina students enrolled in a predominately white university. Data in this study included in-depth, open-ended interviews of ten students, five men and five women. Many of these students reported having difficulty adjusting to college because they felt academically unprepared by their high school experience. They reported that the pace

and rigor or the college classroom was difficult to adjust to. While other studies have shown that this perception is common among many first-year students, Latino /Latina students perceive themselves as less academically prepared than others (Hernandez, 2002).

There are limitations to Hernandez's research as it pertains to this study. As in Rendón and Nora's study, the data was not disaggregated by gender, so it is impossible to know what the perceptions of Latina students specifically were. Second, the students in this study attended a four-year university, and consequently may not match the profile of community college Latina students. However, the fact that they were first-year students does make their experiences more relevant to those of community college students than students further along on their academic path.

In one of the few studies focusing solely on Latina students, González et al. (2004) conducted a series of interviews with two groups of Latina university students. The first group had been selected into top universities directly out of high school and the second group had attended California community colleges before transferring to university. Although these two groups were mentioned early in the study, the data discussed and analyzed was never broken down by these two groups, so it is impossible to attribute specific challenges to those students who attended community colleges and those who did not.

One challenge that Latina students described in the González et al.'s study (2004) was the tension between their desire for independence and the societal expectation that they stay dependent on, and close to, their family (González et al.). This finding echoes the personal reflections of Rendón (1996) in "From the Barrio to the Academy: Personal Reflections of a Mexican-American Scholarship Girl." Once Rendón transferred to a university far from her parents' home, her mother would often urge her over the phone to return home and " '*ya déjalo todo eso*' (leave everything behind)" (1996, p. 59). Similarly, one student in the study by González et al. related telling her mother that she was accepted to a university: "[My mother] said, 'Oh, now you are leaving.' And then she stayed quiet. I felt like I had to apologize, even though I

was happy” (González et al., p. 20). Another student described facing the wrath of her father when she told him she wanted to leave home to attend university.

González et al. (2004) wrote of the “web of conflict and opportunity” (p. 20) that Latina students and their parents found themselves in. Latina students felt both excitement and guilt about attending college; they were eager to stretch themselves and experience independence, but they were acutely aware of the impact their leaving has on their parents. Their parents, in turn, were largely supportive of their daughters’ college opportunities but were torn about them leaving the home and family. The parents often were operating under a belief system that young women could not take care of themselves and needed their parents, family, or a spouse to do so. Consequently, they feared for their daughters’ safety and well-being (González et al.).

The strength of González et al.’s (2004) study is its reliance on student voices. The researchers quoted at length from student interviews, so the students’ voices remained at the center of this study. This method allowed the researchers to paint a rich and nuanced picture of the challenges Latina students face. The students chosen for this study, however, attended highly selective universities when interviewed. The purpose of the research project here is to provide a similar level of rich detail of the experiences of Latina students currently in community colleges, specifically those participating in learning communities.

In a meta-analysis of Latina students in higher education, Rodriguez et al. (2000) identified four main areas that cause stress for Latina college students: lack of financial support, academic underpreparedness, family expectations and obligations, and gender-role stereotyping. Latina students are more likely to lack financial support because they are more likely to come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; the cost of higher education can be a heavy burden on them and their families. In addition, Latina students are more likely than Latino male students or white female students to express feelings of insecurity about their academic preparation for college; moreover, they are more often the recipients of antagonistic attitudes and low expectations in their educational experience. The stress caused by competing family expectations and obligations has been described in earlier studies. Parents of Latina

students often want their daughters to succeed at college but are wary of them leaving home to do. This is especially true for first-generation Latina students. The source of this ambivalence is often complex: Parents are proud of their daughters' successes, especially when they surpass the parents' own educational levels, but they fear that this success will pull their daughters away from them and that they will lose their connection to their native culture. And finally, the gender-role expectations in many Latino families result in Latina students doing more unpaid domestic labor than their male counterparts and receiving stronger pressure from the family to stay at home while attending college (Rodriguez et al.).

This meta-analysis concludes with recommendations, based on the research surveyed, for strategies to promote Latina student success in higher education. These strategies include providing adequate financial aid, academic support in the form of individualized guidance, social and cultural support systems, such as Latina support groups and cultural centers, and a more welcoming and inclusive campus environment (Rodriguez et al., 2000). In these recommendations, the authors do not mention use of pedagogical models such as learning communities to promote academic and social integration. This is clearly an area where this study can add to the literature.

There is one pivotal piece of research that addresses how pedagogy and classroom practices affect Latino/Latina college students (Brown, 2008). In an effort to explicate the cultural complexities and academic needs Latino/Latina students bring to the college classroom, Brown administered questionnaires to two groups of students, one white and the other Latino/Latina, enrolled in Spanish language classes in a large research university in the Southwest. His findings showed that Latino/Latina students gave priority to group solidarity over individual attainment in the classroom. In his analysis of the data, Brown argues that the cultural focus on community and cooperation that many Latinos/Latinas value crosses generations; students in the study who were second and third generation Latino/Latina still showed affinity to these cultural values, choosing cooperation over competition, and appreciated classroom practices that did the same (Brown, 2008). Unfortunately, like a number of the other studies cited above, this study does not disaggregate the findings by gender so it is

impossible to know how women differed in their responses from men. Moreover, the study was conducted at a research-based university not a community college. Once again, understanding how classroom practices and pedagogies impact Latina students in community colleges is left unanswered by this study.

### **Summary**

Latina students make up a significant percentage of community college students, especially in California. In California alone, they are the largest demographic group in college after white women (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2008). Latinas have achieved large gains in participating in higher education over the last thirty years. In spite of this fact, there are insufficient data available on their academic participation and attainment.

The challenges facing Latina students in higher education have been explored by a number of researchers (González et al., 2004; Hernandez, 2002; Rendón & Nora, 1994; Rodriguez et al., 2000). These challenges include a lack of academic preparation, a tension between the pull of independence and the desire to stay close to family and local communities, limited understanding of the true cost and benefits of higher education on the part of the students and their families, and a need to hold jobs to contribute to the family's income. The relationships between Latina college students and their parents are often complicated by traditional belief systems and gender role stereotypes that stand in opposition to the need by many Latina students to leave home to pursue their academic goals.

A repeated refrain in the critique of the studies in this section is that the research currently available on how Latina students experience community colleges is sorely limited. As Rodriguez et al. (2000) state, "as a group [Latinas] have been largely ignored by higher education researchers, a slight that has led to a lack of knowledge and understanding of Latina students' needs and concerns" (p. 512). The studies that are available usually involve high-achieving Latina students at research universities (Brown, 2008; Cuadraz, 2005; Gardella et al., 2005; Hernandez, 2002; Hurtado et al., 1994; Lundell, Higbee, Duranczyk, & Goff, 2007). There is a clear need for researchers to study the experiences of Latina students using a variety of theoretical frameworks to

better understand how the community college experience impacts Latina student educational attainment (Flores, Horn, & Crisp, 2006). It is the intention of this study to add to this literature by looking at the lived experiences of Latina community college students participating in learning community classes.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

Latina students make up a significant percentage of community college students, especially in California where they are the largest demographic group in college after white women (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2008). Latinas have made gains in participating in higher education over the last thirty years, but they have faced many obstacles in that pursuit. These obstacles include a lack of academic preparation, a tension between the pull of independence and the desire to stay close to family and local communities, limited understanding of the true cost and benefits of higher education on the part of the students and their families, and a need to hold jobs to contribute to the family's income. In spite of the fact that Latinas are participating in higher education in increasing numbers, the research currently available on how Latina students experience community colleges is sorely limited.

Many Latina students come to community colleges underprepared for the academic work expected of them. In many ways, they are the latest in a long line of students pursuing higher education without the requisite preparation. American colleges and universities have a long and rich history of serving academically underprepared students. Much of this work has fallen under the purview of community colleges; these institutions have developed extensive college preparatory programs to respond to this growing need. Some of these programs take a remedial approach to preparing students for college level academics while others take a developmental approach.

One pedagogy that is often cited as a successful practice for underprepared students is the use of learning communities. Studies have shown positive trends in the areas of retention, persistence, grade attainment, and social and academic integration for students who participate in learning communities. Underprepared students participating in learning communities report greater self-confidence, comfort in working in groups, and higher involvement in social and academic activities.

None of the research cited in this chapter looked at the perceptions of Latina students in learning communities at the developmental level. This study aims to add to the body of knowledge by exploring the lived experience of Latina students in those types of community college learning communities.

### CHAPTER THREE: DESIGN OF STUDY

*We probably know far more about our students before they enter and after they leave than we do while they are with us . . . This [is] short-sighted, for if we are to manage education better it is with the process of education itself we must begin. (Van-Manen, 1988, p. 6)*

The purpose of this section is to discuss the design of this study. It includes the philosophical approach, the research method, the data collecting procedures, and a personal disclosure statement.

#### **Philosophical Approach**

Understanding how Latina students participate in learning community classes and the learning that they gain from this experience calls for a qualitative study. Qualitative research centers on the premise that meaning is a social construction created by individuals as they interact with the world (Merriam & Associates, 2002). These meanings, or interpretations of reality, are unique to the individuals experiencing them and unique to the time and place of the experience. Qualitative research is a means to understand, in a richly described way, how individuals experience their world.

Qualitative research falls into three general perspectives: interpretive, critical, and post-modern (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Each perspective has a different focus. While critical researchers attempt to emancipate the disenfranchised and post-modern researchers to deconstruct meaning, interpretive researchers attempt to understand the world. Neumann (2003) traces the origins of interpretive social science to the writings of Dilthey and Weber in the late nineteenth century. Dilthey (1989 ) introduced the concept of *verstehen*, an empathetic understanding of common experiences of ordinary people. Weber (1978) elaborated on Dilthey's concept by defining interpretive sociology as one type of sociology that views individuals, as opposed to institutions or larger social groups, as the primary unit of analysis and interprets how individuals act, interact, and understand their actions in a given context. Neuman (2003) calls this the study of "social action with a purpose" (p. 75).

This study takes an interpretive social science approach. It looks closely at the lived experience of Latina students as they participate in learning community classes.



Data on these lived experiences will include the voices of the individual students in the form of interview transcripts. In addition, the voice of the researcher will be heard in the interpretation of student interviews.

### **Key Concepts**

The purpose of interpretive social science is, in its broadest sense, to understand the world. More specifically, interpretive social scientists concern themselves with how individuals make meaning of their lives and their daily social interactions (Neuman, 2003). As such, the main task of the theory is to find the meaning of a local situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Interpretive social scientists are interested in “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 38). In this study, I conduct interviews of Latina students as they are participating in learning communities to better understand how they are interpreting their experiences, constructing their worlds, and making sense of these experiences.

There are four key concepts that define interpretive social science: intersubjectivity, naturalistic settings, rich description, and inductive analysis. Given that the purpose of interpretive social science is to understand the meaning people make of their experiences in a particular context, these key concepts frame how interpretive social science research is conceptualized and conducted as well as how data is collected and analyzed.

**Intersubjectivity.** Intersubjectivity is integral to interpretive social science research in terms of process and product. Intersubjectivity is, in essence, the interactions between one’s self and “the other.” The researcher and the participants of the study are subjective, each bringing her or his own unique perspectives to bear on the study. A well-designed interpretive study plumbs these subjectivities deeply and thoroughly. Since meaning is viewed as socially constructed, the research process involves creating a shared understanding between researcher and participant (i.e., intersubjective understanding). The written product that is the outcome of any research study is also intersubjective. For this product to be meaningful, it requires “the other.” Van-Manen

(1988) describes this other as the reader. Meaning is not housed in the text alone but in the interpretation the reader brings to the text.

**Naturalistic setting.** Interpretive social science research is conducted in a naturalistic setting (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). The researcher goes to the local setting to conduct research because the natural context is significant to the experience. Moving people out of their natural context changes the experience that the researcher is trying to understand.

**Rich description.** The data collected are rich in detail, providing what Geertz calls “thick description” (1983). These data are presented through words and pictures rather than numbers, with every attempt made to keep data as close to the original form as possible (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998).

**Inductive analysis.** The analysis of data is done inductively. Interpretive social scientists do not set out to prove or disprove a hypothesis, but rather to understand a phenomenon. To do so, they ask broad questions; they keep an open mind and collect vast amounts of data. From these data, patterns, themes, and possibly new theories emerge (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998).

### **Major Assumptions of Reality and Truth**

Philosophical stances on the nature of truth have traditionally rested on a continuum between idealism and empiricism. Idealists believe that “knowledge resided in the thinking person” (Becker, 1992, p. 18). Through careful reflection and the application of logical principles, a person discovers meaning and truth within her/himself. Reality exists only through one’s perceptions and thoughts; the material world is not real except as it is perceived through human consciousness. Empiricists, on the other hand, believe that “meaning comes to us from the world” (p. 18). Truth lies in the external world, “the world as it is ordinarily taken for granted by science and common sense” (Macann, 1993, p. 183). Reality is ready to be discovered and measured by those who set aside their personal selves and objectively observe the world around them.

In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (1962) articulated a philosophical stance that is more nuanced than the traditional dichotomy of idealism

and empiricism. Merleau-Ponty viewed reality as something co-created by both the person experiencing the world and the world being experienced. Becker (1992) illustrates this concept with a simple example. If students in a classroom were asked to look at the pens in their hands and described the personal and cultural meanings associated with pens, the meanings will be varied. Some may describe the pen as a tool; others as a symbol of freedom or power. However, it is unlikely anyone will describe it as food. The objective properties of the pen itself—plastic, metal, ink—limit the meaning students will bring to it. Each individual, based on culture and experience, will also bring limitations to the meanings possible. So the meaning of pens is co-created by each student and the pen in her hand. Truth lies in the dialectic between the person and the object or between one person and another. It does not live alone in the person or object or experience. Most interpretive social scientists approach truth and reality from this perspective.

Another way of describing this understanding of truth is that reality is socially constructed. Each person experiences social and physical reality in a unique way, and, through coming together and interacting with one another, we gain multiple perspectives. These multiple perspectives make up our reality (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). Each of these perspectives is as “true” as the other, and, because these perspectives derive from personal experience, they are subjective and unique to the individual. There is no single overriding impartial truth.

Gadamer (1976) explains socially-constructed reality in a slightly different way. Human consciousness, the mind, is never alone; it is always in conversation with another. Conversation is the “fundamental state of thinking and human existence” (Hahn, 1997, p. 226). This conversation may be with another person who is physically present, or it may be a conversation with a text or image. Understanding this conversation requires understanding the context in which it takes place. Furthermore, since this conversation always involves the self, we can never realize pure detachment from an experience. Like Heidegger before him, Gadamer (1976) believes that all our thinking reflects who we are and our situations. We cannot escape subjectivity.

If there is no neutral objective truth, how do we ascertain the “truthfulness” of research findings by interpretive social scientists? What are we to believe? First of all, interpretive social scientists strive for accuracy and comprehensiveness in their data collection and analysis (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). What they observe and record through field notes or audio-recordings of interviews is as close to what they experience as possible. They strive to account for all the complexities present in their subject. Second, interpretive social scientists do not believe that human behavior is ‘random or idiosyncratic,’ so they look for universal statements they can make about human social processes (p. 32). Third, interpretive social scientists recognize and account for their own subjectivities. They recognize that all research is value-laden and that researchers approach their area of study from a particular perspective. Their task is to make their viewpoints explicit while remaining as accurate and detailed as possible in collecting and analyzing data. Finally, interpretive social scientists measure truthfulness through intersubjective understanding. They look at how well a theory or explanation of a phenomenon resonates with those who experience that phenomenon and how well outsiders can understand the realities of those being studied.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The strengths of interpretive social science are often described in relation to the limitations of positivism. These strengths include the explicit linking of fact to theory, the attempt to understand human social processes in all their complexities, and the focus on the practical lives of everyday people in their natural setting.

The first strength of interpretive social science is that it connects the what we know with how we know it (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982). It takes into account the fact that social conventions shape how we define and describe our world. Positivists believe that facts, “what we know,” exist in the external world, fixed and incontrovertible in their essence. They see facts as separate from the theory, the “how we know,” that is used to explain them. Interpretive social scientists, on the other hand, recognize that the theory and world view of the researcher influence what facts are and how they are explained. For example, two researchers, one educated in China and the other in the United States, may view the same piece of student writing and come up with two different

assessments. The first, coming from a tradition that privileges replication over originality, may see an essay skillfully modeled after a master, while the second, coming from a tradition that privileges independent thinking over imitation, may see a clichéd copy of another's scholarship. While a positivist approach would consider the "fact" of this student writing as either faithfully modeled or shamelessly copied, an interpretive approach describes the fact in relation to the theory: This piece of writing is poor *because* the researcher is approaching it from the perspective that good writing must be original, or this piece of writing is strong *because* the researcher is approaching it from the perspective that good writing must be derivative.

The second strength of interpretive social science is that it attempts to understand human social interactions in all their messiness and complexities. Giorgi (1970) describes the positivistic approach to social science as reducing the study of human endeavor to only that which can be predicted, observed, broken down into small elements, and then measured. Giorgi argues that this approach inherently limits a researcher to study only those aspects of human behavior that can be narrowly controlled and replicated. An interpretive social science approach, with its focus on understanding and open-ended questions and its reliance on intersubjective understanding rather than generalizability as a measure of truthfulness, allows scientists to study larger questions of human existence and account for all the complexities that entails.

Finally, the third strength of interpretive social science is its focus on giving voice to the lives of everyday people in their natural setting (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). Since a positivist approach demands statistical accountability and a controlled environment in which a study unfolds, subjects are removed from their natural setting; their voices are not part of the study. Interpretive social scientists are intensely interested in the lived experiences of individuals. And they are particularly interested in understanding these lived experiences through the perspectives of the participants. In collecting data, the researcher spends time in the natural environment of the participants. The voices of the participants are included in the study, often in long uninterrupted chunks of texts, in an effort to accurately capture their experiences.

This study benefits from the strengths of an interpretive social science approach. By reflecting upon and articulating my own perspective, the theory I bring to this study explicitly informs the facts I describe and the conclusions I draw. Using open-ended interviewing techniques and eschewing the constrictions of a positivist approach allows me to explore the rich complexities that surely are part of the experiences Latina students have in learning community classrooms. Including their voices enriches our understanding of their experiences.

In addition to strengths, there are limitations to the interpretive social science approach. These limitations come from four standpoints: positivist, critical, political, and practical. From a positivist standpoint, interpretive social science is perceived as “soft” and inexact. The collection of data is considered anecdotal and the researcher’s job as reduced to that of journalist (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). Positivists object to the lack of generalizability or objective criteria for stating theoretical positions that is inherent to interpretive studies (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Critical researchers, on the other hand, find interpretive social science too relativistic (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982). Critical researchers believe that there is an external reality separate from our perception of it and that this reality is governed by social and economic structures that empower some and disenfranchise others (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982; Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Research needs to be conducted with the aim of tackling these social and economic inequities and giving power and voice to those without. From a critical researcher’s standpoint, the interpretive approach of describing and analyzing human social interactions in an effort to simply understand them is not sufficient. It does not adequately explain the power dynamics inherent in any society or help the powerless move towards emancipation. In fact, interpretive studies have in the past been used to justify and uphold colonialist practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Interpretive social science has further limitations due to the current political climate. It is at present out of favor (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The National Research Council, an influential private non-profit organization, has initiated and supported a research movement that favors a positivist approach towards research. Federal legislation, such as the recent No Child Left Behind, is connected to this movement and

consequently, federal funding for research is currently focused on experimental and quasi-experimental designs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This limitation is situational, being tied to the current political zeitgeist, and, therefore, temporary. Finally, there are practical limitations to interpretive social science. By its nature, data collection takes a great deal of time and personal involvement on the part of the researcher. It is not an easy or quick endeavor.

Of these limitations, let me address the one presented by critical researchers as it relates to this study. Underprepared Latina students are in many ways a disenfranchised group. Economically and educationally, their position in American society is often tenuous. For students who are undocumented the situation is even more problematic as they carefully chart their course between progressing in school and remaining invisible to “la migra” (immigration). When applicable, these social dynamics are addressed in this study.

### **Research Method**

Van-Manen (1988) states that a researcher should choose a method that holds “a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator . . . in the first place” (p. 2). As one whose instructional practices are continually shaped by the stories students tell of their own experiences, I find that phenomenology as a research method resonates with my worldview. Phenomenology is the study of how we experience the world. It “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). Attinasi (1991) argues that this approach is often missing in research on students in higher education. Most institutional research uses quantitative methods that create a distance between the researcher and the subject and reduce student experiences to numerical outcome data on retention, attrition, and grade attainment. However, to understand who students are and what motivates their decisions to stay or leave and how they learn requires a research method that captures the voices of the students themselves as they describe their experiences. In the case of this study, illuminating the experiences Latina students have in learning community classrooms, drawing from their own perspectives, will enrich our understanding of who these students are and how they learn.

Phenomenology as a philosophical movement was first conceptualized by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000). Husserl (1900) laid the foundation for phenomenology in his first great work published in two parts, *Logical Investigations*, and in his later lectures in 1907 he fleshed out the concepts that guide phenomenology as a research method (Husserl, 1970). Husserl believed that “all scientific knowledge rests on inner evidence” (1900, p. 61). A person has to return to her or his self, or consciousness, to understand the nature and meaning of the world. These perceptions of reality, these manifestations of “inner evidence,” are the phenomena to be studied, and these phenomena, in turn, “are the building blocks of human science and the basis of all knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26).

The purpose of phenomenology is to look deeply at the structure of lived experience. Such experience can include thoughts, emotions, memories, and perceptions as well as social and linguistic activities. Phenomenological researchers collect data on individual experiences and then identify and describe the common essence of that experience. According to Van-Manen (1988), the goal of phenomenological research in education is a “critical pedagogical competence” (p. 8). He defines this as knowledge of how to act tactfully and thoughtfully in an educational setting. Learning to act with tact and thoughtfulness is especially important when instructors and administrators work with students, such as underprepared Latina students, who have historically not been a part of higher education. Many of these students already feel unsure of their place in academia. By opening ourselves to hearing about and striving to understanding their experiences, we are better positioned to create educational contexts that are welcoming and meaningful to such students; our actions will be tactful and thoughtful.

There are a number of key concepts in phenomenology. First of all, phenomenology begins with the *lifeworld*. Van-Manen (1990) describes the lifeworld as pre-reflective reality as people experience it. It is the experience without conceptualization, categorization, or abstraction; it is the everyday experience as it is lived. Phenomenological researchers study this lifeworld in an attempt to be in closer contact with it and to understand it; their research does not attempt to explain or control the world. Second, phenomenology is based on the *intentionality of consciousness*



(Becker, 1992; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000).

Phenomenological researchers believe that people have no access to the world but through consciousness, or in Husserl's (1970) term, the "inner evidence." Reality and consciousness are inextricably linked together, and one cannot experience the one without the other. The world cannot be described except through consciousness, that is, through the experiences of an individual. Third, phenomenology is the *study of essences* (Van-Manen, 1990). The essence of an experience is the "universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon" (Van-Manen, 1988, p. 10). When a researcher captures the essence of an experience accurately it rings true for all those who experience the particular manifestation of that experience. A fourth key concept is that a researcher must undergo a *process of reduction* to be open to understanding the experience of others (Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994). The four steps of this process include (a) allowing oneself to feel a sense of wonder about the world; (b) setting aside one's preconceived biases and expectations about the phenomenon being studied, also termed *epoche* or *bracketing*; (c) divesting oneself of the pre-existing theories of the phenomenon being studied; and (d) seeing past the particular experience to find what is universal (Van-Manen, 1990).

For this study, the lifeworld studied is the learning community experience set in a community college. How this lifeworld is experienced by Latina students is the subject of my questioning. As students reflect upon and share these experiences, it is through the lenses of their own consciousness. How they interpret and communicate their experiences is uniquely individual based on their histories, personalities, and inclinations. As the researcher, I listen with an open mind and make every attempt to follow the process of reduction to be receptive to and perceptive of the experiences being shared. Once these experiences are expressed, I analyze the information collected, grouping common statements and identifying themes, and uncover the essence of the lived experience of learning communities for Latina students.

Phenomenologists stress the unique attributes of individuals (Becker, 1992). They are less concerned with the ways that culture may shape common perspectives

among a group of individuals. Since this study is specifically looking at the experiences of Latina students and not those of other cultural groups, the concept of culture is important to consider. While a phenomenological method is used in the design of this study, elements of ethnography may be helpful in the interpretation of data.

Ethnography is a research method that attempts to describe cultural scenes and reconstruct the shared belief system, practices, and behaviors of a distinct group (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Culture has been defined by anthropologists in innumerable ways. Geertz (1973) poses a semiotic definition: Culture is the “web of significance” spun by individuals and the study of culture is an analysis of those webs, an attempt to make sense out of social interactions that on the surface seem unfathomable (p. 145). As I interpret the interview transcripts collected from the students participating in this study, I do not ignore the sociocultural contexts that Latina students may share.

### **Procedures**

Phenomenological research focuses deeply on the experiences of a few individuals as an attempt to understand the essence of a phenomenon they all share. Typical data collection techniques in a phenomenological study include in-depth, and often multiple, one-on-one interviews and reflective writing by the researcher and participants. As a research method, interviews are central to most qualitative studies. They allow the researcher to delve into affective as well as cognitive aspects of the responses by participants and they allow for an in- depth understanding of a particular phenomenon (Hernandez, 2002). This study focuses on the experiences of underprepared Latina students participating in learning community courses at community colleges. A small sample was chosen to allow me to delve more deeply into the lived experiences of these students.

### **Data Needs and Data Collection Techniques**

In qualitative studies, the researcher and the participants are co-creators of new knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The primary ways that this co-creation occurs is by ensuring that participants feel able to express themselves openly and honestly and by including the voices of all participants in the study. The researcher needs to build a

trusting relationship with each participant so that participants feel comfortable. The researcher also needs to be diligent about capturing the voices of the participants accurately. In many ways, the data collected is only as good as the relationship established between the researcher and the participants.

I follow Moustakas's (1994) steps in both data collection and interpretation. Specifically in terms of data collection, I collected data through in-depth interviews of thirteen individual students. Moustakas stresses that this process should be informal, open-ended, and interactive. These interviews evolved into more organic dialogues. Dialogues, by their conversant nature, are more apt than interviews to put both participants on an equal plane. Dialogues allow the students to guide the conversation into areas that are important to them.

Organizing focus groups of participants was another means of collecting data. Focus groups are discussions organized around a specific topic involving a select number of individuals who have experience with that topic (Gibbs, 1997). The purpose of focus groups is to generate additional information and explore diverse perspectives on the topic. In addition to responding to questions posed by the researcher, participants are encouraged to talk with one another, asking their own questions, commenting on the experiences of others, and sharing anecdotes. This group interaction helps the researcher understand "not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way" (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 1).

**Sample interview questions.** The types of questions asked are critical to getting students to open up and talk about their personal experiences in the classroom. Moustakas (1994) recommends the researcher prepare questions in advance to meeting with participants; however, in his experience, these questions are often changed or dropped altogether depending on the stories that emerge. The following questions, modeled from those provided by Moustakas (1994), are samples of what I brought to each interview:

1. Tell me about your past week in your learning community classes.
2. Tell me about what you are learning in these classes. What is easy?  
What is hard?

3. How are the learning community classes affecting you? What changes do you see in yourself because of this experience?
4. Describe yourself as a learner. What kind of learning environment do you do best in?
5. How are your learning community classes different from the other classes you are taking this semester?
6. What feelings do you have when you think of your experience in learning community classes?

A final question that I tried to keep in the forefront of my mind as I wrote my own observations and reflections of the interviews was, “What is the context of this particular interview and how might that be affecting the content and flow of the conversation?”

Before moving into the heart of the interview, it is important to establish a trusting and relaxing environment for students to feel free to talk candidly. I did this by starting each interview with a casual conversation, asking the students to tell me a little about themselves. It gave the students a chance to relax, open up, and get used to talking to a stranger. In addition, it is important to give the student a chance to reflect on the experience before asking her to speak about it. I did this by asking each participant to think about what happened that week in her learning community classes and giving each silence and space to do so.

### **Participant and Site Section**

The sites for this study included two community college learning community programs. I looked for learning community programs that consisted of a paired set of courses with at least one course specifically designed for underprepared students. The theory behind such a pairing is that the support the students receive in the developmental course boosts their ability to perform the more academically sophisticated tasks required of them in college-level courses. In addition, foundational literacy skills being learned in the developmental level course are contextualized and made more authentic through linking with college-level courses. Since this proposed study centers specifically on the experiences of underprepared students, it makes sense to focus on learning communities that are intentionally designed for this group of learners.

I determined specific sites by asking learning community experts to identify colleges that had thriving learning community programs designed for underprepared students. I wanted to choose students from thriving rather than weak learning community programs because the focus of the interviews was on the students' experiences in learning communities, not on problems that exist within a particular learning community structure. Because the focus of this study is on student experience rather than program success, I did not provide detailed criteria for "thriving" learning community programs, but rather asked the experts to identify strong programs based on their experience. The learning community experts I approached were program coordinators from learning community programs highlighted as exemplary in the *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success* (Boroch et al., 2007) and regional coordinators of California's Basic Skills Initiative who were familiar with successful developmental programs across the state. Program and regional coordinators gave me names of colleges with thriving learning community programs that included developmental level classes. I contacted the learning community program coordinators from these colleges to determine if there was a sizable Latina student population participating in learning community classes. For those programs that had a significant number of Latina students enrolled, I asked the coordinators if they were amenable to a research study being conducted using students from that program and if their colleges accepted the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols from Oregon State University and had their own protocols in place. Based on these conversations, I narrowed my search to two sites from which to draw students: West Creek College and Northern College.

Once I identified two learning community programs that matched my criteria, I approached the instructors who taught in the program to describe my study and ask for permission to recruit participants from their classes. At West Creek, there was only one learning community that matched my criteria, so I sought permission to recruit students from that pair of courses. At Northern, there were six learning communities that matched my criteria. The program coordinator recommended that I recruit students from the two learning communities that had the largest number of Latinas enrolled in them.

At both colleges the instructors were helpful and graciously allowed me to recruit participants from their classes. From these three classes, one at West Creek and two at Northern, I invited students to participate through classroom presentations modeled after the recruitment materials used by Dieckmeyer (2006). The script of the presentation is in Appendix A.

Thirteen students who self-identified as Latina participated in this study. My aim was to have five to eight student participants; however, fifteen students expressed interest in my study and filled out Informed Consent Documents. Of those fifteen, thirteen showed up to be interviewed. Six were in the West Creek learning community and seven in Northern College learning communities. This number was small enough to allow for in-depth interviews and yet large enough to provide rich data to develop credible common themes and allow for individual variations (Polkinghorne, 1989). Every Latina student who expressed interest in participating was included; there were no criteria with which students were turned away.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected were categorized to provide insight based on the original research question: What are the experiences of Latina students enrolled in developmental learning community courses which have the greatest impact on their learning?

The transcriptions of the interviews and focus group sessions were analyzed for significant statements and emerging themes related to how Latina students experience learning communities. Significant statements are sentences that highlight an understanding of how participants experience the phenomenon. These statements were clustered into themes. Textural description (a description of what the participants experienced in the learning community program, the “what”) and structural description (a description of the context that influenced how participants experienced learning communities, the “how”) were written based on information gathered from the interviews, focus group session, and reflective writing (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Strategies to Ensure Soundness of Data Collection, Analysis, and Interpretation**

In an interpretive social science approach, truth is measured through intersubjective understanding, i.e., how well a theory or explanation of a phenomenon resonates with those who experience that phenomenon and how well outsiders can understand the realities of those being studied (Neuman, 2003). I follow several strategies to ensure that this intersubjective understanding is achieved in each stage of data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

An important prerequisite to data collection is building a trusting relationship with the participants. The data in this study came directly from students through interviews. For students to express themselves openly in an interview situation, they need to feel relaxed, comfortable, and safe. Interviews were conducted in safe and neutral locations, as determined by the students. In addition I used member-checking as a means to ensure soundness in my data collection. Once interviews were completed, I sent transcriptions to participants and asked them to send back any corrections warranted.

According to Worthen (2002), validity in qualitative research is measured through demonstrating that data collection was done in a thorough and authentic manner and that in its analysis there is repetition and redundancy. One method for doing this is to describe emerging meaning and then impose it back on the data to make sure it rings true. By collecting data from various sources – multiple interviews – I established what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call credibility in my findings. By careful attention to detail and exhaustive analysis, I hope the text created rings true to both those who have lived the experience and those who view it from the outside.

I used MAXQDA software in coding the data. In all, I had approximately 300 pages of transcripts to code. MAXQDA simplified the manual work of coding and was useful in keeping track of and cataloguing coded segments. I went through three cycles of coding. I used attribute and holistic coding for the initial cycle. In the second cycle, I used descriptive and in vivo coding (Saldana, 2009). After two cycles of coding, I had 322 segments of coded texts that varied in length from single words to full pages of transcripts. These 322 segments were the significant statements that highlighted the

participants lived experiences in learning community classrooms. These statements were categorized into 38 codes. See Appendix D. The larger coding categories included learning community class teaching/learning, parents and family, non learning community classes, type of learner, making connections, and perceptions of improvement. Many in vivo codes were also embedded in the larger coding categories.

At times, coding categories were labeled with the students' own words ("in vivo" coding), for example, "I feel very supported," "I learn from people," and "I was nervous." After two cycles of coding, a data reduction process was used in which codes that were not conceptually salient were eliminated and those that were similar were clustered together. This process distilled the codes to emerging themes that occurred across the data sources and were shared by several participants. These themes, in turn, were grouped by topic and are fully explained in chapter four.

The use of a focus group was another means of ensuring soundness in data collection. Focus groups are especially useful as a complement to interviews and as a means of triangulation (Gibbs, 1997). In a group setting, the power dynamic between researcher and participant is minimized, and there may be thoughts and impressions student participants are more apt to share with their peers present (Gibbs, 1997). In analyzing the transcripts from focus group sessions, I identified examples of overlap of the significant statements and themes that emerged from the interviews and examples of divergence as well.

Furthermore, through my own reflective writing, I explored the expectations and presuppositions I brought to this study. Like Heidegger (1962), I don't believe it is possible to completely bracket one's experience and to step outside of one's place in history and time, but by identifying and exploring my own beliefs related to the research project, I made these explicit and accounted for them in my analysis.

### **Strategies to Protect Human Subjects**

I completed the Oregon State University (OSU) course in the Protection of Human Research Subjects in July 2007 and am well versed in the protocols to ensure that participants in research are protected. Once my proposal was accepted, I applied for approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Only after receiving approval from



the IRB did I begin my research project. A few strategies I put in place to ensure protection of human subjects included using pseudonyms for all participants and keeping the name of the institution in which they study confidential. Consent forms were collected before any data were collected. Human research subject policies for OSU and for the institutions in which the research were conducted were followed.

Participating in a formal research study may be mystifying to students new to academia, so I was conscientious about explaining my research purpose and design to the participants. I took extra effort during interviews to answer questions about my process and goals and responded to any concerns expressed. Participants were free to leave the study at any time without fear of retribution or adverse consequence. Luckily, none chose to do so. Following Moustakas's advice (1994), I kept my data collection procedures fluid so participants had opportunities to suggest changes to improve their comfort and ease of communication.

### **Personal Disclosure**

My epistemology has, naturally, been shaped by my personal and professional experiences. I grew up in Beirut, Lebanon, the daughter of a Palestinian father and European-American mother. We lived in a middle-class neighborhood in a predominantly Muslim section of the city, and my siblings and I attended an American school. Slipping between cultures was our norm, and my earliest and most vivid memories are of those moments where the world views of those close to me intersected and, at times, collided. I never had the luxury of believing that there was one truth, one way of being, because my early life was woven from multiple threads of truth and diverse versions of reality. The interpretive social science assumptions that reality is socially constructed and that, consequently, there are many truths reflect my own experiences of the world.

When I came to the United States to attend college, feelings of homesickness and isolation competed with exhilaration and newfound discovery as I adjusted to my new life. These experiences led me to a career of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). I related to my students' feelings of "otherness" and the challenges they faced deconstructing and reconstructing cultural assumptions. I understood their

struggles to create new identities to fit their new lives and the cost that came with these decisions.

My interest in how Latina students experience college stems in large part from my own journey. Attending college is a pivotal experience for many women and this is especially true for women who have grown up within the confines of traditionally-defined gender roles. While my parents taught me that I could be and do whatever I wanted, the society in which we lived had historically put restrictions on women. My father's mother never learned to read or write, and none of my father's sisters were expected to nor achieved the same levels of education as their brothers. Many Latina students have similar experiences. They are expected to put the needs of their families before their own. Attending college becomes a hard-won luxury rather than an expectation.

The stories Latina students have told me about being in college, stories of struggle and determination, have propelled me to look deeper into their experiences. As mentioned in the first chapter, I have worked with Latina students in ESL and developmental reading and writing classes for fifteen years but always in classes held in a tradition format. I have not had the privilege of collaborating in a learning community environment. I am curious to know how Latina students experience this pedagogical model.

Although I am adopting an interpretive social science approach to this study, my upbringing has made me sensitive to issues of class, ethnicity, and gender and the dynamics of power and privilege that exist in every society. The political and economic realities of crossing borders and starting over are part of my family's history. And as I listen to and explore the experiences Latina students have in learning community classrooms, it is through a lens of empathy and understanding for their social positions in both the community college and in American society at large.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND THEMES

The intent of this study is to understand the experiences of Latina students enrolled in developmental learning community courses. I am specifically interested in the perceptions they have of their own learning within this pedagogical structure. To that end, I interviewed thirteen students at two California community colleges. In addition, I held a focus group with the students at one of the colleges.

This chapter is organized in five sections. The first section gives a brief overview of the research context: the two colleges, the learning community class structure in each, and profiles of the thirteen participating students. The second section describes the students' first impressions as they started their learning community classes. The third section includes findings on how students felt about the learning community environment. The fourth section includes a contrast of the students' experiences in their learning community classes with those in their non-learning community courses. And the last section includes findings on the perceptions students had of their own learning. Within each section, emerging themes are introduced.

### **Section One: Overview of Research Context**

This research was conducted at two small community colleges in northern California. Both colleges are located in rural communities with strong ties to agriculture. For purposes of anonymity, the names of the colleges have been changed to West Creek College and Northern College. Both colleges have offered linked courses as learning communities for at least five years.

At West Creek College, the learning community was part of the Puente Project, a state-funded program designed to increase the number of educationally disadvantaged students who enroll in four-year colleges and universities (Puente, 2010a). This learning community paired an English class that was one level below freshman composition with a counseling class designed to prepare students to transfer to a four-year university. The English class carried four units and the counseling two. These courses were hard-linked, so students were required to enroll in both. The coursework in both classes was integrated and focused on Mexican-American and Latino issues. There was only one set

of paired courses at West Creek, so all students interviewed were from the same learning community. There were 24 students in the class, 11 of whom were women. Of these 11, eight appeared to be Latina, and six of those eight chose to participate in this study.

Northern College is larger than West Creek and its learning community program more extensive. Again, English courses were paired with counseling classes. In this case, the English class was two levels below freshman composition and the counseling class focused on learning styles and study skills. All six sections of English courses at this level were linked with both the counseling class and an English lab, so every student at this level was enrolled in a seven-and-a-half unit learning community. The English class was five units, the English lab half a unit, and the counseling class was two units. The courses were hard-linked, so students were required to enroll in all three. Assignments between the English and counseling classes were integrated but the courses were not thematically linked. At the recommendation of the instructor who taught the counseling component of these learning communities, I recruited students from two sections, one that met in the morning and one in the afternoon. These were the sections that the instructor said had the most Latina students enrolled. The morning class had 25 students in it, 11 of whom were women. Four of these students agreed to participate. The afternoon class had 20 students, 10 of whom were women. Five students from that class agreed to participate; however, two did not show up for their interviews. Both classes were so ethnically diverse it was difficult to determine who among the women, aside from those who self-identified to me, were Latina.

### **The Students**

Thirteen students participated in this study, six students from West Creek College and seven from Northern College. The participants from West Creek College were all enrolled in the Puente Project learning community. They agreed to meet me at their campus on a Saturday morning. Individual interviews ran between half an hour and an hour. After the individual interviews were complete, we held a focus group in which five of the six students participated.

At Northern College, I interviewed seven students; four were enrolled in the morning learning community class and three in the afternoon. All participants were enrolled in one of the learning communities that linked developmental English, an English lab, and a counseling class. Interviews spanned two weekday mornings and each was between a half hour and an hour in length. These took place on the Northern College campus. The schedules of the women in the Northern College learning community were more complicated and I was unable to schedule a focus group at a time many could participate. Consequently, the data gathered from these participants came strictly from individual interviews.

The interviews at both sites and the focus group at West Creek were tape-recorded. Transcripts were made from the recordings and sent to the students as a means of member-checking. Four students made comments about their transcripts, all positive, and one student requested minor factual changes which I incorporated. Students were also given an opportunity to choose a pseudonym for this research project; two students chose their pseudonyms and I chose the rest. I also gave pseudonyms to instructors and all other classmates mentioned in the interviews to ensure anonymity.

General demographic information about the students who participated in this study show that the majority are what is often called Generation 1.5: non-native speakers of English who have gone through the American school system before entering college (Harklau, Losey, & Siegel, 1999). While all but two of the students were born in the United States, most identified Spanish as their first language and their ties to their parents' homeland were still strong. Even though Spanish was often their first language, all but two learned English at early ages and spoke like native speakers. Only one student, Delfina, was educated outside of California. She went to school in her native Argentina until her family immigrated to California when she was 11. At the time of the interviews, students' ages ranged from 18 to 37 with half of them first-time college students. The younger students were most likely to live at home with their parents, while most of the students who were 25 and older had children of their own and lived apart from their parents. All of the students were either single or divorced.

Approximately half of the students work outside the home. Almost every student expressed intent to transfer to a university. See Table 1.

The demographic chart above does not do justice to the remarkable diversity in experiences and backgrounds of these students. The student profiles below provide a glimpse into this diversity.

**Dulcina.** Dulcina is a large-framed 18-year-old who arrived to the interview stylishly dressed in a bright magenta summer dress. She joked and smiled a lot during the interview and talked in that slightly ironic way of teenagers: “I don’t have any kids, I’m not married. I live with my parents. Um . . . that’s about it. I go to the gym sometimes.” Both her parents work in a tomato processing plant, and the expectation was that Dulcina would do the same: “They’re like, *yeah, when you’re 18, you’re gonna work there*. And I was, like, 10, and I was like, *yeah whatever*.” This is her first semester at West Creek, and she is juggling a full load of classes while working eight hours a day, seven days a week in the cannery. She brings her laptop to the cannery and works on homework when she can. When talking about the work, she became very animated; she is extremely knowledgeable about the various operations of the processing plant. She chose West Creek because it was close to home.

**Delfina.** Delfina is a slim 21-year-old with an expressive mouth. She spoke quickly and with great animation, playing with her cell phone throughout the interview. She wore a crisp white shirt and pressed jeans. She is the only one I interviewed with a noticeable Spanish accent. She was born in Argentina and moved to California with her family at age 11. Her father’s work spanned three continents before he settled in northern California. The family followed him to California a year after. Education is important to Delfina’s parents: “It is basically, like, the first thing always.” Delfina wanted to study E-commerce at a state university, but financial and legal obstacles stood in the way: “My parents, they get good money, I don’t get financial aid . . . because I actually don’t have, um, papers. So, like, they have to pay for, like, everything, and I don’t want them to pay for all my education.” She has been working half-time as a lab technician and secretary at a local rice mill since she was 17. Delfina has been taking classes at West College for three years although she intends to transfer

Table 1

*Student Demographics*

College	Student	Age	Birthplace	First language	First time college student	Lives with parents	Currently working	Has kids	Plans to transfer	Major
WC	Dulcina	18	California	Spanish	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	GE
WC	Delfina	21	Argentina	Spanish	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Marketing
WC	Jade	25	California	Spanish	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Nursing
WC	Cecilia	25	California	Spanish	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Human Services
WC	Marisol	18	California	Spanish	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	GE
WC	Irena	28	Mexico	Spanish	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Accounting
North	Frankie	35	California	English	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Human Services
North	Carmen	18	California	Spanish	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Photography
North	Candi	22	Unknown	Spanish	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	GE
North	Ynez	18	California	Spanish	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	GE
North	Josefina	37	California	Spanish	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Allied Health
North	Dolores	18	California	Spanish	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Psychology
North	Alma	18	California	Spanish	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	GE Psychology

to a state university once her general education classes are complete. She chose West Creek because it is close to home.

**Jade.** Jade is in her mid-twenties and exudes an energetic, take-charge attitude. She is dramatic and precise in her conversation. She wore stylish glasses and a green v-neck top. When she graduated from high school, she had the opportunity to attend a state university that was a six-hour drive from her hometown, but her parents did not want her moving so far away: “Like, my parents were so *You’re not going that far. If you’re going to go anywhere, it’s going to be here in West Creek.* Right before I graduated from high school, they were like, *Don’t even get ideas. We won’t let you go.* I begged. I literally begged.” Jade ended up enrolling in a dental assistant program and working full-time to help pay for the education of her two younger brothers, both at four-year universities. When she told me about this sacrifice, her eyes filled with tears: ‘Cause I have to, I helped out my brothers . . . and, it’s really important for me to help out my brothers.” Now that her brothers have graduated, she is returning to school to become a nurse. She works as a dental assistant and sees the work nurses do: “Hey, the nurses are here, they balance their checkbook . . . and, I’m doing all the work. Wait a minute, I can be a nurse. How hard can that be?” Jade has been interested in the medical professions since her first trip to the dentist as a child when she fell in love with the smell in the dental office. “It’s eugenol oil that causes that smell. And I’m like, oh my God, I so love it!” Jade has been enrolled at West Creek for a year taking her nursing prerequisites.

**Cecilia.** Cecilia looks younger than her 25 years, but there is a seriousness that counters her round youthful face. She comes across as pulled together and proper, so it is a surprise to hear that she has struggled with chemical dependencies: “I actually got off track for a few years . . . And it’s hard. It is hard, and . . . just trying to get myself back together right now, and it’s its – I mean, I’ve gone through apartments, I’ve gone through cars, I’ve . . . for being 25, I’ve been through a lot.” Cecilia said that she has been clean for 90 days and is doing rehab on her own. As a child, she was placed in a class for gifted children. She said that she could have skipped two grades in elementary school, but her mother didn’t want her “to feel like an outsider.” Her mother was in and



out of her life, and her father working long hours in construction, so she raised her younger brother and sister herself. She held jobs until she “kinda started falling off.” She became most animated when talking about a position she held at a local car dealership: “In the first three months I was there I actually boosted their, their, customer satisfaction, I guess, percentage, in sales and service from about 60 or 70%. I got sales up to actually 100 and service was up to 90% in the first three months that I was there.” She speaks of her father with great pride: “I don’t think there is anything my dad can’t do.” This is Cecilia’s first semester at West Creek; she chose this college because it was close to home.

**Marisol.** Marisol is fresh out of high school at 18 years old. Her hair is dyed copper and stylishly swept across her forehead. She wore a blue plaid flannel shirt and jeans. She is very soft-spoken and answered most questions during the interview with short answers and a shy smile. Both of her parents are academics, her father is an administrator at a nearby state university and her mother a counselor at West Creek. Marisol says she likes that because “I can always go visit her when I’m bored.” Her mother is currently working on her Masters degree. Marisol knew she was going to go to college either where her father or mother worked. She decided on West Creek because she was late for orientation at her father’s university and could only sign up for two classes. It was more cost effective for her to take her classes at the community college and then transfer. This is Marisol’s first semester at West Creek. Once the interview was over, Marisol became more animated. She told me that this was the second time that she participated in a research project. The first project looked at the relationship between church attendance and academic achievement in Latina/Latino high school students.

**Irena.** Irena is a 28-year-old returning student with light-brown shoulder-length hair and a smile that lights up her face. She was dressed youthfully in a bright sun dress and patent-leather mary janes. The first thing she told me was, “I am a single mom and I have two kids.” She started taking classes at West Creek eleven years ago. Then she got a job as an ESL assistant and tried to juggle school and work. When her supervisor was no longer able to accommodate her school schedule, she quit school. Once she became a

parent, she had difficulty with her work schedule: “It was really hard. I wouldn’t see my kid.” When she became pregnant a second time, she stopped working. Irena lives separate from her parents although she says they are not happy about that: “They can’t see me single. They would love to see me married, someone taking care of me. Well, I’m like, I can take care of myself, too.” Although her English is fluent, Irena is more comfortable speaking Spanish. She returned to school last year and is studying accounting. She chose West Creek because it was close to home.

**Frankie.** Frankie is a returning student in her mid-30s, heavy-set and fair. She was casually dressed in a brown sweatshirt and khakis. She spoke slowly and deliberately about her difficult childhood and current struggles. “I was, um, in foster care as a child... and, um, the foster family that I ended up with was not nice.” She started college right out of high school, taking Administration of Justice classes “‘cause I wanted to investigate foster homes and get the bad ones out of there.” That was 17 years ago. Frankie has three children. She was in an abusive relationship that included domestic violence. Her children were placed in foster care for two months. This experience propelled her to return to school to try to help other families: “I decided I wanted to, um, help other families going through life issues and things of that nature. So, I came back and now I’m majoring in human services.” Frankie was diagnosed with ADHD and a panic disorder and receives services for disabled students at Northern College. She works half time as a parent advocate for families with open Child Protective Services cases. During her interview, she talked at length about racism, and how she disliked reading or watching movies about race issues, but it seemed difficult for her to articulate why. This is Frankie’s second semester at Northern College; she chose Northern because it was close to home.

**Carmen.** Carmen looks and sounds older than her 18 years. She kept her grey wool coat buttoned up tightly throughout the interview and approached the questions warily, as if she was used to her views being misunderstood. She spoke with a sardonic confidence that struck me as unusual for someone her age. At times in the interview, she would turn questions back to me, and she ended the interview by telling me that I would see her photos in Teen Vogue one day. Carmen is the oldest of three children and

both her parents work in the fields. She expressed a sense of responsibility in helping her family financially: “I need to get them out of there, out of where they work . . . Also with, um, the bills . . . I need to do this. I don’t like being the oldest, but . . .” As a high school student, she sang with her friend’s father at Cinco de Mayo festivals. She said her father wanted to be a songwriter but her mother “was negative” and “put down my dad’s dreams.” Now Carmen is determined to be a photographer and not let her mother do the same to her. Carmen chose to enroll in Northern for financial reasons even though her mother expected her to go straight to a four-year university: “I was like, we don’t have the money for it, so we have to – I have to go here.” This is her first semester at Northern.

**Candi.** Candi is a reserved 22-year-old with a warm smile. She was conservatively dressed in a turtleneck sweater and twill blazer. She approached the interview very seriously and turned away from the recorder as she talked. When she glanced at it, she seemed to lose her train of thought and become quiet. Candi’s parents divorced when she was young and until recently her brothers and sisters were split between the parents. Candi remembers her parents working hard and not having time for her: “Bills marked their world, so you know, we were just kinda there, you know, and my older sister took care of us.” Candi and her siblings now live with her mother who owns a restaurant in a nearby city and is rarely home. She and her siblings and cousin take care of the house. Candi was not motivated to go to college when she graduated from high school, so she took three years off. She was interested in doing something in the arts. It was her brother who gave her the motivation to start college: “My brother wanted to come, actually, and he told me how to – he asked me how to sign up, and since he was younger I was like, I can’t have him go to school and not me!” This is her second year at Northern.

**Ynez.** Ynez just graduated from high school. Short and solidly built, she was dressed casually in a grey hoodie and jeans and looked older than her 18 years. She was soft-spoken and serious as she talked about her goals and the struggles she had with her parents. She wants to help troubled children: “Like, instead of being in gangs, or they think they don’t have an opportunity in school, actually give them an opportunity.”

Ynez spoke only Spanish when she started pre-school. She remembers being confused between reading in English and speaking Spanish. She was reading at a first-grade level in third grade, so her mother put her in a reading program. “And that’s where I caught up.” Ynez spoke at length about her parents. They only reached sixth grade in Mexico and have traditional views about gender roles. She said a couple times during the interview that they were “pulling her back.” She expressed frustration at the limitations they put on her: “Like, I . . . get sick of the rule book they have. I see that man and woman are alike 100%. There’s no difference. But my dad sees it differently . . . He’s like, *women are weaker* . . . and it’s like, no that’s not true.” Ynez expressed a desire to move beyond her parents’ way of thinking: “They always say, like, Latinas are, like . . . us, we don’t go far. You end up getting pregnant and married at a young age, and it’s like, no that’s not true. We ARE smart and we can go forward if we really want to.” Ynez chose to come to Northern because it was close to home and her parents told her she needed to go to community college before transferring. This is Ynez’s first semester at Northern.

**Josefina.** Josefina was interviewed over the phone because she was recovering from the H1N1 virus and had a sick baby at home. Josefina is an articulate and knowledgeable mother of two in her mid-30s. With over 10 years experience working with disadvantaged youth and HIV positive Latina women in two local counties, she is well-versed in how to access and refer others to social services: “My knack is social work.” She took classes at local community colleges for four years after she graduated from high school in 1990, but she did poorly and ended up on probation. Recently, she went through a deep depression after ending a difficult relationship and moved back in with her parents. Her mother talked her into re-enrolling through a local program designed for “anybody in the community that was interested in further learning about child development.” Josefina is not sure exactly what she will do with her education, but she says she will most likely stay in the medical field: “I do want to find a job that, um, I can support my daughter and I . . . So I figure the best thing I can do for her is, um, is take the steps myself.” This is her second year back at Northern.

**Dolores.** Dolores is a petite 18-year-old who came to the interview in fashionably narrow jeans and a stud piercing below her lower lip. She had a direct style and lots of energy that kept one leg bouncing during the whole interview. Dolores is the youngest of three children raised by her mother who is an accountant at a local hospital and her step-father who works at a glazer shop. Her father passed away when she was six. Dolores says that her mother is excited about her going to college because she didn't have that opportunity herself. "She came . . . to the United States and she didn't want her GED, she wanted her diploma, and um, so she went to adult school and I helped her how to get her diploma instead of a GED." Dolores's brother also attends Northern College, but "he's been coming here for awhile. I told myself, I don't want to be him til I'm 24. I just wanna get my two years or three years in . . . and then I wanna go straight to a university." Dolores chose to go to Northern because "I wasn't very good in school, and I always knew that I was going to come to the JC. And, of course Northern 'cause it's closer." Dolores is a soccer player and hopes to play for Northern next year. This is her first semester in college.

**Alma.** Alma is a large 18-year-old with a powerful build. She wore a long-sleeved t-shirt and jeans and sat squarely in front of me. She smiled a lot and had fun turning the tables during the interview. In fact, she started the interview by asking me questions, beginning with: "When you're back to school are you gonna tell who we were and stuff?" Alma exuded confidence and spoke unguardedly about herself. Although educated in California, she did not learn to speak, read, or write English until third grade. She learned fast: "I remember in fourth grade, I was speaking English with my teacher and I was like, how did I do that? Like, I'm speaking English!" Alma wanted to study fashion design at a private institute, but her parents had different ideas: "My parents don't really know about the colleges, so they're always like, *oh be a police-* 'cause I'm a big girl, so they'll be like, *oh, you know, why don't you become a cop or a lawyer or a secretary?* And I was just like, no, I don't want to do that." For financial reasons, her parents decided she would go to community college. She decided to study psychology. She is interested in transferring to a state university in San Diego because she has extended family there. She is eager to separate herself from her

immediate family, but wants the security of having relatives nearby: “My family’s here, but I want to be away from them, but at the same time it’s like my uncle and family, if I ever get homesick they’re right there . . . Just as long as I get away from my real family, just when I – so when I turn, like, 20 and 30 I’m not, like, dependent on them.” This is her first semester at Northern.

### **Section One Summary**

Thirteen community college students were interviewed for this study, all Latinas enrolled in developmental learning community classes at two rural northern California colleges. The learning communities paired developmental English with counseling classes. At one college, this was part of the state-funded Puente Project. At the other college, every section of English at this level was offered in a learning community structure.

Although the students all self-identified as Latina, there was remarkable diversity among them in terms of personal background and life experiences. Some students’ parents had attended college, some with advanced degrees, and others had not completed elementary school. Some parents worked professional jobs, others in restaurants, and some worked in the fields. Many of the students held jobs in canneries, rice mills, retail outlets, restaurants, and dental offices. The students experienced a variety of home environments: living with foster parents, living with divorced parents, raising siblings on their own, and living with their parents and siblings in traditional nuclear families. All of the students who had children of their own were single parents, most of whom relied on their own parents for help with child-rearing. While some of the students had hoped to attend four-year universities directly out of high school, all of them chose to attend the community colleges closest to their homes.

### **Section Two: First Impressions**

Each student spoke briefly about their first impressions about entering learning community classes. Since half of the students interviewed were first-time college students, many did not separate their first impressions of being in learning communities

with their first impressions of being in college. The impressions of new students and returning students are both addressed in this section.

To understand students' first impressions, it is helpful to know how students ended up in the learning community classes. Students at West Creek College have an option to take their English classes in either a traditional or in a learning community format as a part of the Puente Project. Most of the students I interviewed chose to enroll in the Puente Project learning community when they registered for their English class: Dulcina had been in a similar program in high school; Delfina had failed her English class twice before her counselor urged her to enroll in the section linked with counseling; Irena had heard about the program at another college and was worried she wouldn't get in because she registered late; Cecilia accompanied a friend to a counseling appointment and was convinced by that counselor to re-enroll in college and register for the Puente Project learning community. Jade and Marisol were the only student who ended up in the class without knowing it was a learning community. Jade registered for the English course section and was placed in the accompanying counseling class a week before the first day of class, and Marisol registered late for all her classes and this was the one section of English that still had room in it.

In contrast, at Northern College all sections of this level of developmental English are taught in a learning community format, so students do not have a choice but to register for the linked 7.5 unit course package. I expected this requirement to cause resentment because students are forced into a particular pedagogical structure. I asked the instructor who taught most sections of the counseling component of this learning community about this. She said that there is "a fair amount of resistance" to the structure at the beginning of the term. Students are not happy to find out that they have to register for the added writing lab half unit. The whole idea of a required learning community "has some students grumpy." However, in the interviews, I only heard positive comments about the learning community structure. This instructor postulated that the resistance students experience at the onset of the semester breaks down early on because they begin to see the benefits of the integrated courses. This was born out in my research: By the time I interviewed them during the tenth week of an eighteen-week

semester, students were uniformly positive and appreciative about their learning community experience at Northern College.

When West Creek students talked about their learning community, they often referred to it as “Puente.” Students from Northern often referred to their learning community classes as simply “community.” In the direct quotes, italics are used when students quote others, for example, when they are conveying the words of their teachers or parents in their responses.

### **New Student Impressions**

At both colleges, the most common feelings new students expressed in their interviews about entering college and their learning community classes were nervousness and excitement about embarking on something new. In addition, students felt relief at being able to stay in the same classroom for their next class. Navigating from room to room and building to building as new students was a daunting task they were happy to avoid. One student expressed skepticism about the linked structure of learning communities, and one student, on hearing the term “community” and seeing that one of the instructors was Latina, believed the courses were designed for non-native speakers.

Many students described feeling nervous about entering their learning community class, especially those students who were first-time college students.

DULCINA: I was really nervous, too, like, ‘cause like, none of my friends came here, and I was, like, oh, you know, I’m not gonna know anybody, and like, I’m gonna be a loner. For me, that was my first college class ever. So I had just got there, and I was like, oh I don’t know – like, I didn’t even know how to get around the school. I was like, 800 buildings, okay . . . and I was like – I think I asked somebody, where’s the 800 building? And they were like, *over there*, and I was like, whoa, that’s really big. How am I gonna find my class? And then, like, I found it, and I was like, I hope it’s not a really big class, I hope I’m not late, everyone’s gonna stare at me when I walk in . . . [laughs]

Marisol, another first-time college student, expressed similar feelings:

MARISOL: I was nervous at first.

INTERVIEWER: Why?



MARISOL: Because it's, like, a lot bigger. I don't know, you have, like, high school where you know a lot of everybody, and then college you go in not knowing many people.

Delfina expressed excitement about starting college:

DELFINA: I was excited. I really just wanted . . . I was tired of high school. I was like, oh, I just want to get over it, so when I signed up for college it was just, like, okay, finally I'm gonna do something, and you know, taking the classes I want to take and learn more, and like, the teachers are gonna be strict, but I'm gonna learn.

Although she was excited about going to college, Delfina was initially skeptical about the learning community structure:

DELFINA: Um, at first I thought that class was gonna be weird, 'cause, like two classes combined? And I already heard that from last semester my, um, Sociology teacher told us that they were gonna start doing combinations of, like, classes, but I never thought about, like, getting into one.

A couple of students expressed more confidence about entering this new learning environment. Jade had brothers who went to university before her and gave her information on what to expect:

JADE: I felt pretty comfortable. Um, I have other brothers that went to college. Well, to the university, and so, like, they prepped me, basically what to expect and what not to expect, so . . . I was excited but comfortable, confident. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: What are some of the things your brothers told you?

JADE: Um, *you're going to have a lot of reading, a lot of homework. Um, you're going to meet a lot of people.* So, yeah.

Alma, another first-time college student, described her relief at discovering that she didn't have to move from class to class or face a new room of strangers. She had been worried that she would not be able to navigate the new campus without help:

ALMA: Well, it was especially – it was really helpful for me, like, the first day of school that I found out that we were gonna have, like, the same class for counseling, and I was like, oh, that's good, 'cause then I don't have to like, search . . . and I was really embarrassed to ask around, like, where the classes were, so my English teacher was like, *oh for your next period you stay here.* I was like, oh that's super cool!

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

ALMA: And then, um, she was like, *it'll be the same group in your counseling class* and I was like, that's super cool, too, 'cause then, like, I know these people will be in the same class, and I won't have to make, like – I won't have to be, like, embarrassed because I'll know these people again, and I'll see them tomorrow, so . . .

In the West Creek focus group, Marisol and Dulcina also expressed relief once they entered their learning community class and were welcomed by the other students:

MARISOL: And, I came into the class kind of, like, a week or two later, than everybody, and so, I was really nervous, like, they're all gonna be like, *why is she here?* [laughs]

GROUP: [laughs]

MARISOL: And um, but everybody was really nice. Like, they just started talking to me the first day and I was like, oh . . . yeah, and so . . . it was – I like it. It's a good class.

Dulcina echoed Marisol's feelings:

DULCINA: I'm not, like, scared, but you know, I was kinda nervous, like the first day, you know, like, not to know anyone. And, like, so, in that class, I met a lot of people, and then, like, that first day I was like, ah, okay, you know, these people, they look pretty cool. I don't know them yet, but they look really nice. And, like, it made me feel better. And I was, like, okay, it's okay. [laughs]

Even though she was fresh out of high school, Carmen felt comfortable as a new college student. The same circumstances that made Dulcina and Marisol nervous, facing a class of strangers, did not intimidate Carmen:

CARMEN: It feels . . . pretty chill. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah! Good. [laughs] Is it different from high school?

CARMEN: Yeah, it is.

INTERVIEWER: How?

CARMEN: Well, my teachers that I had my senior year, they're kinda like them, so it's easy. But, it's different because you don't have, like, all your friends with you, and there's, like, no one in the class that you know, and you're barely starting to make any friends, and sometimes you feel, like, I think I seen her somewhere, and then, yeah.

Carmen's first impression of her learning community classes was colored by her recent high school experiences. She had been placed in an ESL course, inappropriately, in high school. When she heard that her English class was part of a learning community, Carmen made the assumption that she was once again being placed in a class for non-native speakers:

CARMEN: Right away when I found out that it was, like, a learning community, I knew it was going to be someone who was speaking another language. It's always like that – I don't know why.

INTERVIEWER: How do you mean?

CARMEN: Because, in high school, it's like they'd put – when I first started high school they put me into bi[lingual] classes which, supposedly because I speak Spanish.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

CARMEN: But I'm like – in my middle school I was never in SDAIE [Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English – content-area courses designed for English Language Learners] classes. I was always in the perfect English. So I told them to change it, and the first day that I got there it was all these Latinos or Filipinos – Asians, or whatever you call them – and, um, the teacher is always either Mexican or another person, um, you know, another foreign language. It's really never an English person – a white person. So I noticed it's like every time you're in a community or a different type of class, there's always Latinos there, it's always – the teacher looks Latina, or, you know, another language, but it's never a white teacher. I always noticed that. Well, the school that I went to – there never actually was American.

INTERVIEWER: What's that say to you? What do you think about that?

CARMEN: Um, for me – well, for me and other students, because I know in the community they don't really know that much English – I think it's good for them because they feel more comfortable knowing that the teacher will understand them. So yeah. But, um, I've been working with probably Latino teachers most of my life because most of my teachers were like that. Or they're all foreign languages, so I understand where they're coming from. And my English teacher – I already had one for my senior year, and she was so nice. She, like, understood everything, so . . .

INTERVIEWER: And she was a Latina or she was white?

CARMEN: She was American.

INTERVIEWER: American. Uh huh. When you say American you mean . . .

CARMEN: White. [laughs]

In her response, Carmen expressed frustration at how she was tracked in high school. Even though she was in mainstream English classes in middle school (what she calls “perfect English”), she was placed in a class for English Language Learners in high school. (Although she called it bilingual, she described the student make-up as Asian and Latino, so it was more likely an ESL class.) Carmen felt misplaced and took the initiative to get her class changed. This experience made her sensitive to the context of her learning community class. The term “learning community” conjured up “difference” to Carmen. And when she went to the class and saw that one of the instructors was Latina and the students were ethnically diverse, she immediately assumed that she had once again been placed in a special class because she spoke Spanish. It is interesting to note how Carmen racialized the experience by equating “American” and “English” with “white.”

### **Returning Student Impressions**

Several of the students who were not first-time college students had had earlier negative experiences with college. Like many of the new students, they felt nervous about this new experience. Their expectations were cautiously optimistic as they turned to the supportive environment of the learning communities for help in areas where they had previously failed.

Frankie struggled academically and psychologically. She returned to college a semester before this interview after a 17-year absence. That semester, she took counseling classes and found that her writing skills were not strong and led to a lower grade than expected in her Case Management course. This led her to ask advice from her counselor on what class to take to help her:

FRANKIE: I told [the counselor] what I wanted, and I said I need to work on my writing. I’ve got a serious issue with run-in sentences. Um . . . and I just talked to my professor from last semester and I asked her – well, uh, my counselor asked me why I got such a low grade in the class. I got a C out of the class, and my other classes were As. And, um,

so I asked and it had to do with my writing. So I, you know, expressed what area I needed help in, I felt I needed help in . . .

An additional difficulty Frankie faced was a panic disorder that made new situations stressful:

FRANKIE: I have, um, what do they call that? It's, um . . . not CTSG, it's um . . . a panic disorder, so, um, I'm being treated for that, too. And, um . . . like, in the beginning of the semester I feel like, really on the spot. You know, and like I just want to run right out the door, but I'm too scared to get up to run out the door.

Josefina spoke about her difficulties when she first enrolled in college prior to enrolling in the learning community class:

JOSEFINA: Um . . . when I first went to college and took my English courses, the learning community wasn't available – at least, what I recall it wasn't available. And, um, it was really hard. It was really hard, um, coming fresh out of high school and not really understanding the college culture and, you know, just all the . . . details that come along with it.

Candi actually placed into transfer-level English but chose to register for a learning community that was two-levels below transfer. She made this decision because the semester before she struggled with the heavy reading requirement in a transfer-level History of Mexico class:

CANDI: Like, the book [for the History of Mexico class] was really hard. It had so much information, like, it is the whole history of Mexico, just compact into, like, a small book, and it just . . . every line just was a fact, you know, just a lot of stuff, and then . . . the teacher was kind of lenient, but still, like, the essays, I did horribly. Like, I got C's, you know, but, like, I was like, I don't wanna struggle like this. It was a real, real big struggle. I almost failed, and I was like, ahhh. And then, like, I cannot do this, I cannot do this. That's why I just chose to start again at the bottom, 'cause I knew that I needed it. [laughs]

Cecilia found her way into the learning community through an unexpected route. She had registered for college when she graduated from high school seven years earlier but never attended:

CECILIA: What happened was, I ended up never coming, and so I took a break longer than I expected. I was out for about seven years and am now back, so . . . and then, initially, I wanted to go to school, continue on. I wanted to transfer.

The fact that Cecilia had registered for classes but never attended caused her problems later on. A serendipitous visit to a counselor with a friend put her back on track to returning to school:

CECILIA: And so I had come on the campus with a friend one day. She had to come get some stuff taken care of, and they were telling me I couldn't because in '03 and '04 when I had registered I owed my, um, the fees for registration. So they were telling me I couldn't do anything until I paid my fees, I couldn't get, you know, educational plan down, I couldn't get my classes . . . until I paid the fees. So when I was in here with my friend, she goes *well that's it for me, unless you want to help Cecilia out* jokingly, so he took me in his office and he set me up, got me my student educational plan. I told him along the lines of what I wanted to do with the Human Services. He went ahead and helped me with my student educational plan, filled out my request form. He said *we're gonna go ahead and get you into English*. He looked at my old tests, my old assessments, said *you should be okay*, so he goes, *well, I'm going to set you up for the Puente Project, you know it's two classes in one, we'll have to make sure you get in there*.

She was nervous about coming back after those years:

INTERVIEWER: What, um, what was your first experience when you came onto the campus after being gone for all those years?

CECILIA: I was nervous. [laughs] First reaction: I was nervous. I didn't know what to expect. My assessment were the scariest thing. I was like, I gotta take these assessments, I've been outta school, I don't know where I'm gonna place, so that, that was a little nerve-racking, but once I got 'em done, I was in, I was so relieved.

## Section Two Summary

Both new and returning students entered their learning community classes feeling nervous and/or excited. For new students, these feelings were part of their general heightened emotions about coming to college for the first time. For the returning students, the nervousness often stemmed from having done poorly in previous classes. Confidence in their academic abilities had been lowered and they approached the new experience with some trepidation. Many students, both new and returning, expressed relief once they were in the learning community classes. They found the environment comfortable and supportive. This is further explored in the next section.

### **Section Three: Students' Feelings About the Learning Community Environment**

A number of the questions asked in each interview centered on the students' experiences in their learning community classes. I asked students to describe what they were doing in these classes, how they felt about it, if the classes were affecting them and, if so, how. In their responses, students often focused on how they felt in their learning community. This section centers on these affective aspects of their experiences. Three themes emerged from the interviews regarding the students' experiences in their learning community classes. In labeling these themes, I chose to use representative comments using the students' own words. The first theme includes the most common response to the question, "How do you feel about your learning community classes?" Many students answered, "I Feel Comfortable." The second theme is that students often attributed this sense of comfort to feeling like they were part of a cohesive and supportive group, in Dulcina's words: "A Class of Friends." A couple students equated this sense of togetherness with feeling that the learning community was like a family. The third theme that emerged is, in Josefina's words: "Collaboration and Teamwork." The connections students felt with their peers broadened to include helping each other with class work and assignments.

#### **"I Feel Comfortable"**

Most students described their learning community classes as comfortable environments. This was often attributed to the extended amount of time the students spent together and the relationships they established with this extended time together. This theme was expressed during the focus group at West Creek:

JADE: And it's like, I'm like, good. You know? Like, you end up being really good friends with Joe and with Corey, and they're all about their weekend, and I'm like, you know, at least ask them, and they ask me, and then if I go to, like, my microbiology class, it's like, [whispering] everyone's quiet, and they're serious, and . . . it's like, okay . . . So, I don't even, like, talk, you know? I feel very, like, like by myself compared to, like, Puente, you know? 'Cause we're in there, I guess together for, like, how many hours?

DELFINA: Six hours a week.

JADE: Yeah, six hours a week, something like that, yeah. So I think I tend to feel more comfortable in my morning [Puente] classes.

INTERVIEWER: Does it impact your learning, do you think? That feeling of comfort?

JADE: Mm hm.

INTERVIEWER: How?

JADE: Well, I'm – I think I'm able to speak up and say answers and not feel shy.

Later in the focus group, Dulcina and Marisol reiterated how this comfortable environment allowed them to participate more fully in class:

DULCINA: I like, just, like, the comfortable environment. Like, it just feels, like, good in there. And you can just do whatever you want or say whatever you want. Like Delfina said. It was, like, you know, you can just, like, ask anything you want and, like, everyone's like, *oh, okay, yeah. I have that question, too*, or whatever. So yeah, that's pretty cool.

Marisol described how important it was for her to feel comfortable in a class:

MARISOL: Like, I think that being comfortable in your class is really important. Like, for me, at least, 'cause like, sometimes I can get quiet, like, in the beginning and then afterwards, like, once I get to know the people it's like, totally different. And like, I think that if, like, everybody was comfortable, like, the class would be so much better, because, like, you know, you could feel, like, safe and comfortable and then it would be fun. It would be funner and then you're having fun and you tend to learn, you know, more and you remember things better, and so . . . that would be really important just having everyone be comfortable and feeling good.

Dolores also felt comfortable in her learning community classes. However, she said she was more reluctant to participate actively in class. As she continued to talk, it became clear that she did participate when she was “really into it” and once she overcame her fear of making a mistake.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that you can – are you comfortable in that class?

DOLORES: I am.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel like you can – do you raise your hand much in class?



DOLORES: Um . . . not really. 'Cause sometimes maybe I don't know the answer, or I can be shy if I don't wanna, like, really talk. But, like – when, like, I'm really into it and I'm getting used to it, then I can raise my hand and I'll talk. But, like, say in the beginning I wouldn't do that, 'cause I don't really know anybody, and I don't wanna, like, say something or mess up and it be, like, really weird, so . . .

Alma expressed a feeling of comfort in her individual interview, not only with spending more time with the same students, but also staying in the same physical space:

ALMA: Um . . . like . . . I get something to look forward to – 'cause, like, today we have it. We have – I have English and counseling, so like, um, I know there'll be the same people, like, I won't be – I know that I won't be like other people, 'cause they're the same people in both classes. And it's in the same class, so we don't really have to move. So I – I guess it's kinda, I look forward to it, 'cause I'll be like, oh, you know, it's like the same people. It's not, like, different faces, and . . .

INTERVIEWER: What's good about that? Why do you look forward to that with the same people?

ALMA: 'Cause I'm like, 'cause like, I already got used to those people and I talk to them, and like in my keyboarding class I talk to, like, nobody.

Later in the same interview, Alma described how this feeling of comfort extended to her own participation in class:

ALMA: And, like – like, when she asks us questions I feel comfortable answering, or raising my hand answering a questions because I know the people around . . .

Irena found the long class period a comfortable respite from her life as a single mother of two young children:

IRENA: So I hardly have that time for myself, just to be on my own without my children, and coming to classes I was like, oh, feels comfortable. I mean, you know a lot of the students, and you see 'em around. But, in class, you spend at least three hours with them. It's kinda nice.

Cecilia also spoke of this feeling of comfort. In her case, she described how helpful this was when she shared her writing with the class:

CECILIA: They'll be there, also, and so a little more familiar, again. I was kind of nervous walking onto the campus, but . . . But when you get familiar with the different faces and, you know, and get comfortable with

them, that – to me, that’s a lot, a lot more comforting than having to move on with totally different student. Especially with the writing. Some of it gets a little . . . more into ourselves and our personal lives, and so it’s just a little – been more comforting to have familiar faces there.

### **“A Class of Friends”**

A second theme that emerged from the students’ experiences in learning community classes is a sense of friendship and support from one another, in Dulcina’s words, they were “a class of friends.” Some students, especially those new to college, spoke of the age diversity in their learning community classes and how the more experienced students helped those who were new.

Dulcina, a first-time college student, spoke in detail about how a sense of community, of “family,” was created in her learning community class and how she relied on those who had more experience for guidance about college. She began by comparing her learning community to a similar course she took in high school:

INTERVIEWER: So tell me about your – what was your early, your first experiences in this Puente Project, which is the learning community with the English and the counseling.

DULCINA: Um . . . it’s really similar to a class we had in high school. It’s called Avid, where it’s, like, like um, like, kinda like family-based sort of thing . . . well, that’s what it felt like to me. Um, I don’t really know what it’s kinda like right now, especially ‘cause, like, we just started, like, what, like four weeks ago? But, it’s really cool, like, it’s a lot different than high school because there’s a lot of, like, different age groups in the class, so it’s, like, *oh yeah, you know, my wife is gonna give birth in, like, two weeks* or something, or like, *oh, I have to go to my son’s graduation at blah blah blah*, and it’s like, what? [laughs] But it’s cool, ‘cause, like, you get to, like, talk to a lot of people and, like, different people. And, well, I don’t really know a lot of people yet, but, like, I could see myself, you know, like, getting to, like talk to them, and like, learn from them, and, like, share things with them. So I think it’ll be cool. It’ll be good.

INTERVIEWER: Mm hm. Tell me a little – you said it was like family – tell me a little bit about that.

DULCINA: Oh yeah.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by that?

DULCINA: Um . . . well, what we had in high school seemed like family, 'cause, like, it was, like, from, like, your freshman year to your senior year, so it was, like, the same group of people every single year til you graduated. So, it was, like, you have the same classes with them and stuff like that. And here you can kind of relate, too, because, like, they help you, too, because, like, Elise, um, I met her the first day of Puente, and like, she already has, like, a lot of her units done, and, like, she was telling me, you know, like, *oh, you know, make sure you do this . . .* and, like, kinda like a big sister or something, you know? Kinda like, *oh, you know, you need to go talk to a counselor, and you should get these done, like you should get your general ed done first and all this stuff . . .* and then, like, a lot of other people were like, *oh, you know, I did this, so don't do that . . .* or, you know, and, like, they kinda guide you, since, like, a lot of them already kinda know . . . and like, I don't really know, you know? And I was kinda like, I am a beginner, you know? And, like, a lot of them already know what to do and stuff, so they were kinda, you know, they help you out. So, in that way, it's kinda like family based.

Dulcina summed up her comments like this:

DULCINA: Mm, I have, like – it's, like, a nice feeling, you know, 'cause, like . . . um, I'm really glad I took it because, like, when I came to college I was like, oh I'm not gonna know anyone, and then I'm really glad I took this class because, um, it's kinda like, I made, like, friends. Like, a class of friends.

Alma, another first-time college student, received guidance from those more experienced in her class:

ALMA: And . . . sometimes, like, the older people – they'll help us out, too, 'cause like, we don't understand it, and so then they'll just be, like, *oh, well you do this, and this is how you do it.*

Marisol also spoke of the support she received from a classmate early on and how she was more outgoing now:

MARISOL: I just – I like – I'm more outgoing in that class than any other classes. And . . . I talk to more people. Like, I didn't know anybody – oh, I knew one person in the class, but . . . I've decided I've met a lot of new people, so I talk to more people.

INTERVIEWER: Mm hm, mm hm. Like you said that Dulcina started talking to you right away?

MARISOL: Yeah. I was just, like, standing there waiting for the teacher, and then she just starting talking to me and I was like, oh, I'll sit by her. [laughs]

Josefina is an older, returning student who described the support she received from the other students in the class:

JOSEFINA: Um . . . the difference is [between the learning community classes and other classes] . . . these classes versus the other classes is I feel I – I feel the support of my friends. I was sort of just trying to figure things, whereas in the community course, though, I know who to ask, where to go for help. I don't feel so lost.

Irena, also an older returning student who had been taking classes at West Creek for the past two semesters, described the satisfaction she received in being able to give guidance to new students:

IRENA: I'm just gonna tell you this because, um, Dulcina, it's her first semester, and she's just right outta high school, so it kinda like, feels good, to kinda, like, let her know all the things that there is – that the school offers. And . . . like I said – like, with Javier [the counseling instructor], like, since he's given us, like, more lecture, like, the schools that are out there and which ones you want to transfer and not which one is best for you but, like, which schools would you like to transfer? Or, so you're not only stuck with one. So that's like, she knows where she wants to go, and then I said, hey, you should. And I just, kinda, like, kinda help her out with it, and she can do it, and then classes that she needs to take, and then I said to talk to Javier first so that, you know, and then just tell her, if anything I could help you with some of, like, those classes. And it feels nice. And I seen other people, and they're like, *oh, you've been for awhile? You don't look like you've been here.* I was like, Ohh, yeah! [laughs] So just, kinda, giving that feedback, it feels good.

Jade described the sense of community and support that had formed in her learning community class:

JADE: It's, um . . . you know, we spent so much time together that I know exactly who's going to come in to class, like, if someone doesn't come in to class, I'm like, whoa, I wonder what happened to that person, you know, like, hopefully they're okay, you know?

Later she adds:

JADE: And, and . . . and see, with Puente, it kind of helps me, because everyone talks, and nobody ever says, *oh, that's a stupid question* or makes fun of. Everybody, like, listens, and they, they comment back, so it kind of makes me feel kind of, like, I can be myself there. Yeah. And other students can be themselves there, too, you know? They're not shy, they're, like . . . we're very interactive with one another.

INTERVIEWER: What about the experience makes that happen? That ability to be yourself and speak out?

JADE: . . . I think it's because everybody wants to speak out, everybody wants to know who you are. Everybody wants to know what you're doing, and by doing that it helps . . . it just makes it so much better. You know, you can talk, you can be yourself, you know?

At one point in the focus group, the students talked about the work circumstances about another student in their learning community. Marisol summed up the discussion, "See, we know everyone's business."

### **"Collaboration and Teamwork"**

A third theme that emerged was how the sense of friendship and support students experienced in their learning community classes translated into actively helping one another with class work and assignments. In addition, students helped one another navigate the college system. Josefina described this as "collaboration" and "teamwork."

Dulcina described this support in terms of group work in class. After describing how her math class had no opportunity for interaction, Dulcina contrasted that with the experience she had in her learning community:

DULCINA: And like, so, I like the Puente class 'cause, like, we get to do a lot of activities together, and, like, he [the instructor] puts us in, like, groups with, like, different people, like, every time. It's not like the same group of people.

INTERVIEWER: What helps you about that group work? It sounds like you like the group. What helps you?

DULCINA: What helps me, I think . . . 'cause sometimes, you know, I don't really know how to start something, or – and then they'll be, like, *oh, you know, what should we do?* And then, like, we all kind of brainstorm together. And then it's like, *oh, yeah, that's a good idea*, you know, *let's do that*, or, *I'll do this and then you can do this and then I'll do this*, and it's like, okay, and then we put it together and, you know, it turns out really well. When you're by yourself, you're kinda like, oh, I dunno, what should I do? Maybe people'll think it's retarded or dumb, you know? It's like, and then, like, when you do it with a group, you know that, like, everyone likes it, but, like, oh you know it'll be find . . . and like, it's – I like it. Yeah. I like group work.

Ynez also attributed the focus on group work in her learning community classes as something that helped her interact more with her classmates. In this section of the interview, she had just described her math class and was contrasting it with her learning community classes:

YNEZ: So it's, like, just different environment, I would say. You're more, like, willing to be open and actually work with the people. Because we always do group activities.

Josefina described the closeness she felt to her classmates and explained how helpful this was to her as a struggling new mother:

JOSEFINA: It's a setting where it's very friendly, it's very normalized, and in a – in a group where . . . in a group where you become very close to your peers. Um . . . and it just really becomes – it really, really promotes, um, collaboration, ah, team work, ah . . . morals, emotional support . . . um . . . just a really – I really think, at least . . . I think it's very ideal for anyone. Um . . . and especially where I'm at in my life, um . . . as a new mom and sort of coming out of, you know, fighting my postpartum depression, and, you know, just really trying to, um, to get my life back together. You know, um . . . it is really good. Healing, inspiring, motivating . . . and, um . . . and just really, really . . . how should I say? Um . . . really motivating, more than anything. Really motivating, and very welcoming. The teachers are excellent. [laughs]

Marisol also gains help from those around her:

INTERVIEWER: Mm hm. And is the experience in the learning community helping you in terms of this – does it match your learning style?

MARISOL: Yeah, I think so, 'cause, um . . . both the teachers, they put stuff up on the board to show us what we're s'posed to do, or we'll have examples of stuff. Like in English, and, if you still need help you have, like, the people around you 'cause you're friends with them and they'll show you.

As does Jade:

JADE: Because, I guess everybody just interacts, and if you're, like, having trouble with something, or, like . . . I noticed that we had to write that paper and everybody was like, *hey, have you started writing paper?* No. Wait, who are you going to interview? Wait, what kind of questions are you going to ask?

And Delfina:

DELFINA: Um, 'cause since we know each other it's, like, more fun and more entertainment and . . . and we can ask all the person sitting next to you, okay, what was that question that he said? or something, you know, so you know the people.

Students in the learning community also relied on one another for advice on what teachers or courses to take. Jade described this well in her interview:

JADE: Another thing that's really good about Puente, it's like, some of the students already have gone to school a lot longer than me, and I can ask them, hey have you taken, you know, a math class? *Yeah*. With who? *Clark*. Ahh! [laughs] So, how was Clark? You know? *Oh, well, he's really cool. He's, you know, high energy* . . . Or, like, I didn't know about this Carroll history teacher . . . So now I know, so I need to take that history class, and I heard that he's fun, like Delfina said . . . And I'm like, oh, okay! Now I know who to take history, because I do not want to take it with, like, a strict teacher, you know? So, I get kinda like the inside scoop on, like, other professors by other students, you know?

### **Section Three Summary**

Students repeatedly spoke of feeling comfortable and supported in their learning community classes. The social relationships established among their peers were critical to developing this comfortable environment. They saw each other as friends, and some even compared the relationships in class to those of a family. They relied on one another for support, encouragement, and advice. Often students expressly connected their willingness to participate actively and to learn to this comfortable and nurturing environment and to the friendships developed within it. This connection is developed more fully in the third and fourth sections of this chapter.

### **Section Four: Contrasting Learning Community and Non-Learning Community Classes**

The majority of students participating in this study took traditionally structured classes in addition to their learning community classes. These included math, microbiology, Spanish, child development, accounting, film, photography, psychology, sociology, human services, keyboarding, yoga, and dance. Several of these classes were online, but most were face-to-face. One area of questioning in the interviews centered on the differences students perceived between their experiences in learning community

and non-learning community courses. Three themes emerged from the responses to this line of questioning. First, students felt more isolated in their non-learning community classes, or as Carmen described it, “You Are Always Solo.” Second, they perceived their instructors in their non-learning community classes as less friendly or approachable. Many were, in Delfina’s words, “Afraid of the Teacher.” Third, students were less likely to participate actively in their non-learning community classes, in Ynez’s words, “I don’t participate.” Since the experiences students had in online courses differed from both traditional face-to-face classes and learning community classes, I did not include students’ comments on their experiences in online classes in these findings.

### **“You Are Always Solo”**

When describing their experiences in classes that were not learning communities, students often presented themselves as alone or separate from the other students. Carmen contrasted her ability to reach out to classmates for help in her learning community class with feeling “solo” in her math and photography classes:

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that that kind of learning [in your learning community classes] is different from your math class or your photography class?

CARMEN: Yes, because . . . it’s a community, so you’re always with the same people and you’re always working in groups and stuff like that. And, you know if you need help you can turn to your partner and say, do you know how to do this? Do you know how to do that? And . . . with the other classes you’re always solo. It’s like, no one there for you to tell you. If you want, you can talk to someone, but with the learning community you see them mostly every day and, you know, they’re always, like, there. So yeah. I think it’s better working in the learning community for me because I’m the kind of people that likes to work with people and do stuff.

Carmen continued by stating that students who like to stay quiet might prefer non-learning community classes:

CARMEN: But it depends on what type of person you are.

INTERVIEWER: How so?



CARMEN: Um . . . like, let's say, there can be a quiet person in the community, in my English class, and will never speak or never say nothing, you know? But . . . probably when they're in the other class they'll feel that they're the same as everyone else. 'Cause in my community class we're all friendly. We're all loud, and trying to be noticed.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay. Uh huh.

CARMEN: So, um . . . it's like, *okay, everyone's talking, but I'm not*. And then in the other class they're probably like, *okay, well everyone else is like me, everyone is quiet*.

Delfina, who described herself as very outgoing in her interview, presented herself differently in her math and film classes:

DELFINA: I'm usually, like, if I go to, like, another class, I'm usually, like, wearing my iPod, and it just depends til the teacher gets there, and that's it, and I don't talk to, like, nobody.

Other students described some interactions with other students, but usually in contrast to the depth of connection they felt in their learning community classes.

Dulcina, for example, described her interactions with a few students, but mentioned that the way the instructor had structured the class didn't encourage better relationships:

DULCINA: Well, I'm taking a math class, and it's, like, a lot bigger. It's maybe, like, 60 people, and, like, you – I only talk to, like, the five people around me, kind of, or like, oh, you know, what does that say? Or what did he say? Or something, you know, but you don't get to, like, associate with, like, everybody in the class. And, like, we never, like, in his class, like, we don't, like, there's never like a group time or, like, times when you get to do, like group work, or, like, help each other out, or, like, um, *ok, you guys have 15 minutes to review for something with your partner*, you know? And like, so, I like the Puente class 'cause, like, we get to do a lot of activities together, and, like, he puts us in, like, groups with, like, different people, like, every time. It's not like the same group of people. So we get to, you know, talk, and get to know a lot of different people. And, like, in the math class we don't. It's just, like, notes, notes, notes. And then we leave.

After talking about how she enjoyed the group work in her learning community classes, Irena contrasted that experience with her accounting class. Earlier in the interview, Irena expressed a love for accounting and spoke of her involvement in the accounting club. In spite of this engagement, Irena did not express satisfaction with the

connections she formed with other accounting students. She contrasted it to the sense of “family” she felt in the learning community classes:

INTERVIEWER: Do you find – are you able to form connections with students in your other classes? Is it different? Is it the same as the connections you form . . . ?

IRENA: It’s a little different, because I know everybody – like, most of the classes that I’m taking. Well, sorry, it would be accounting, and that goes for two hours, and it’s just very tough. You cannot miss anything, so it’s really hard to be connecting with other students. We have a, like a accounting tutoring, which is like, uh, homework, when you need those days. But it just has to be, like, very, like, strict. You go there to go the homework, so you can hardly meet the people. Like, as a friend, sort of type. It’s just, like, okay, help me with the homework, or how to do this. And they jump, because they need to help other people. Or if you know a little bit more then you want to help other people but . . . it – it’s different. And being in Puente Project you have a little bit more time to, like, talk about different things. And . . . as far as education, like, okay, these classes, um, help you for this, for that. And it’s nice, because you can get the work to other people, and to other students say, like, *oh I’ve taken those classes, oh you should take it with this teacher, or I have the books*, and it’s more, kinda, like, a family.

Marisol described her experience in two classes, one in which she had started forming relationships with other students and one in which she stayed quiet. She did not speak up or feel comfortable in the class where she was quiet:

MARISOL: Um . . . I think – my Child Development class is – we’ve actually all started talking recently, so I kinda like that. But my Sociology class . . . everyone, like, is very, like, focused on their own work on stuff. I sit by one girl, and we barely started talking, like, last week, I think. And . . . but . . . It’s not as – like, I wouldn’t say anything in front of the class ‘cause I’m not comfortable in that class.

### **“Afraid of the Teacher”**

When talking about their non-learning community classes, students described their instructors as less approachable and more intimidating. Several students said they were afraid of these teachers. Often the non-learning community classes were larger and more impersonal. Moreover, the instructors often structured their classes with less group activities than in the learning community courses. Consequently, students were less likely to approach their instructors when they needed help. However, when students

did interact personally with their instructors, they often felt more comfortable in those classes and more willing to participate.

In describing her behavior in her film class, Delfina explained why she did not approach her instructor when she was unsure of the work:

DELFINA: And having your own classes, you basically don't know, like, everybody. So you're sometimes . . . like, afraid to ask, um, okay, so what are we doing? or something like . . . And like, I'm usually, like, if someone sits next to me, like in my film class, I just make – it's not like they're my friends, but, *oh, what did he say or when do we have to have the homework done?* I'm always trying to ask – not asking the teacher, 'cause I'm afraid of the teacher, so I ask the person next to me . . . and having that class, like, combined, is more, um, like, easy to get along with the people, too. Like, with your students and with your teachers and . . . I don't know, and also like the homework, maybe.

Later in the focus group Delfina explained that she found the film teacher “scary” even though she knew what to expect in his class and recognized that he had a lenient revision policy with the essays he assigned:

INTERVIEWER: How does it – do you think that you're going to get a good grade in that class?

DELFINA: Well, since I'm doing the homework and I kinda understand what he expects from the essays . . . And he also, like, um – if we do the essays and we don't have, like, a good grade, we can do it again. So that's really helpful, so, like, if I didn't kind of do it very good, we can just do that part that we didn't do so we can get a better grade. So, that's the only thing, though, because – the teacher's really scary.

In the learning community classes at Northern College, students had an assignment in which they interviewed and wrote about one of their instructors in a non-learning community class. Several students mentioned this assignment and spoke of how it changed their attitudes towards the teachers they interviewed and changed their behavior in those teachers' classes. Ynez interviewed her English teacher and felt more willing to participate actively in class afterwards:

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel differently in the class after interviewing her?

YNEZ: Yeah. I feel like I could actually raise my hand up and say something now. Without being embarrassed.

Alma chose to interview her math instructor because math was a difficult subject for her. The interview itself was “nerve-wracking” partially because she felt that she was intruding on the instructor. Alma spoke at length about how she felt in her math class after the interview. She was no longer anonymous and this made her uncomfortable:

ALMA: Um, our – like, our big assignment – we just had a list to interview one of your teachers – one of your professors – and that was a really hard – that was really hard for me . . . ’cause I just – I just started coming here, and you have to go to your – you have to go their office hours, and I had never been to an office hour, and like . . . um . . . we were supposed to choose – we were supposed to choose a teacher, um, we didn’t really have a good connection with them, and so then at the end of the class they might give you a good grade if you talk to them . . . and I sorta chose math because I’m horrible at math. And she’s my math professors. She’s cool, and then . . . I met her, and it was so nerve racking. Like, I went to her office hour and, like, I had a list of questions. It was, like, ten questions and I only asked her, like four. I was like – she’s like, *any more?* And I was like, no, that’s it, thank you . . .

INTERVIEWER: Why did you stop?

ALMA: I don’t know. I was just . . .

INTERVIEWER: Just didn’t . . .

ALMA: Yeah, I was all nervous, and like, I felt like, um . . . like when I came in she was, like, filling papers, and I was like, oh, okay, good time? She was like, *sure*, but then, like . . . I kept seeing her looking at the papers, so I was like, maybe, like, I’m bothering her and I just wanna go. And . . . my other friends went to her and I got some of their answers . . . but, yeah, I was like, well, I’m Alma, and she’s like, *oh, okay*, and then . . . so, when I wrote my paper I was like, well, now she knows who I am. Like, I’m not just another name in her class. Like, she knows who I am. I talked to her . . . It was . . . I dunno, but it was really short. It was just fast, and . . . well, I found out, like, where she graduated from, and she really loves math. Like, when she was little she was a math genius, and . . .

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel more comfortable in that class now? Do you think? After having met her . . .

ALMA: Uh, I feel, like, kinda . . . ah, what’s that one word? Uh . . . dunno . . . like . . . now she knows who I am. Like, sometimes a little timid, I think? I dunno. Or . . . like, I dunno, ‘cause now she really

knows who I am, so if I get, like, a bad grade on my test, it's like, *oh, well I know this is Alma* . . . and I'm just like, oh . . . well, I dunno. That's just how I'm feeling when I walk in. She kinda looks at me, and . . .

INTERVIEWER: So you feel more noticed?

ALMA: Yeah!

INTERVIEWER: And hey, that's not so good or is it?

ALMA: I don't know if it's good. [laughs] I don't think it's good, 'cause now, like, I don't know. I don't know. It's just, like, I don't know if I can explain it. It's just like . . . Sometimes it's good, but then, like, I don't know. Like, the day after doing her interview, like, I walked into class and we kinda made eye contact, and I was like, oh hi. And then that was it. But . . .

INTERVIEWER: You're not anonymous! [laughs]

Candi also interviewed her math teacher. Unlike Alma, Candi approached the interview with confidence:

CANDI: Um . . . well, the thing is, last semester I did really, really good, 'cause me and my brother had, like, a sibling rivalry, so I understood everything, and so I came into that class pretty, like, confident. And so, and the teacher, Miss Levin, is really, really good, so, you know, I've been doing pretty good and stuff, so. But like, just talking to her made me realize, you know, she was a student once, you know, like, she kinda – you know, I just got to know her more and stuff. I really did like the experience of interviewing her, and just, like . . . she's not just a teacher, you know. She has family, you know. Just kinda knew her background more and just kinda know her. It was a good experience. [laughs]

Even though Candi was confident about her ability in math, she felt that the interview made a difference in how her instructor, Miss Levin, saw her as a student. Candi contrasted her relationship with her learning community instructors and her math instructor:

CANDI: They [the learning community instructors] know you more than other teachers. Where like Miss Levin [her math instructor] , when she kinda just – before the interview and she kinda just saw me as another student, you know, but, like, them, like, they *do* know you, they know your name quicker, and just know you more.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Uh huh, uh huh. How about when you were – last semester you were in your history class and in your – what – oh, you took Spanish class, and did you feel that same connection in those classes, or is this English and this learning community different from those as well?

CANDI: Yeah, it's different. I would say it's different. Yeah, I just feel . . . like, more connected with the teacher. Like, they're . . . I dunno. I would say it does help to be in the community.

### **“I Don't Participate”**

When describing their behavior in classes other than their learning community classes, students often described taking a more passive role. They did not participate as readily and often described what they did in class as just “taking notes.” When they did participate, they still described it as less active than how they participated in their learning community classes.

After Alma talked about how she participated actively in her learning community classes, I asked her about her other classes:

INTERVIEWER: Do you do that in your math class or your keyboard class?

ALMA: No. I don't do it in my math class at all. And I don't do it in my keyboarding – well, we just sit and type, so I don't have to, but . . .

INTERVIEWER: Do you do it in any other classes?

ALMA: No, I don't do it in all my classes . . . But yeah, I don't do it at all in math. It just – I mean, I know it's – I know it's the same people Tuesdays and Thursdays, but it's just so different, 'cause . . . I feel like the age variety is so much more higher in my math class than in my English and counseling. And my English/counseling classes, really, it's probably like 15 kids, and the other class, it's like thirty kids. And it's a really, really big class, and like, I don't feel as comfortable as I do in my English and counseling. [laughs]

It is ironic that Alma felt the difference in ages of classmates was a deterrent to participating in her math class when she described this as a benefit in her learning community class earlier in the interview.

The size of class mattered to Alma as she continued to elaborate:

ALMA: I feel like if my math class was a little smaller, though, I'd probably learn a lot more, because in, like, English and counseling, she

[the instructor] doesn't have to be super loud, 'cause it's – we're all right there, the board's right there, and like, I could take perfect notes . . . and, she . . . I don't know, and then in my math we kind of sit behind. And so it's kinda hard to take notes, and like . . . I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: So would you say that you participate more in your English and counseling?

ALMA: Mm hm, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Is that because the class is small or because you feel more comfortable because it's a learning community where you share the same students in two classes and you . . . ?

ALMA: I think it's that. I think it's, like . . . 'cause I – I don't know, the second part you said . . .

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

ALMA: . . . was much better, and it's so – it's smaller, so . . . Yeah. And then we really get to know each other. Like, we'll do activities, like . . . and so, like, the people know you.

When asked about her participation, Ynez started by saying that she did not participate in her non-learning community math classes. However, further in the interview when asked if she raised her hand or talked in class, she said she did. The difference is that the structure of the math class did not create many opportunities for interaction:

YNEZ: Yeah, I would say that, like, I don't participate . . . not in math class, I don't participate. I sit in the front . . . but it's like, I'll talk to the people around me, but it's just . . . different in there. I don't know why, just feels different. But . . .

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think it is?

YNEZ: Probably 'cause we really don't do group work or, like, interact with each other. So it's just, like, notes that we take. And then the math exercises we do. And I go do ask for help once in awhile. But . . . it's like, okay, I'm done, so I'm going back to my home to work.

INTERVIEWER: So when you ask for help do you, like, raise your hand and ask for help?

YNEZ: Yeah, I ask the teacher or my classmates. There's, like, a little group which I feel better, but still it's not the same as counseling and English class.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And what goes on in counseling and English? How is it different?

YNEZ: Um, there's actually . . . we're in the same pace . . . and, you know, it's like, we read, and then Miss Erica or Sara tell us to, you know, interact with our neighbor, like, tell them what we took out from the reading. And, in math class, it's like, *well, if you need help raise your hand, or work in groups*, but still, it's like everybody's into math and it's like, no really interaction.

INTERVIEWER: Mmm, mm hm. Just sort of focusing on the project as opposed to each other.

YNEZ: Sitting there and not interacting with people.

Jade's description of her participation in microbiology was similar. After she described how she liked to talk in her learning community classes, I asked Jade if she perceived this as a good trait. She said yes, and then contrasted this with her participation in microbiology. She then clarified her position by saying that she did speak up when she knew the answer:

JADE: 'Cause there would be no way I would talk, like, in my, in my microbiology, like, I'm usually, I'm just like the quiet one. But if I know the answer, I do speak out . . . if no one says it, I do speak out.

In the focus group, Jade went into more detail about her microbiology class. She describes feeling too scared to greet the other students. Delfina related to Jade's experience and shared her own fears about her film class:

JADE: Yeah, 'cause, like, in, like I said, like, in my microbiology, like, my teacher . . . he's so serious. *It's one o'clock, alright, let's get started with lecture* . . . and, I don't know . . . well, besides in my lab group because I sit with them, I don't know anyone else by a first-name basis. I don't even know what they do. I don't – I just know that they don't even talk, like . . . I'm even scared to say hi to them, because, you know, they're just, like, very very serious people. At least in my group I kinda know them, they say hi. But, it's not like, hey, what'd you do this weekend? You know, it's nothing like that. It's completely different. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

DELFINA: I had the same experience in my film class. Like, that class starts at 2:30, and . . . we can't have, like, cell phones at all, like, not even, like, on the table. He's like, *okay, 2:30, silence your cell phones*



*and put it away. And we're just all watching, like, films, 'cause it's a film class, and . . . and he just get mad sometimes because, like, if someone do some text or something, so he stops the movie or something and then he picks sometimes on the other people . . . so it's like, I really don't want to like, talk to, like, the teacher or nothing. I'm, like, really scared about saying something, because, um . . . because, like, a lot of other people, they say sometimes, like, um, what did you think about that movie. And he say *okay, I'm gonna move to someone else 'cause you already talked*. So I was like, okay. I don't – and I really don't understand, like, he gets so into, like, the movie so much, like, he can see like, I dunno, like a table on there or something, and he like, *oh, okay, so you guys can know that*. Like, I don't see that stuff in the movies. I pay attention to, like, the characters. He gets really, really into the movies, like, oh my god. So it's, like, I don't talk to, like, most of the people in that class. Just me and myself.*

#### **Section Four Summary**

Overall, students were less comfortable in their non-learning community classes than in their learning community classes. They felt more alone in those classes, describing themselves as “being solo” or “the quiet one.” They were often intimidated by their instructors although those who took the initiative to interact with their instructors felt more connected afterwards. Because students felt less comfortable in these classes, they were less likely to participate fully in them. In contrast, the learning community classes seemed to have ample time and activities build into the structure that allowed for social interaction and community. For these students, this made a big difference in how they felt and performed in the classes.

#### **Section Five: Perceptions of Learning**

This research study focuses on the experiences of Latina students in developmental learning communities. In particular, it looks at those experiences that students perceive to have the greatest impact on their learning. This final section includes the responses students gave to interview questions that centered on their learning. At times it was impossible to tease out what learning was specific to the learning community experience and what was tangential. For example, students applied strategies that they gained in their learning community classes to all of their classes. Moreover, it is impossible to know what learning is distinct to the learning community

format and what learning would have taken place with the same classes taught in unlinked formats. The perceptions students had about their learning fell into four areas: Gaining academic literacy, making connections, developing new learning strategies, and moving in new directions. Themes emerged within each area.

### **Gaining Academic Literacy**

The learning communities in this study both included English classes. At West Creek, the English class was one level below transfer and at Northern it was two levels below transfer. In both cases, students did a lot of reading and writing, and, not surprisingly, reported a greater awareness of their literacy development as a consequence of this experience. This awareness fell into three themes. Once again these themes are represented using the students' own words. The first, "We Have Other Opinions on It," describes an appreciation for peer editing and instructor feedback. The second, "They Correspond with Each Other," describes the transference of literacy skills from one class to another. And the third, "You Really Have to Read," describes the awareness students have gained in the importance of reading.

**"We have other opinions on it."** The learning community courses at West Creek included peer editing on a regular basis. Cecilia and Irena found peer-editing to be helpful in improving their writing. In Cecilia's case, writing was always a struggle and she appreciated the group aspect of peer-editing as a means to prepare her for the transfer-level English course (English 1A). She looked forward to continuing the relationships she had built with her learning community peers into the higher-level English class:

CECILIA: I like the peer editing a lot, because then it's not just the teacher editing our work. She's not the only proof reading. We have other opinions on it. And so getting to be in the groups and having others read it, and then we're going around, we're working *with* our peers and knowing that they're going to be – they're not just in this, in counseling, but when we move on to English . . . is it 1A?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, yeah.

CECILIA: They'll be there, also, and so a little more familiar, again.

Like Cecilia, Irena had difficulty with writing. She described herself as having “left my English behind” and “starting at the very bottom” when she came back to college. She avoided English and took general education courses without the requisite English preparation. I asked her if she had trouble with the writing in her general education courses, and she responded that she received help from people at the school where she worked as an ESL assistant:

INTERVIEWER: Did you have trouble with taking – when you did your general ed, before taking [the current English class], did you struggle at all, or did you not have to do much writing in those classes?

IRENA: I did, I just – I, I did. I did. And because English was not my strongest, it – I would have a lot of hard time writing – I mean, I could write, but I don’t have to look at punctuation, and grammar, run-ons, and those were my mainly, um, errors that I had. Grammar and run-ons. And now that I worked through the year, and, um, working for the school actually helped me, because, um, my boss was a teacher. And most of them are – well, they’re all teachers. So every time I had to write a memo, I was like, can you help me? ‘Cause I don’t to send a memo to everybody – they’re all professionals – and, it’s gonna look sloppy. I’m like, I don’t want that. So they kinda, like, *oh yeah, we’ll help you*, so they, they didn’t mind, and I just . . . I wasn’t shy to ask them because I knew that that was, like, my weakness.

Irena admitted that she didn’t spend time with editing at that time: “I didn’t . . . have any, any enthusiasm in doing my own editing.” In the learning community class, peer-editing helped Irena see how other students wrote and gave her new perspectives on her own writing. It also bolstered her confidence:

IRENA: And in English, we do the same thing. We gather in groups and we do, like, little projects. Like, read someone else’s rough draft, and give opinions and what you think, and the right combination, like what do you think his essay and your essay, and actually compare. So it’s kinda nice, because it gets you more, like, oh, you gotta read his paper. [laughs] And give a little feedback on it. And then compare with yours . . .

INTERVIEWER: Is it helpful to look at what other students are writing, or the way that they . . . they respond?

IRENA: Um, yeah, because, um, they . . . they have different opinions, different way of writing than . . . a lot of times I feel like, oh my writing is totally weak! But, I’m learning it, and . . . it’s – I understand that it’s

my weakness. It's helpful to read other – somebody else's paper than maybe yours, and they give you feedback. It feels good. So, oh yeah, I could have done that!

In the learning communities at both colleges, students were able to receive feedback on their writing from both instructors. Ynez appreciated getting the additional feedback from two perspectives on one essay. She included both to strengthen her next draft:

YNEZ: It's like English and counseling. I was like, how is that gonna work out? But, you know, we do have, like, assignments, essays, and stuff from both of them, and, like, you get more feedback, I would say. Like if I turn it in earlier that actually helps out.

INTERVIEWER: So if you turn in something – do you find, like, you give something to your English teacher you can get input on how you're structuring the essay and then you turn it into Sara . . .

YNEZ: Yeah, it's, like, help. And good resources, nice to have . . . like, two different opinions, and then put it all on one and it's, like, a good essay.

While students reported improvement in their own writing, one student was in a unique position to receive feedback on her writing from someone who saw improvement over half a year. Ynez had the same instructor in her summer bridge English course and the subsequent learning community course:

YNEZ: So she saw my high school writing, and then now, like, she says, like, my writing has changed a lot.

INTERVIEWER: Can – has she been specific about what's changed? Are you writing longer pieces, more structure, or the vocabulary's changed, or . . .?

YNEZ: Yes, like and overall – I can't remember what, but she says that it's improved a lot.

INTERVIEWER: That's great.

YNEZ: Like, they're longer and there's more details.

**“They correspond with each other.”** In the learning community courses, instructors often integrated their assignments. As a result, students reported an awareness of transferring the literacy skills they learned in their English class to

assignments in their counseling classes. In the focus group at West Creek, the students spoke at length about an interviewing assignment they were working on in their counseling class. Some wrote in a question/answer format and others organized their interviews into formal essays. I asked Marisol how she approached it:

MARISOL: Um, I thought it was easier 'cause we had the English class, too. Like, we were learning grammar and the spelling, like, "it's" and, like, "it is" and stuff, so . . . I could put all that into doing the essay. I wrote it as an essay.

Cecilia was not present for the focus group, so I asked her the same question during her interview. Like Marisol, she paid more attention to writing conventions in this interview assignment:

INTERVIEWER: So how did you end up writing that? This is one of the discussions we had at the focus group. Um, I guess Javier gave you an option: either you can just do question/answer, question/answer, or write it as an essay?

CECILIA: I actually wrote mine in an essay form. I did. I took the questions and the answers that I had and I just kind of wrote, like an, um, not a short summary. I guess I did kind of a long summary on her, and I just put it in my own words and her words, using both to fit it together, so . . .

INTERVIEWER: Mm hm. Did you end up sort of focusing on doing an introduction and a conclusion of things that you have been learning in the English class as well? I mean, did you find yourself . . .

CECILIA: Yeah, I did, I was keeping that in mind. I was using the quotation, you know, citing her words . . .

INTERVIEWER: Good! Yeah, uh huh.

CECILIA: I was doing it, definitely. So, again, that Puente does help out, because the English with the counseling . . . it's, it's – it's good structure. It is. It is helping. I catch myself when I'm writing now. [laughs] Like, make sure I'm looking for grammar and punctuation . . .

In Frankie's case, the integrated curriculum helped her feel supported and gave her the structure she needed to succeed in spite of her challenging learning circumstances:

FRANKIE: Um . . . I feel very supported. Um . . . and I think it has to do a lot with the – the teachers, the, um, the work being, um, the syllabuses

for both classes, their – the assignments are due – they’re, they’re – what is that called? They correspond with each other?

INTERVIEWER: Like they’re integrated?

FRANKIE: Yeah. And, um, that really helps me, ‘cause um, I have ADHD so it’s hard for me to, uh, to concentrate sometimes.

**“You really have to read.”** Instructors in the learning community courses at both colleges had students reading complete memoirs and novels as part of the curriculum. The two students who use Spanish in their daily lives more than English, Delfina and Irena, both spoke about how reading in English helped them. They found this extended reading helped them improve their vocabulary and prepare them for transfer-level courses. Delfina, who earlier had admitted she never read for pleasure in English, addressed both these areas in her interview:

DELFINA: So, I mean, that’s helpful a little bit ‘cause we do vocabulary, and that really helps us, ‘cause okay, now you can put those words that you didn’t know into your, into your, um, essays or something. Or into our other classes here. So I think that’s what is really helpful. And also the readings. I really don’t like reading, but I got so into this book [*Enrique’s Journey*] so it’s like now I’m enjoying it. [laughs]

Later in the interview, she added:

DELFINA: And that’s what I learned in here, in community college, is it’s like, okay, do you wanna pass the classes? You really have to read. So it’s like . . . it was hard at first to get used to, ‘cause it was something I that I wasn’t used to – just do your homework and try to do your best at something like that. But now it’s like, okay, if you don’t know what to do for your homework, you have to read because that’s the background you’re gonna use. So it’s basically reading, reading, reading, reading, and it’s like, oh wow, I can’t believe I’m reading so much. [laughs] But it’s good ‘cause it’s basically preparing me to for – to transfer.

Although Delfina said that she did not like reading, she became so engrossed in this memoir that she had trouble putting it down. This was a new experience for her:

DELFINA: So it’s like, okay, I mean . . . it’s also because I have to read, but I could say that seriously it’s, like, the first book that I read. Like, I’m actually reading, reading, reading. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: Really?

DELFINA: Yeah. Like, in my other classes it's like, okay I'm just gonna do some reading and then just get some stuff or go to the glossary and get out the vocabulary or stuff like that. But with this book it's like, okay, I even came, um, um – yeah, yesterday, and did my homework. I don't have any classes so I just came to our back and I just started reading and reading and reading . . . and then for a minute I stopped, and it was like, what's gonna happen now? So I started reading the next chapter! [laughs] I was like, no, no, no, that's it, since I had a lot of other homework, so I was like, okay, I just can't keep reading all of it 'cause I had to keep the homework with other classes, too.

Like Delfina, Irena read primarily in Spanish before taking this class. She found reading in English helped her with vocabulary development for her other courses:

IRENA: Um . . . 'cause I love reading . . . but . . . I usually read Spanish, and that's kinda, like, bad for me, because I have to enforce a little more my English. So, having that book [*Enrique's Journey*], it's like, extra homework for me, but it was a really good book that had been picked, that the teacher picked, because . . . um, not only am I interested in the book, it has me, like, highlighting words that I don't even know, and I could go back to a dictionary and find 'em out. And we have vocabulary quizzes, too, in the class, so it's like, *ok, if you know 'em, you know 'em; if you don't, you better look for 'em*. So that kinda gives me more practice with my, with big words that I didn't – that I don't know or that I knew from my daily dig. So it's kinda nice.

Frankie is a native speaker of English and yet she talked about struggling with comprehension when she read. In her learning community classes she learned strategies to help her with her reading. She made the connection between journaling and note-taking:

FRANKIE: And then, um . . . yeah, just, like, trying to find the main point and reading and things like that. I think that helping me, um, take notes, too, 'cause we gotta read. We read two chapters and then we, um, summarize it – or not summarize it – um, she calls it journaling. And there's a way that she wants it done, and I'm getting better at it. And I'm thinking that when I'm done I might learn how to take notes . . . is what I'm . . . and that just registered this week, and I was like, oh, you know what this kinda looks like?

INTERVIEWER: They're very similar to taking notes, yeah.

FRANKIE: Yeah.

## Making Connections

A second area of learning that the students spoke about was making connections. As we saw in the third section of this chapter, students connected with their classmates in a social sense. Here we look at the connections students made with the curriculum and the experiences of others. Students made connections between what they were learning in class and the wider world around them. These connections gave them a deeper understanding of themselves and their personal and social histories. This happened through the books they read, class discussions, interviews of their instructors, and homework assignments.

In the West Creek learning community classes, students were assigned to read *Enrique's Journey*, a chronicling of a Honduran boy's journey to find his mother in the United States. Dulcina explained how the book opened her eyes to the plight of immigrants from Central America:

INTERVIEWER: Do you like the book you're reading?

DULCINA: I like it. Yeah, I like it a lot. It's pretty good.

INTERVIEWER: What do you like about it?

DULCINA: Um . . . I like . . . I like a lot of books that are, like, Latino based, like Spanish literature stuff . . . and that one was kinda cool 'cause I'd never really read about, like, um, Honduras or, like, um, you know, like, Central America, or whatever. I always usually just read about, like, Mexico, that's it. And, like, so, it was cool, 'cause like, I never even, like, thought about – well, I know it sounds kinda like, selfish, or whatever, but I never really thought about, like, those people, or like, reading about, like, whatever, like, their stories or anything. And, like, now that I've read it, it's like, oh wow, you know, it's so much similar, or like, it's the same thing, and like, there's, like, so much, like, discrimination in between, like, both of those countries, like . . . um, Central America and Mexico and stuff, and it's like, that's dumb. It's, like, the same thing.

In Irena's case, reading the novel helped her understand the experiences of her father and her baby's father who both came into the United States without legal papers:

IRENA: Yeah, yeah. Um . . . it kinda makes – gives me a connection, because it's on migrant – it's a, it talks about a Honduran kid that is trying to immigrate to the US to find his mom, and it kinda connects me.



It's very sentimental because it gets very good into it, and I'm like, oh, poor guy, what's he going through? They beat him up, and the cities that he's traveling, he travels on the train. And . . . but it keeps me going, from reading, what's going to happen? What's next? What's next? What's next? And it's just picturing . . . 'cause it's hard for me to picture sometimes what I'm reading if I'm not interested on it. So, with this one, I mean, we were like, oh, wow!

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think you can find a picture of this book?

IRENA: Um . . . because I love the reading, one. That's what I found out. And then, two, because um, my baby's dad . . . he's . . . doesn't have any papers, so, um, he told me about the stories when he had to migrate or crossing the border . . . and, it's hard regardless for anybody. It's just the way that this kid has to travel, and all the beating, and plus . . . all – I mean, he could of gotten killed already, and just knowing that my baby's dad made it, it's kind of, like, nice, but it's sad. So it's like, kind of like, oh my god, he went through all this? Like, I wouldn't – my dad tells me, like, when he immigrated, like, in 1970 . . . 75? And he said it was hard, but it probably wasn't as bad as it is now, and then, after that, my mom got him papers so he was able to see the difference, how people feel when they don't have papers, when it's just like, they feel, like, humiliated or trying to hide because they don't want anybody to point at them and make them stand out because they don't know if they could be deported. So it kind of gives me a picture, find a picture of, like, where they stand back then and then now and then seeing my baby's dad going through that.

In the Northern College learning community classes, some of the students were reading *The Color of Water*, James McBride's memoir of his white mother and her marriage to his African-American father. Even though she struggled with fully understanding the assigned chapters, Frankie connected the subject-matter to her own multi-racial background and sense of identity. Frankie expressed skepticism about the book's overall message because of her own sensitivity to racism:

INTERVIEWER: *The Color of Water*. Okay. What do you think of that book?

FRANKIE: Um . . . it's – I gotta go back – we're working on chapter 11-12, and I need to actually go back and re-read, 'cause it's hard for me to, um, to read two chapters at a time and then analyze it and all that stuff. I need to read it straight through. Um, so I don't really . . . I'm not really quite sure about . . . about it. I mean, it's . . . I don't know. It's like a book in pieces so it's not – you know, it's, like, fragmented. 'Cause it's

so – but my daughter, she asked me a couple weeks ago, ‘cause we’re Mexican and Indian, and she’s a blond-haired, blue-eyed little girl – and she says, *momma*, something about *me being white* or something. I said, what do you mean? She’s all, *well you know you’re white and I’m white*. And I said, I’m not white. She goes, *well, what color are you?* She goes, *well, what color is that?* I said the color of water. And then I didn’t go any further on it because, you know, I just – it was just funny to me, you know, how she, um . . . was relating to, you know, the color skin. She’s only in second grade, you know.

INTERVIEWER: I find that interesting. She’s already aware of that.

FRANKIE: Uh huh.

INTERVIEWER: That’s a young age to be aware.

FRANKIE: It is. And we don’t um . . . actually, you know, the color of water – I’ve always had a hard time with that because, um, like Malcolm X, um, and all that stuff, I just, um . . . um . . . I can’t watch movies that have to do with racism, like, that are – when they’re really mean to the colored people, because it’s just . . . it’s so emotional for me. I mean, it really affects me, so I avoid movies like that. And there was, um, a book – I started reading some John Grisham that had to do with, um, I think it was a little colored girl that was raped or something and I just – I couldn’t even read it, you know? It was just too much for me to take in. So . . .

INTERVIEWER: Why does that impact you?

FRANKIE: I have no idea. I have no idea. Um. And I – you know, my kids, I teach them, you know, to treat people the way you want to be treated. Um. And they – they’re good kids, you know, so I just . . . I don’t like the race – the racist stuff. Um, it’s not okay, and I think that’s kinda where I’m not really into the book. I mean, I read it, and it’s like, okay, I can see the point there, this and that, but . . . as far as, like, really getting into the book . . . it’s not sticking for me ‘cause I don’t know what they’re really talking about as far as the . . . there’s a revolution or civil rights or something? I don’t know.

At both colleges, students had interview assignments in which they were required to interview someone and write about it. This assignment also created opportunities for students to make connections in their learning. When Cecilia interviewed her Human Services instructor, she discovered they both shared a common

experience -- being in recovery. Cecilia's conversation with her instructor led her to deep questioning about the causes of her addiction and gave her new direction:

CECILIA: I actually interviewed Sally. She's an instructor here. She's one of my instructors, and um, 'cause she -- she actually had some troubles of her own, and she did go away for awhile. She came back, she, you know, recovered, and she -- she's an instructor here now. She's doing very, very well, and when I was interviewing her I was telling her, you know, along the lines of why I was taking her classes. And I was like, honestly, like I've said myself, I've, I've -- I'm in recovery now, I've been clean for 90 days on Monday, and I've done it on my own. I've never successfully completed a rehab because I've never had to go -- I quit on my own. And so, as far as information on what and why and just everything about it as far as what it does to a person, why it does that, and . . . I'm still not totally aware. I mean, I could tell you, yeah, this is why I did it, but internally I still -- there's a lot I want to know, and so for myself these classes are actually helping a lot. Which, it's interesting, like I said. It really is. And I told this -- that's why I said when I'm doing Human Services I'm choosing more to do that for myself. But I'm looking to pursue it now.

Ynez spoke about the learning she gained through class discussions, especially in seeing issues from multiple perspectives. Earlier in the interview, she spoke about the difficulty she had with her parents' traditional views of gender roles. She described her father as believing that women were weaker than men and that young Latinas in particular should follow strict rules about dating and marriage. At this point in the interview, she contrasted what she was learning in class with conversations her family had at home and commented on how much she has grown in understanding the world around her:

YNEZ: Like . . . everything that I've gone through, and just, like, seeing different people's stereotypes of, like, Latinas . . . because, like, I've actually become stronger personally, and actually go forward. And, you know, preaching to myself that I can do whatever I want if I actually want to. And then counseling and English class are helpful and I enjoy the classes because you always learn something new and different perspectives. And, you know, it's hard because we usually wouldn't talk at home . . .

INTERVIEWER: Like what kind of talking?

YNEZ: Like, um . . . right now we're reading *The Giver*, and we talk about movies, like with the death penalty for . . . like, injections for

death. And so we got an article about how babies are deformed or need life support, sometimes the parents prefer them to die and actually give them an injection. And it's like, wow, that's something we might talk about at home, but it's not a typical conversation, so I like how in these classes you're exposed to, like, different ideas. It, like, helps me see what's actually out there in the world.

Ynez connected her broadening understanding of the world to personal growth: "So it has helped me, you know, actually be open to different opinions. Help me grow into a person I like."

At Northern College, students had an assignment in which they wrote their academic autobiography, a reflection on their past experiences with school and learning. This assignment gave Candi the opportunity to reflect on why she was not a strong student as a child and why she struggled throughout school:

CANDI: Throughout, like high – you know, just school in general, like, I guess I really just got a bad reputation, you know. Like, I would get average or like C's, D's. I was barely getting A's or B's, so I didn't know how to divide long division and multiply, and then, um . . . like, nouns and verbs, I never really learned that. Just, like, the basics. Like, I just, you know, they passed me, just, kinda just passed me, you know, so I just kinda went by struggling, really, so . . .

INTERVIEWER: So that – the things you're talking about are things that you should have learned probably elementary school.

CANDI: Well, like, 'cause we did that – the academic autobiography, and I noticed that my parents didn't really care, like, they weren't really active in my . . . in my education, so you know, I kind of really didn't care. I was a little kid, like, if my parents didn't care of course I wasn't really gonna care. I never really saw why I was a loser, I just kinda accepted it.

The realization that her parents had a part to play in her earlier lack of academic success gave Candi a better understanding of her personal history. Placing her final comment in the past tense, "I just kinda accepted it" implies that she no longer does accept that judgment about herself.

### **Developing New Learning Strategies**

In their learning community classes, students spent time exploring how they learned. They gained a metacognitive understanding of their own learning style

preferences which helped them articulate what learning environments and methods worked and did not work for them. They discovered learning strategies that helped them gain confidence and success in their classes. And finally, students articulated the ways they had become proactive in their education.

**Learning styles.** The students had a good understanding of how they learned. When asked, each student was able to name her preferred learning style. Many could describe active learning strategies they employed to help retain information. For example, Cecilia described herself as a visual learner who needed to re-read what the teacher had read aloud to see the words on the page:

CECILIA: I guess . . . I'm more a visual. But then, again, I guess, it would be, like, audio. I like to be able to see it, but then I'm gonna have to go over it on my own . . . the second time, to make sure that I got it. So, like, when Laura [the English instructor] reads in class, if she reads us the paper, reads us a story out of the book, I'm listening to her read it, but I'm gonna go and I'm gonna read it again just for myself, see actually the writing.

INTERVIEWER: So it's not just coming in here [pointing to her ear], it's coming in through your eyes as well?

CECILIA: Exactly. It helps me to remember that way . . .

Irena, on the other hand, described herself as a "hands-on" learner who learns best when asked questions and given time to practice:

IRENA: Hmm . . . I'm more of a hands on. I . . . or . . . even if I'm shy and I'm really quiet . . . when they ask me, is when it gets me, like very alert and very awake, and that's when I'm, like, that's when it sticks in my mind! [laughs] I realize that – that that's when it sticks to my mind, to my head, like, it's there, and I'll never forget it . . .

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean "hands on"?

IRENA: . . . like I like to practice . . .

INTERVIEWER: Okay, you want to . . . so, you like to practice?

IRENA: Mm hm.

INTERVIEWER: You said that when stu – when teachers ask you questions, it makes you . . . alert?

IRENA: Yeah, yeah, more alert, and it sticks in my head, but I won't forget it, like, for . . . for . . . I'll never forget it. But, um, it's hard. Not many teachers will be asking you . . . it's like . . .

INTERVIEWER: What kind of learning is difficult for you in terms of, like, are there any classes where the approach the teacher takes is – doesn't work for you?

IRENA: Um . . . yeah . . . um . . . when – it's been hard, like, some subjects that I'm not into it . . . and just, like, it's hard for me, it's like, to memorize, like, a big lecture or like a lot reading, so just memorizing . . . that's like, maybe, a hard time that I have.

Frankie learned best through repetition. She also recognized that she struggled in other classes because she lacked good note-taking skills. She was working on improving those skills in her learning community classes:

FRANKIE: I really like . . . this class this semester, because it's like I – my learning style, I need to do the repetitious stuff, I guess. That really helps me out. Whereas the other classes that I took are, like, um . . . *here's your homework*, you know, and it's really fast paced. Um . . . I'm not good at taking notes . . . and I'm not sure what's important to write down. So I'm learning that this semester, too.

Dolores described herself as a visual and verbal learner. She explained how the learning community instructors helped her because they knew her learning style. She felt that instructors who were not familiar with her learning style might not provide her with the extra assistance she felt she needed. Unlike the other students, Dolores did not describe a strategy that she employed to help her succeed, but rather put that responsibility on the instructor:

DOLORES: So, the two ones that I was – I think it was, um, this visual – I can't even remember the other one. It was visual, and the other one was verbal. So I – it's better for me to learn to, like, to see someone do something and they explain it to me, without just, like, reading something and then already knowing what it is.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, yeah. So you want to watch somebody and have them sort of tell you what steps they're doing.

DOLORES: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: So with the learning style that you have, is it – how does that – does it help you in the learning community that you're in, in the English and counseling?

DOLORES: Um . . . it sometimes help me 'cause, the teachers – they, like, 'cause they're teaching us this, they help. But, like, if I had a different teacher and they didn't know what I was learning in my other classes it probably'd be kinda hard because they don't know my learning style and they wouldn't know that I need, like, a little bit more to, like, learn it. They're just probably like, *here, do this, you already know how to do it*, but . . . knowing they don't know how I learn, so, it can be rather difficult.

Many of the students mentioned that they learned best in interactive learning environments. This finding is in keeping with the theme of teamwork and collaboration described in section three of this chapter. Josefina described it well:

JOSEFINA: Um . . . I learn best, um, in doing and interacting. Um, so the learning community is really accustomed to where I learn best. Which is, um, discussion. I've never – I've never liked reading. Although I – however, I love learning. [laughs] If that makes any sense. Um . . . I've um . . . so I – I learn best, um . . . in ah, in discussion, kind of group settings. Although I like – I like working individually. But I've learned that I . . . I can do well in my courses and my work when I work individually; however, I've learned that in a group and in a community setting I really get the most out of – and I learn so much more. [laughs] Um . . . from the interactions, from other people's opinions, other people's way of, uh, looking at things, doing things, um . . . and it just sort of reinforced whatever we're learning. It just, you know, it kinda just brings in the . . . it's like a repetition of the material. And, um . . . you know, and I – and I, and I love people. And I learn from people.

**Learning strategies.** In addition to understanding their preferred learning style and finding ways to maximize those, students developed other learning strategies for success. These included getting to know instructors, breaking homework into manageable chunks, having more than one strategy to tackle difficult problems, and knowing how to access resources when needed.

Ynez learned that developing a personal relationship with her instructors was an important learning strategy in college. She described this explicitly when she talked about her interview assignment:

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And, are you working on – like, you had an assignment where you needed to interview another teacher?

YNEZ: Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: How did that go for you?

YNEZ: It was pretty good, I think, actually. I was nervous at first, but I'm like, no, I need to get it – I hear from everybody that, *talk to your professor, you know, they'll see you differently, that you're actually interested in the class*. And it's like, that's true, that's pretty cool, actually.

INTERVIEWER: Who did you interview?

YNEZ: Uh, I interviewed Erica. Because I'm . . . I knew her as an English teacher over here but not as a college teacher . . . so it was like, okay, I want to see what she expects in class. Different things. It was actually good, because she helped me out with my thesis for my essay, and like, I asked her, you know, what do I need to do in class to have a good grade, and she told me stuff like better relationships and . . . see that I'm actually into the class and want to get a good grade.

Frankie, a returning student and single mother of three, contrasted her earlier unsuccessful experiences with school to this term. She described how she learned to break homework into manageable chunks to avoid feeling overwhelmed. This helped her understand and learn. However, when that strategy didn't work, Frankie had a second strategy (reading it out loud) and a third (talking to the instructor) to draw upon:

INTERVIEWER: What difference do you see in yourself as a student?

FRANKIE: Um . . . well . . . I feel like I'm learning more. I feel like I'm more, um, like, on the same page as what's being taught. Um . . . when I took a counseling class, the last few counseling classes I took were really fast paced and, um . . . overwhelming. Really overwhelming. Um . . . when I get overwhelmed this semester . . . um, I've learned to, um . . . 'cause I'm a single mom of three, so I work and then I go home, and . . . um . . . I've learned to do a little bit of homework and walk away and go feed a kid or change a diaper or . . . you know, do whatever I need to do, come back do a little bit more homework. So what I'm doing is breaking down my assignments a little bit more at home. And I seem to be, um, remembering it more. Um, understanding it more. And if I don't understand it then I go back and try to figure it out. If I'm just absolutely not getting it I try to read it out loud, um . . . and . . . if I don't get it I



just, I let the teacher know, *I really had a hard time with this. I just didn't get it.*

At two other points in the interview, Frankie addressed her learning strategies. When I asked Frankie how she liked the learning community, she responded:

FRANKIE: Um, I'm liking it. It's – it's very rewarding because I'm feeling more confident about my writing. Um, when I get stuck I immediately let the teachers know.

And later when she talked about doing her homework:

FRANKIE: I'm learning to re-read things and take my time. Like, I never did that before. So that's part of my treatment with ADHD, is slowing down. You know, little bits at a time.

Frankie also learned how to access resources to help her succeed in school:

FRANKIE: 'cause um, I had ADHD so it's hard for me to, uh, to concentrate sometimes, and I've already let my teachers know about that, and I, um, let the office know, put in my documentation and stuff, so, um . . . I'm allowed to have accommodations. I haven't used 'em yet. I just – I'm just now getting it all together. Um . . . it's . . . I'm not sure, I think it's just the teachers. You know, I – I feel very comfortable approaching the teachers, um, and the students. I don't – I don't know. It's just . . . I feel good about it. I don't know if 'cause of my age and I'm just ready . . . to take that step, or, I'm not sure. You know, I'm just very eager and excited to, to learn new things, so I'm totally focused and doing my best to . . . to learn what I'm supposed to be learning.

Josefina contrasted the experience she had in a prior semester taking counseling classes that were not in a learning community format. The difference was learning what resources were available to her and having someone check in on her regularly:

JOSEFINA: Um, when I took the first courses I get – the teachers are wonderful, but um . . . the teachers are wonderful and the students were as lost as I was, um, plus the most – I think most of them were adults like myself. Um, that classroom setting was more adult than younger, 20-year-old, uh – the younger adults. Um . . . and, I think that I – I was sort of just trying to figure things, whereas in the community course, though, I know who to ask, where to go for help. I don't feel so lost. Like, I know – the resources are there, the community, um, the counseling course really provides a lot of, um, information, tools, resources, um, and checks in with you on a regular basis as a part of the class.

Josefina continued by describing how her learning community class helped her better understand her own strengths and weaknesses as a learner. She described how she was learning how to look at “weaknesses” as areas to build upon:

JOSEFINA: I think what it does is instead of you sort of going through the motions and kinda going through trial and error, what the learning community does for you is it brings it all – puts all the cards on the table from the beginning and helps you move along much quicker. Um . . . helps identify all the issues and concerns that can come up, um, plus all the successful, um, ways of learning and how to best achieve in school, um, and in life. It really helps you look inside of yourself and helps you identify your strengths, your weaknesses . . . Um . . . it really helps you, um, look at things in a different light. So, instead of looking at things like a weakness, it’s really looking at it like . . . here’s the place where I can, um, use some tools to build my – build on this, and it really allows you to build on your strengths, as well.

**Becoming a proactive learner.** Josefina talked about how she had become more proactive since enrolling in her learning community class. Knowing that she came back to college after a long break, I asked her if this change was due to her own gain in maturity or to the learning community structure. She replied that both were responsible for her changed behavior:

JOSEFINA: And, uh . . . so it’s really . . . um . . . I’m really, I’m doing – I’m doing well. [laughs] For example, now that I’ve been off school for so long, I . . . uh, what I do now is when I get into a classroom I make friends immediately and I get phone numbers and emails and, you know, try to figure out how I can access my teachers, etc., etc., and so now when I’m off, I’m on the internet, looking to see what’s been going on in the classroom. I call my classmates to ask them what’s been going on. Um . . . and, you know, little bits and pieces here. When I can I do a little bit of my homework in hopes that I can at least turn something in and not fall completely behind, so . . . I’m definitely much more proactive now than what I used to be! [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Do you attribute that change into a more active learner – do you attribute that to just your own maturity and your own experience working in the work force, or to this structure in the learning community? What would you attribute that change in you to?

JOSEFINA: Um . . . I would say 50% of that is maturing . . . um . . . the other 50% as far as utilizing the resources and . . . um, really, um, taking advantage of being . . . the teachers, the – their accessibility – I attribute all that to the community setting. And also, um . . . so yeah, I mean the

other 50% I do definitely attribute to the community, ah . . . source – ah, the community setting that is . . . that I'm in right now, because, um, like I said, they put all the cards on the table so I know all the resources up front, which saves me a lot of time, because I don't have much – because I'm a mom! A single mom, at that. Um . . . that I really, really, um, attribute to the fact that the community setting, um . . . its influence has really expedited my . . . my success in my courses now because of the way they're set up and how they encourage things and how everything, you know, is on the table. Which I think if that wasn't in place right now I would still be like all the other kids, you know? Um . . . trying to figure things out and . . . because I don't have time, um, I wouldn't have been able to, you know – I wouldn't be this successful this quickly if it wasn't for the current structure of the community classes.

Josefina was not alone in describing herself as taking a more active role in her own learning. Students repeatedly spoke about raising their hand, writing on the board, and participating in group activities more readily once they felt comfortable in their class setting. For example, Marisol made the connection between her ability to contribute in a class to feeling comfortable in that class. She said that her level of comfort in a class dictated whether she participated actively in that class. And when she participated actively, she learned more:

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay. So you don't contribute as much?

MARISOL: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find, um, when you do have a class where you can contribute, does it . . . how does it make you feel about that class?

MARISOL: I like it more 'cause I feel like – 'cause I'm more comfortable. And . . . I dunno. Like, English class – I went in front of the class and wrote something on the board, and I was like, oh . . . I dunno, it's, like, I dunno. It's weird. [laughs] It's just – I didn't feel, like, nervous or anything.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it's going to impact, um, how you do in the class? Is that . . .?

MARISOL: Probably, 'cause I, like . . . the things that I wrote on the board, I remembered them for the next test that we had, and it was there and, like, I can ask questions and I'll, like, learn because I'm actually asking questions instead of other classes where I probably wouldn't as often.

### **Moving in New Directions**

For some students, the experiences they had in their learning community classes brought changes in their lives outside of the classroom. We saw this already with Ynez who began questioning her parents' views on gender roles. Other students brought up ways they were moving in new directions because of their learning community experience. Frankie saw changes in herself as a parent. When before she did not feel capable of helping her daughter with her homework, now they do homework together and she helps:

FRANKIE: And at first it was like, my littlest one would, like, run across my papers and, you know . . . like, trying to get me to play with him stuff, and I explained to him, I said, I have to do homework right now. And then . . . so I do a little bit of homework and then we go play or, you know, get him Play-Do, 'cause he's really handsy. He's got, um, sensory, um . . . he's just gotta be doing stuff with his hands. Beads and things like that. And so, um, he's learning that, you know, mom's doing her homework. There's a time to play. And then at the same time it's teaching him about homework 'cause he starts kindergarten next year. And then me and my little girl, we do homework together. And it's so funny, 'cause my English stuff that I'm learning, she's doing it in second grade.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting.

FRANKIE: So it's like re – I'm going – I'm doing homework here . . . and then I can actually help her with her work in school.

On another front, two students changed their aspirations due to their experience in the learning community. Both Cecilia and Irena had no intentions of transferring to university prior to enrolling in their learning community. That has changed now. First, Irena:

IRENA: I didn't have in mind to transfer, but I'm kinda excited now that I'm hearing it from Dr. Lopez, so it's kinda nice, because I'm like, oh, how exciting. Hopefully I can do it and transfer.

And this is how Cecilia responded to a question about the learning community structure:

INTERVIEWER: Do you find the structure of the two classes together helpful for you?

CECILIA: It does. Like I said, the routine, the schedule was a little bit hard for me to get back into, but that does. It does. And the transfer prep, I'm glad it ended up being transfer prep 'cause like I said I wasn't headed that direction, but, originally that's what I wanted to do, so . . . The structure there is good. It definitely does help.

Cecilia had plans to go to community college and transfer to a university when she graduated from high school. But once she descended into a life of substance abuse, her dreams evaporated. Six years later, she enrolled in a learning community that has brought her back in touch with those earlier aspirations.

### **Section Five Summary**

Students had a lot to say about what they learned in their learning community classes and how their approach to learning changed from the experience. In terms of literacy development, they appreciated the feedback they received from both peers and instructors, they recognized when they transferred the literacy skills learned in one class into others, and they gained fluency and a wider vocabulary through their reading. Students made connections between what they were learning and their own lives and histories; they made connections with instructors through the interview assignment given in both learning community classes. Students gained insight into their preferred learning styles and shared learning strategies they used to maximize their learning styles. And finally, in several instances students shared that the experience in the learning communities was making a difference in the directions their lives were taking them.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to present, in their own words, the experiences of Latina community college students enrolled in developmental learning community courses, particularly those experiences that they believed had the greatest impact on their learning. These experiences were organized into broad categories based on an initial coding of interview data. See Table 2 for a complete chart of categories, findings, and subfindings. These sections represented areas where students had the most to say. These include their first impressions of their learning communities, and first impressions of college for new students; how they felt about the learning community

environment; the contrasts between their experiences in their learning community classes and other classes; and, finally, their perceptions of learning that took place in their learning community classes.

Table 2

*Findings and Subfindings*

Category	Findings	Subfindings
First Impressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New students were nervous, excited, and skeptical</li> <li>• Returning students were nervous</li> </ul>	
Feelings about the Learning Community Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students felt comfortable</li> <li>• They saw their peers as friends and family</li> <li>• They collaborated on coursework and navigating college life</li> </ul>	
Contrasting Learning Community and Non Learning Community Classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students felt alone in traditional classrooms</li> <li>• They were afraid of their teachers</li> <li>• They did not participate in their traditional classes</li> </ul>	
Perceptions of Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students saw gains in their academic literacy</li> <li>• Students connected curriculum and instructors to their own lives</li> <li>• Students developed new learning strategies</li> <li>• Students moved in new directions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Viewed their writing through others' eyes</li> <li>- Appreciated integrated curriculum</li> <li>- Understood the importance of reading for college</li> <li>- Knew their preferred learning style</li> <li>- Developed alternate learning strategies</li> <li>- Became proactive learners</li> </ul>

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Thirteen Latina students from two rural community colleges participated in this study by sharing at length their experiences in learning community classes. An interpretive phenomenological method, using in-depth interviews as a primary means of data collection, was used to give the reader, researcher, and participants a deeper understanding of these experiences. The focus of these interviews was on those experiences that students felt had the greatest impact on their learning. An open-ended format was used in the interviews to allow students to speak about those aspects of their learning community experience that mattered most to them. This chapter discusses the findings of my study in relation to the literature review, gives implications for practice, discusses limitations to the study, addresses areas of future research, and concludes with a personal reflection on the experience.

### **Discussion of Findings**

What are the experiences of Latina students enrolled in developmental learning community courses which have the greatest impact on their learning? This is the research question guiding this study. The interviews with Latina students from West Creek and Northern Colleges yielded rich description of these students' experiences in learning communities that pair developmental English with counseling classes. In particular, these interviews give practitioners an understanding of those aspects of this specific type of learning community that impacted the students' academic growth from their own points of view. The interviews yielded findings in four general categories: first impressions, feelings about the learning community environment, contrasting learning community and non-learning community classes, and perceptions of learning. In addition, these interviews illuminated two more findings that, although tangential to the central research question, are of great importance in understanding the experiences of Latina community college students. These include the remarkable diversity in family background among Latinas, and the fact that Latinas choose colleges close to home regardless of their academic preparation and ability.



## First Impressions

To understand the students' academic experiences in their learning community classrooms, it is important to understand their initial emotions and perceptions as they entered into this experience. The interviews revealed that the students viewed college as a new and alien environment. Six of the students interviewed expressed nervousness about coming to college. For those who were fresh out of high school, simply navigating the campus was scary. For example, Alma was relieved when she discovered the learning community classes were both held in the same classroom, so she did not have to risk embarrassment in searching out a new room. In *The College Fear Factor*, Cox (2009) eloquently describes the fears community college students have about embarking on higher education. Drawing on data from 34 community colleges across the nation, Cox concluded that students entered community colleges experiencing self-doubt in their abilities, anxiety about the work required of them, and feelings of inadequacy in relation to their instructors' mastery of the subject-matter. Like their counterparts in Cox's study, six students at West Creek and Northern expressed nervousness, self-doubt, and anxiety about entering college. When asked how they felt about coming to college, or being back in college, the most common response was "I feel nervous." Those who were new felt nervous because they did not know what was expected of them, and those who were returning battled feelings of inadequacy because they had had negative experiences earlier.

The fears students expressed might have been exacerbated by the fact that few of them had family members able to demystify the experience. Six of the thirteen were the first in their family to go to college and nine had parents who had limited or no first-hand experience with the American educational system. For these students their home environments were vastly different from what they were experiencing in college. Tinto (1993) theorized that students stay and do well in college once they successfully pull away from their home environments and integrate socially and academically into the new college environment. This is most difficult for students whose families are not versed in academic culture and for those who do not have other family members to guide them, what Attinasi (1989) refers to as "fraternal modeling" (p. 257). It is telling

that those students who did have family members who had attended college before them felt more confident. For example, Jade said that her older brothers “prepped” her for college. They had attended state universities before she enrolled at West Creek. Jade, in turn, was engaging in fraternal modeling for her younger sister. As her sister approached high school graduation, Jade told her, “You’re gonna go to school. If you’re not finding a job, you’re gonna go to school. And it’s not going to hurt you.”

Rodriguez et al. (2000) identified four main areas of stress for Latina college students: lack of financial support, family expectations and obligations, gender-role stereotyping, and academic underpreparedness. The participants in this study experienced some of the same areas of stress described in Rodriguez et al.’s study. Seven students in this study cited financial concerns and five cited family expectations as reasons they chose to attend their local community college over a more distant university. For the most part, students in this study did not describe financial or family obligations as obstacles to their academic success once enrolled. The exceptions were three of the students who had children. Frankie, Josefina, and Irena each spoke at length about the difficulty of balancing class work, homework, and caring for their children. These circumstances were most likely exacerbated by the fact that each was raising children as a single parent.

In terms of gender stereotyping, only one student explicitly expressed frustration about this. Ynez felt that her parents were “pulling her back” because of their narrow vision of her potential as a young Latina. The message she received from her parents was “Latinas are, like . . . us, we don’t go far. You end up getting pregnant and married at a young age.” It is interesting to note that this struggle was internal to her family, not a limitation she felt was imposed from the outside like the students in Rodriguez et al.’s study. In Ynez’s words, “I want to go to school and not be the same like they are. You know, I actually want to go forward in life.” For Ynez, attending her learning community classes was a means to move forward. It was a liberating experience:

YNEZ: Now I am aware of what people do . . . And it’s like – and I question myself, and why other people do that? You know, why are things done this way? Or why do people say this is right and this is wrong? So it’s helped me, like, see that there’s not perfection, but we

always have a guideline to what is supposedly perfect. So it has helped me, you know, actually be open to different opinions. Help me grow into a person I like.

Once enrolled, five students expressed concern over their lack of academic preparation. These students had all attended college at least one semester prior to their interview and had experienced difficulties or failure. Josefina, Cecilia, and Frankie started college years before and had struggled. Irena and Candi had struggled in their classes the semester before being interviewed for this study. Each approached their learning community experience with some trepidation and insecurities about their academic abilities due to these past experiences.

### **Feelings About the Learning Community Environment**

When asked about their academic experiences, students often responded by talking about affective characteristics of their learning experiences. Indeed, the two were inextricably linked together; students' feelings about their classes, peers, and teachers were integral to what and how they learned. The themes that emerged when students talked about their learning communities centered on their feelings of comfort and connectedness: "I feel comfortable," "A class of friends," and "Teamwork and collaboration." The learning community structure and the activities designed within it promoted social integration, and repeatedly, students emphasized this as a positive. The participants in this study spoke positively about the extended time they had together and the collaborative activities that allowed them time to talk and get to know one another, something often lacking in their other classes. In their learning communities, students described feeling supported and comfortable. They described one another as friends, and even at times as family. They relied on one another for support, encouragement, and advice. Those who were younger and new to college appreciated the counsel of those who were older and more experienced with college culture.

The participants in this study exhibited an affinity to Bordas's concept of "We" culture (2007). They preferred collaborative over competitive learning environments and valued interdependence, cooperation, and mutual assistance. Bordas describes these values as the cornerstones to the Latino concept of *la familia*. Several students in this

study described the relationships they had in their learning community as “like a family” or “family-based.” The younger students spoke of being welcomed, brought into the fold, by the older students while the returning students spoke of giving advice and support to the newer students. It is interesting to note that although none of the guiding questions in the interviews were directly about family, students spent on average 10 percent of their interview time talking about their families.

In their study of first-year experience learning communities at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Huerta and Bray (2008) concluded that the only statistically significant difference in classroom experiences between Latino/Latina and white students was in their perceptions of collaborative learning. Latino/Latina students were more likely to report that they experienced collaborative learning in their learning community and were more likely to attribute this collaborative learning to the learning community structure. Like their university counterparts, the Latina students at West Creek and Northern connected collaborative learning with their learning community experience. Dulcina, for example, explained that she liked her learning community classes because “We get to do a lot of activities together, and, like, [the teacher] puts us in, like, groups with, like, different people, like, every time.” When I asked her what helped her about being in groups, Dulcina answered, “What helps me . . . ’cause sometimes, you know, I don’t really know how to start something, or – and then they’ll be, like, *oh, you know, what should we do?* And then, like, we all kind of brainstorm together.” Being able to bounce ideas off one another and help each other out was a key aspect of the learning community experience that Dulcina appreciated.

The experiences of the participants also supported Brown’s (2008) findings. In his study contrasting the attitudes of Latino/Latina and white students at a large research institution, Brown concluded that Latino/Latina students brought a cultural focus to their educational experience that valued community and cooperation. In addition, he found that many Latinos/Latinas who were second and third generation still showed affinity to these cultural values, choosing cooperation over competition, and appreciated classroom practices that did the same. Like the students in Brown’s study, the participants in this study enjoyed working together and supporting one another. This

finding remained constant regardless of their status as first or second generation, or as Generation 1.5 students. Irena, who is first generation, spoke of how comfortable she felt in her learning community class because the students were together for three hours a day. The sheer length of time together allowed for deeper bonds to form. Josefina, who is second generation, explicitly contrasted her regular classes to her learning community classes. “[In the learning community,] I feel the support of my friends . . . I know who to ask, where to go for help.” These sentiments were echoed by the Generation 1.5 students as well. So, the attitudes Brown discovered in students at a large research institution were also articulated by students at two small community colleges.

### **Contrasting Learning Community Classes and Non-Learning Community Classes**

The participants often contrasted the comfortable and collaborative environment they found in their learning community classes with the individualistic environment in their other classes. In those classes, they felt “solo” because there were fewer opportunities to work in groups. When they did interact with other students in those classes, they described it as “different.” Irena said the interactions were “strict” and Marisol described her classmates as “focused on their own work.” The social environment of the regular classroom is reminiscent of Bordas’s concept of “I” culture that reflects the European-American values of independence, self-reliance, and the dominance of the individual over the collective (Bordas, 2007). In such an environment, the students in this study described feeling alone and apprehensive. They were less likely to participate actively in those classes.

In the review of the literature on how colleges respond to underprepared students, on learning communities, and on Latina students in community colleges, no study was found that contrasted Latina students’ experiences in collaborative and non-collaborative learning environments. Nevertheless, the students in this study felt there was a significant difference in their experiences in collaborative and non-collaborative classrooms. Speaking about her learning community classes, Ynez put it this way:

YNEZ: Everybody knows each other more. Just, like, you’re less . . . I would say embarrassed of speaking up . . . because we’re all there together . . . So it’s, like, just different environment, I would say. You’re

more, like, willing to be open and actually work with the people.  
Because we always do group activities.

Asked how this is different from her traditionally structured math class, Ynez flatly stated, “I don’t participate . . . not in math class, I don’t participate. I sit in the front . . . but it’s like, I’ll talk to the people around me, but it’s just . . . different in there.” When I pressed her to find out what the difference was, she replied, “Probably ‘cause we really don’t do group work or, like, interact with each other . . . So it’s just, like, notes that we take. And then the math exercises we do.” I then asked if she ever sought out her teacher for help and she said, “I do ask for help once in awhile . . . But . . . it’s like, okay, I’m done, so I’m going back to my home to work.”

Even though she engaged in what Bueschel (2009) described as good studenting skills – taking notes, doing her homework, and asking the teacher for help – Ynez described herself as not participating or interacting with others in her math class. The traditional, non-collaborative structure of the class kept her from actively engaging as she did in her highly collaborative learning community classes.

### **Perceptions of Learning**

Students expressly connected their willingness to participate actively in class to the comfortable and nurturing environment of the learning community classes and to the friendships developed within them. This active participation, in turn, led to a perception of increased learning. Marisol made these connections explicit when she said that feeling comfortable in her English class (which was part of the learning community) gave her confidence to write on the board at the front of the class without feeling nervous. She then acknowledged that it was what she wrote on the board that she remembered for the next test. That active participation, writing on the board in front of her classmates and teacher, helped her retain the information. She concluded, “I can ask questions and I’ll, like, learn because I’m actually asking questions instead of other classes where I probably wouldn’t as often.” Marisol’s experience, like those of other participants of this study, corroborates Tinto’s findings (1997) that a supportive environment is as important to student participation as are traits inherent within the student and/or faculty. This finding was borne out in the two large studies of student

engagement in learning communities that Tinto led at LaGuardia and Seattle Community Colleges (1997, 1998). In both studies, students built supportive peer groups and experienced shared learning together. Through active participation, they gained a voice in the construction of knowledge in their classrooms.

The gains students saw in their learning were all in the context of social interaction. The students spoke specifically of the gains they saw in their academic literacy, in making connections, and in developing learning strategies that helped them in all of their classes. The activities that students highlighted when asked about their learning included group work, peer editing, class discussions in which they heard each other's perspectives, and projects that required interviewing others. None of these activities could be done without the involvement of others. In *Achieving Academic Success*, Astin (1985) postulated that learning is improved when students are required to share their learning with others. Looking specifically at Latino/Latina students, Huerta and Bray (2008) concluded that collaborative learning was a significant experience for the participants and one that had the broadest impact on their learning. These findings support the central tenet of Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory that learning occurs in social settings.

In Brittenhem et al.'s (2003) study of the Connections Program at a large public university, students in that learning community formed study groups more quickly and appeared more comfortable working in groups than students who were not in the learning community. They had a quicker social adjustment period and participated more readily in collaborative learning activities. The Latina students at West Creek and Northern described similar gains. As Josefina explained it, "I've learned that I can do well in my courses and my work when I work individually; however, I've learned that in a group and in a community setting I really get the most out of – and I learn so much more."

Students from Northern College spoke in depth about the assignment that required them to interview one of their instructors. This assignment helped them connect with instructors who previously were perceived as utterly unapproachable. For example, Ynez acknowledged that she had been advised frequently to "talk to your

professor, you know, they'll see you differently, that you're actually interested in the class." But it wasn't until she was required to do so for this assignment that she actually did. The result was illuminating:

YNEZ: I want to see what she expects in class. Different things. It was actually good, because she helped me out with my thesis for my essay, and like, I asked her, you know, what do I need to do in class to have a good grade, and she told me stuff like better relationships and . . . see that I'm actually into the class and want to get a good grade.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel differently in the class after interviewing her?

YNEZ: Yeah. I feel like I could actually raise my hand up and say something now.

Once Ynez interviewed her English teacher and developed a closer relationship with her, she began to participate more actively in class.

One unintended outcome of this interview assignment was that students suddenly felt noticed and accountable once they established relationships with their instructors. Prior to interviewing her math instructor, Alma felt anonymous in that class. This felt comfortable to her because she hated math. After the interview, however, she felt exposed. She struggled to describe this shift in her relationship with her math teacher:

ALMA: Now she [the math teacher] knows who I am. Like, [I feel] sometimes a little timid, I think? I dunno. Or . . . like, I dunno, 'cause now she really knows who I am, so if I get, like, a bad grade on my test, it's like, *oh, well I know this is Alma . . .*"

There is a sense of disequilibrium in Alma's comments. As Tinto (1997) and Grubb et al. (1999) have ascertained, most college classrooms are passive places dominated by teacher-talk. Shifting that balance by developing a direct relationship with an instructor is not necessarily comfortable for a new student, especially one who finds college instructors intimidating and unapproachable. Becoming noticed when one is used to being invisible can be disconcerting. But in Alma's case, this discomfort gave way to self-efficacy and accountability. She did not dwell long on her uncomfortable feelings, but rather envisioned herself furthering the relationship by visiting the instructor's



office hours. When I commented that she was no longer anonymous in that class, Alma responded:

ALMA: Yeah. But I mean, it was good, 'cause, I, you know, I went up to her and asked her, and now she knows who I am, so . . . I'm hoping to start going to more of her office hours and just asking for help.

INTERVIEWER: Good. How are you doing in that math class?

ALMA: Um . . . well, I do all my homework, and we have journals, and we do that, but then on tests I'm not really doing good.

In their survey of community college Latino/Latina students, Rendón and Nora (1994) noted that few of those surveyed sought out their instructors outside of class. However, those students who successfully transferred to four-year institutions did show high levels of social and academic integration and positive attitudes towards their teachers and academic work. This finding shows a correlation between the two rather than a cause and effect; that is, developing relationships with one's instructor does not necessarily lead to transfer, but the two often go hand-in-hand. All the same, this requirement of students to interview instructors in the Northern College learning community led to positive changes in the participating students' attitudes towards their instructors and to themselves as learners.

### **Diversity Among Latinas**

To recruit participants for this study, I gave brief presentations of my research in three learning community classrooms, concluding with an invitation for any Latina student to participate. Interested students who self-identified as Latina met me after class to learn more about the study and complete the Informed Consent Form. Given this open process in which no student was turned away, it is interesting to note how the participants in this study compare to the "typical" Latina student described by Santiago (2007) and Fry (2002). Based on demographic data, the typical Latina student is a U.S. citizen of Mexican descent and the first in her family to attend college. She lives at home, attends a community college close to home, and works to help support her family. In one area all participants of this study matched the typical Latina student described by Santiago and Fry: Each chose to attend a community college close to

home. This is addressed more fully in the next section. In other characteristics, some participants matched the typical Latina student while others did not. All but one were of Mexican descent. Approximately half were young and living at home, and around half worked outside the home. However, a large percentage were older, returning students with children of their own, and around half the participants did not have jobs and were concentrating solely on their education. It is interesting to note that the four students who had children were all raising them as single mothers.

While many participants shared common characteristics, the diversity among them in terms of family expectations, socioeconomic background, and life experiences was remarkable. Marisol was the daughter of two academics while Carmen's parents worked in the fields. Alma's father left school in the first grade and Ynez's parents left after sixth grade. Dolores's mother had been educated in Mexico but was determined to have a high school diploma from the U.S. Delfina's parents stressed education throughout her childhood while Jade's parents counseled her to get full-time work at a local warehouse after high school. Irena, Josefina, and Frankie were mothers of young children, each had juggled full-time jobs and child-rearing, and each had experienced the heaviness of relationships unraveling. Their lives were very different from those of Dulcinea, Dolores, and Alma, who were fresh out of high school, living with loving parents, and excited about the bright future ahead of them. Ynez was also fresh out of high school but she battled against her parents and their limiting views of her prospects as a Latina. Delfina and Jade held professional jobs and chose ambitious career pathways; Candi was not sure what she was doing in college. Cecilia struggled with drug addiction; Frankie was a product of the foster care system. Clearly, Latinas are not a uniform group. While this sounds simplistic and obvious, it is worth noting. We create demographic composites and look for patterns that fit a particular group, but groups are comprised of richly complex individuals.

### **Staying Close to Home**

Every participant in this study chose to attend the college closest to her home. Their reasons to do so were often complex and closely connected to family dynamics and expectations. Indeed, during the interviews students often became animated when

talking about this topic. Some had high hopes of leaving home and going to universities but were pressured by family members to stay close to home. This finding is in keeping with that of González et al. (2004) who describe the tension between Latina students' desire for independence and the expectation that they stay dependent on, and close to, their family. Like the students in the study by González et al., the women in this study articulated conflicted feelings about leaving home. The tensions experienced by the Latina students at local community colleges were no different from those experienced by Latinas attending highly selective universities.

Dulcina had dreams of attending a state university that was several hours away from her hometown. She recalled her father's reaction to this dream:

DULCINA: Um, well . . . they [her parents] knew I wanted to go to [the state university] – well, first, they were like, they didn't want me to move away. My dad didn't want me to. He was like, *no, why do you want to go away? What's wrong with us? Why don't you like it here?* And I was like, no, I like it here, just, you know, want to go and like, see new things and meet new people and places.

Dulcina convinced her mother to take her to orientation at the state university. Her mother was skeptical at first and then embraced the idea. However, Dulcina herself decided not to enroll because of the projected expense, her fear of leaving home, and her indecision on choosing a major:

DULCINA: Like, at first, she [her mother] was kinda like, *eh, you know, I don't know . . .* and then when we went, she liked it. She was like, *oh, it's really nice here*, and I was like, yeah it is. [laughs] And then, um, so afterwards, you know, I started thinking, you know, it's really expensive. 'Cause, like, we started getting, like, um, like estimates in the mail and stuff. And since we didn't – I didn't qualify for financial aid or, like, any sort of, like, help from the government, so it was going to be really expensive. And then . . . I was – I still – and then I was kinda scared about leaving, and I was, like, mm, I don't know anyone . . . and I was, like, you know maybe – and then since I didn't know what I want my major to be yet, I was like, you know, maybe I'm just gonna be, like, you know, wasting my money over there when I could just be, you know, hopefully when I get these two years done I'll know what I want to do, and then do it over there.

Another student, Jade, was given an opportunity to attend a Summer Bridge program at a university many hours drive away from her family home. Her parents let

her go but not without anguish: “My mom and my dad . . . they took me to the train station, I remember. And my mom was like, *pobrecita, a ti.*” In some ways Jade’s experience is similar to that of Rendón’s (1996) in “From the Barrio to the Academy: Personal Reflections of a Mexican-American Scholarship Girl.” Rendón’s mother put pressure on her to return home from university. However, Rendón resisted this pressure and stayed, while Jade did not and returned home to attend the local community college.

Parents did not always act as an impedance to attending four-year institutions, however. In Carmen’s case, her mother pushed her to go directly to a university from high school. Carmen believed she did this because she did not have a concept of community colleges: “[In Mexico] the people that go to college go straight to the university, while here my mom thought that’s how it worked. But, I was like, we don’t have the money for it, so we have to – I have to go here.” Carmen made the decision to attend the local community college for financial reasons.

Five students in the study mentioned they had parents who stressed higher education and encouraged their daughters to attend college. However, some of these parents did not know how the educational system worked, so their advice was often expressed in general or unrealistic terms. The burden of working out details fell on their daughters. Alma struggled to articulate this:

ALMA: Well, my dad’s always like, *when are you going to university?* Or like, he’s always telling that to my sister, and she’s always like, *oh, I still have a year left*, and then . . . um . . . he never – well, he just always asks us, like, what university we want to go to, and I just – I just told him San Diego. I was like, oh I want to go to San Diego. But . . . he doesn’t say anything, like . . . I dunno. He just kinda doesn’t know, like – he knows that all my other friends go to, like, Sac State or, like, Berkeley, but . . . he – he asks me, but he doesn’t really say much about it, but . . . I’m just – I want to know, too, like, I want to know what he’s gonna say, like, when I’m ready, like, to tell him, dad, we need to go to visit San Diego for, like, orientation. I wonder what he’s gonna say. Like, I’m waiting for it.

INTERVIEWER: What do you anticipate?

ALMA: I don’t know. I just wonder, like, I wonder if he’s gonna believe me, like . . . I wonder if he’s gonna be like, *oh you’re not gonna be able to do it*, or . . . if he’s gonna be like, *oh we’re for you to help you if you*

*need money, or, you're gonna have to get a job, where are you gonna live? Just like, all those questions, and how am I gonna answer them?!*

Alma expressed frustration at not knowing the answers to her father's questions. Not only did she not have the logistical information about attending college, but she also did not really know if she had his support if she truly did want to study at an institution away from home.

### **Summary of Discussion of Findings**

Latina students enrolled in developmental learning community courses identified a number of experiences as having the greatest impact on their learning. They experienced a welcoming, supportive environment with ample time for social interaction. They experienced collaborative learning that gave them opportunities to learn from one another. They actively participated in class by raising their hands, asking questions, writing on the board, and contributing to class discussions. This was in direct contrast to their more passive behavior in non-learning community classes. Moreover, students integrated the learning in both sections of their linked learning communities by applying the skills from one class to the assignments in the other. They saw gains in their academic literacy through engaging in peer revision and made meaningful connections between their course content and their lives and with instructors outside of their learning community classes. The gains students saw in their learning were all in the context of social interaction.

This research yielded discoveries that were not directly related to the central research question but were important in understanding Latina students' experiences in developmental learning communities. These included a better understanding of the diversity of family background and personal experience that exists among Latinas and the discovery that Latina students chose to attend community colleges close to home regardless of their academic aspirations or abilities.

### **Implications**

The Latina participants in this study responded in an overwhelmingly positive way to the integrated structure of learning communities. Given that, the most obvious implication of this study is that community colleges, as the primary provider of higher

education to Latina students, would better serve these students by offering more opportunities for them to learn in linked, integrated, and collaborative environments. Offering more classes in a learning community structure will certainly benefit the growing number of Latina students in community colleges.

What aspects of these learning communities are most important to Latina students? First, there needs to be ample time built into the learning community for social interaction and building friendships. The Latina students in this study learned best in environments where they felt comfortable and connected. They were all social learners and likened their best learning environments to family.

Second, these learning communities should offer assignments that take students out of the classroom to interact with other students and instructors. The participants in this study often felt alone in their non-learning community classes and were intimidated by their instructors. When required to formally interview their instructors, students changed their perceptions about these instructors and behaved differently in their classes. Giving structured assignments that require students to break down these barriers helps students see their instructors as accessible. It also encourages students to become more active learners in all of their classes.

Third, learning community classes should offer students opportunities to link their own experiences outside of class with what goes on in class. In other words, the learning should be contextualized. Students in this study became animated and focused when what they were learning helped them understand their personal and cultural histories. Relevant and authentic readings, class discussions, and writing assignments should build off of the students' personal and cultural experiences and give students frameworks to better understand themselves and their potential.

Fourth, program designers need to be sensitive to the perception Generation 1.5 students may have of courses that appear "different." Many, like Carmen in this study, have had experiences being tracked and inappropriately placed in ESL classes. Like her, they may assume that learning community classes are designed specifically for English language learners and misconstrue the term "learning community" to mean "ESL." This could be achieved through better course descriptions and better promotional materials

describing the structure, purpose, and intended audience of learning community programs.

A final implication comes from the students themselves. They were so enthusiastic about the learning community structure that many recommended that more challenging and content-heavy classes be offered in a learning community format. Specifically, students wanted to see learning community classes that include subjects such as accounting, microbiology, sociology, child development, and psychology.

### **Limitations**

In chapter three, I discussed the limitations common to any study that takes an interpretive social science approach. There is, in addition, three more limitation unique to this study. First, six of the thirteen students interviewed were fresh out of high school and enrolled in their first semester of college. Their responses to interview questions reflected a limited experience with college academics and culture; they did not have adequate college experiences to compare to their learning community experiences. Students such as Dulcinea, Dolores, and Alma had more to say in contrasting their learning community classes with the classes they had had in high school than their other college classes. Second, due to scheduling difficulties I was unable to conduct a focus group with the students from Northern College. One can assume that a focus group with those students could have yielded more information on their college experiences, information students may have been reluctant to share in one-on-one interviews with a relative stranger. And third, the fact that the participants were all drawn from learning communities that linked a developmental English class with a counseling class made it difficult to tease out whether some of the experiences students reported were due to the structure of the learning communities studied or were due to the subject matter covered in the classes. The activities and curricula in each class lent themselves to developing relationships, breaking down barriers, making connections, and improving academic literacy. In the English classes students worked together on peer editing, and in the counseling classes they often collaborated on group projects. In all classes, students read, discussed, and wrote about extended texts. The camaraderie and feelings of comfort and support that students described might in part be due to these activities and

curricula as well as to the structure of the learning community itself. If the learning communities had included general education or technical courses, the students' experiences might have been different. It is impossible to know from this research.

### **Areas for Future Research**

Five areas for future research arose from this study, three closely connected to the findings and two that are more tangential. The last limitation to this project mentioned above points to the first area for further research. What are the experiences of Latina students enrolled in learning communities that link different types of courses, especially those with rigorous academic content? Will the experiences be as positive? Participants expressed interest in having their more rigorous courses structured in a learning community format, but the community colleges in this study did not offer such pairings. There is no research to date on the experiences of Latina community college students in learning communities that included academically rigorous transfer-level courses.

A second area for further research is to follow these students as they continue their educational path. Returning in one year's time and again in two year's time to interview the same students would help practitioners understand these students' experiences over time. Do the gains they described in their learning community classes stay with them as they progress through their program of study? Do they seek out other opportunities to learn collaboratively in subsequent semesters?

A third area for further research is to explore whether the positive experiences Latina students describe about their learning communities translate into quantifiable success. Using objective measures such as retention, grade attainment, and transfer rates, are Latina students more successful in learning community courses than in others? Data are available showing that developmental students enrolled in community college learning communities do see gains in retention and grade attainment, but these data are not disaggregated to show the success rates of Latina students specifically.

Two additional areas for future research are tangential to this study. First, this study looks specifically at the experience of women. Male Latino students struggle with many of the same challenges as their female counterparts. Like Latina students, many



come from home environments that are vastly different from those of academia, are underprepared for the academic rigors of college, and face family obligations that keep them close to home (Rendón & Nora, 1994). Indeed, demographically speaking, Latino students fare worse than their female counterparts in terms of graduating from college. While Latinas have seen gains in graduation rates, growing from 54% to 65% from 1990 to 2000, Latino student graduation rates have stayed at 54% during that same ten-year span (González et al., 2004). Looking at the experiences of male and female Latino students using a similar research design would be illuminating.

A final area of research that is tangential to this study but could yield important information is a study of how family influences Latina students' college choice. Students in this study spoke at length about their parents' influence on their decision to attend a local community college. And each of them chose to attend the community college closest to home regardless of their level of preparation and academic aptitude. Delving into the dynamics of family obligation, and the role of obligation in collectivist cultures, will help practitioners better understand the family's influence on the students' decision-making process. This area of research could be particularly helpful in discovering ways to encourage Latina students to consider four-year institutions as viable options directly out of high school. Considering only one in twenty Latino/Latina community college students actually transfer and complete Bachelor's degrees (Jain, 2010), learning more about why Latinas overwhelmingly choose to attend community colleges is of critical importance.

### **Personal Reflection**

After introducing myself and my research proposal to the learning community class at West Creek, I invited students to talk to me after class if they were interested in participating. I walked out of the classroom unsure if anyone would take me up on my offer. Why would students want to talk to a stranger about their academic experiences? To my surprise, almost every Latina student in the class approached me, keen to learn more about my project and to share their experiences. A month later, I made the same presentation at Northern College and had almost the same level of interest. Students were eager to tell their stories. This surprised me initially. Later, as I got to know the

students better, I realized that they were proud of their status as college students. They took this role seriously and wanted to share their experiences, not just as college students, but as Latina college students. They did not want to be stereotyped or pigeonholed. As Ynez said in her interview, “We ARE smart and we can go forward if we really want to.”

The students who opened up to me were candid about the obstacles they faced both at home and at school. They were forthright about what they needed to succeed, from themselves, from family and friends, and from teachers and staff. And in so many ways, what they needed was what every student needs: support, reassurance, respect, and understanding. The learning environments in which they flourished were social, contextual, and relevant to their lives. Again, these are environments in which most learners do their best.

I came away from this experience with a renewed appreciation for social learning theory as outlined by Vygotsky (1978) and Bandura (2002). The women in this study benefited most when they were in classrooms where space had deliberately been carved out for social interaction. In the learning communities, hours together were doubled and activities often centered on group interaction. It was this focus on social interaction that led the students in this study to describe their learning communities as comfortable places. And it was this sense of comfort that gave them confidence to participate as active learners.

Van-Manen (1988) stated the purpose of doing phenomenological research in education was to learn how to act tactfully and thoughtfully in an educational setting. This ability to act tactfully grows out of a deep knowledge of students’ experiences in specific academic settings. It is my hope that by listening attentively to the participants of this research study and distilling their shared experiences into salient themes, I have made a scholarly contribution that will help community college practitioners better serve Latina students.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Verbal Script for Recruitment in Classrooms

Hello. Thank you for letting me speak to you for a few minutes today. My name is Samia Yaqub and I am doctoral candidate in the Community College Leadership Program in the School of Education at Oregon State University. In other words, I am a student like you.

As part of my degree requirement, I am engaging in a research study on learning communities. The purpose of the research study is to explore the experiences of Latina students who are in learning community classes. Latinas make up the second largest demographic group in California community colleges and yet there hasn't been much research done on how you experience your education. Learning more about your experiences may help community college educators create better learning environments for Latina students. My research question is "What are the experiences of Latina students enrolled in learning community courses which have the greatest impact on their learning?"

To better understand this topic, I am interviewing Latina students who are enrolled in learning community classes at your community college. I am focusing on students in learning communities that link developmental level English classes with other classes. I am focusing on this level because most students coming to community colleges start at that level.

I am talking to you today to invite you to be a part of my research. If you are Latina and have something to say about your own experience in this learning community, then you are eligible to participate in this study. Your involvement would include a one-on-one interview with me and a focus group session with up to five other students. The interview and focus group session would each be for one hour. So, your commitment to the study would be two contact hours. I would schedule these at times that work for you.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will receive a \$10 gift card from your college bookstore.

Would you be willing to participate in this study? Do you know of other Latina students who are in learning community classes who would be willing to participate?

If you would be willing to participate in this study or can suggest others who would be appropriate, please talk to me after class. I am also passing out my card with contact information. Feel free to call or email me at any time.

Thank you!

## Appendix B: Individual Interview Protocol

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. How did you get started at college?
3. Tell me about your past week in your learning community classes.
4. Tell me about what you are learning in these classes. What is easy? What is hard?
5. How are the learning community classes affecting you? What changes do you see in yourself because of this experience?
6. Describe yourself as a learner. What kind of learning environment do you do best in?
7. How are your learning community classes different from the other classes you are taking this semester?
8. What feelings do you have when you think of your experience in learning community classes?
9. What thoughts stand out for you?
10. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experience in learning communities?
11. Do you have any questions about this research project?

## Appendix C: Focus Group Protocol

1. Please introduce yourself to the group and state what learning community classes you are in.
2. What have you been learning this past week in your learning community classes?
3. What were your expectations for these classes before you started? Have these expectations been met so far?
4. What aspects of the learning communities are helping you? What is difficult for you?
5. Have these experiences changed you? Have they changed how you learn?
6. What advice would you give a new Latina student enrolling in a learning community at this college?
7. Do you have anything else to say about your experiences with learning communities?

## Appendix D: List of Codes

Code Name	Number of Segments
1. Learning community class teaching/learning	79
2. Parents and family	52
3. non learning community class	37
4. type of learner	17
5. making connections	16
6. Perceptions of improvement	15
7. high school vs college	14
8. peers	13
9. work	13
10. getting involved – clubs	5
11. Group work	5
12. race and identity issues	5
13. student recommendation	5
14. comfortable environment	3
15. I feel very supported	3
16. Afraid of the teacher	2
17. Becoming stronger	2
18. Community	2
19. family-based sort of thing	2
20. feeling connected	2
21. feeling safe	2
22. I was nervous	2
23. And I learn from people	1
24. bills marked their world	1
25. don't say anything in front of class	1
26. early literacy development - Spanish English	1
27. grow into a person I like	1
28. kinda like high school	1
29. meet people where they are	1
30. motivation or lack thereof	1
31. ninety days clean on Monday	1
32. not understanding college culture	1
33. open up her heart	1
34. See, we know everyone's business	1
35. wanted to pull me back	1
36. wearing my iPod	1
37. what your heart wants	1
38. you're always solo	1