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ABSTRACT

In 1984, Seattle Central Community College, in Washington, implemented the Coordinated Studies Program (CSP) in the humanities division of its transfer and liberal studies area. The CSP program involves interdisciplinary courses or seminars team taught by two to four faculty members from different areas of the college and involving an intense level of student participation. While taking CSP's generally helps students see themselves as serious students and persist, data on participants, as well as ethnographic research, indicate that few first-generation students or students of color participate in them. The parents of students taking CSP's tend to have higher levels of education or to have come from better educated families than those of students who do not enroll. In addition, while more CSP students come from middle-class families than non-CSP students, more CSP students are employed and work longer hours. Reasons given in interviews by first-generation students and students of color for not participating in the CSP's included an unfamiliarity and discomfort with the seminar process, concern over the non-traditional assessment methods used, and the difficulty of identifying supportive faculty beforehand since three or four instructors participated in each seminar. Since CSP's could provide considerable benefit to these students, the college has undertaken initiatives to increase their participation, including encouraging more faculty of color to teach CSP's and developing themes that appeal to students of color. Contains 28 references. (BCY)

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Differential Advantages in an Innovative Community College Setting

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Differential Advantages in an Innovative Community College Setting

If transfer to four-year colleges or universities is one of the main goals of community colleges, and Coordinated Studies Programs (CSPs) provide for successful transfer, then it is important to understand why first-generation college students and students of color are not participating in such innovative programs. At Seattle Central Community College, students who participated in CSPs were more inclined to see themselves as serious students, persisted in college, and aspired to continue on to four-year schools and graduate study (Tinto & Russo, 1993). However, while CSPs have proven themselves as natural bridges to four-year institutions, few first-generation college students or students of color participate in them.

Transfer rates at community colleges have continued to decline over the past thirty years. According to Cohen & Brawer (1982) two thirds of the students entering community colleges in the 1950's sought transfer whereas in the 1980's the number had dropped to one-third. Of those who actually transferred the number decreased from around thirty percent to under fifteen percent. Currently national community college transfer rates hover around 23% with even lower transfer levels in urban institutions of approximately 11% (Cohen, 1988). At Seattle Central the number of those who claim intention to transfer is

four-times that of those who actually transfer. Studies by Tinto & Russo (1993) and Dougherty (1987 & 1994) indicate, however, that almost half of all students entering community colleges desire to continue on with their education. These findings confirm my research which found working-class student aspirations appear are very much in line with those of the middle class. It is not due to lack of ambition that most community college students fail to achieve their academic and occupational goals. The reasons for low transfer rates are many, including: a shift towards more vocational training, the economic and familial demands placed on students resulting in more part-time students, an increase in students returning who already hold degrees, as well as the typical complaints that community colleges are not intellectual engaging or academically challenging centers for learning (LaPaglia, 1994; Bernstein, 1986; McGrath & Spear, 1990).

Accusations that community colleges do not prepare their students sufficiently well for transfer to four-year institutions has prompted the development of several innovative programs nation-wide (Karabel, 1986; Donovan & Schaier-Peleg, 1988). One of the main purposes of these programs is to increase the number of liberal arts courses that serve as conduits to four-year institutions. Of particular concern is the need to bring a larger portion of students of color into the transfer process and hence on to university campuses (Wilson, 1986; Orfield & Paul, 1988; Rendon & Valadez, 1993). It is this last issue that I wish

to pursue in this paper: how class and race provide a context for taking advantage of innovative community college curricula.

Methodology

Over the course of a year (1994-95) in-depth interviews with faculty, students, administrators, staff and graduates of Seattle Central Community College revealed that what took place at this institution was, for the most part, a radical, innovative educational journey for people from all walks of life. Students at SCCC were not "warehoused" (Shor, 1980); they were engaged in multiple struggles around identity (London, 1989). For many this entailed a struggle between their previous dismissal of schooling as superfluous and a growing awareness of their academic, political and social responsibilities and possibilities. Some readers may see this as a far cry from the stereotypes that exist about community colleges, but in fact, as this study demonstrated, there are schools similar to Seattle Central throughout the country. Perhaps the mix is slightly different: fewer Asians, more Latinos, less politically conscious, or more traditionally academic, but the mission and direction are similar.

To explore what changes have occurred over the past twenty years in terms of community colleges and in particular the transfer process, a national research project on urban community colleges commenced in 1993 sponsored by the Ford Foundation. After a year of research based on transfer data and telephone surveys of community college experts, the directors of

the project identified four community colleges that seemed to provide a "transformational function" which enabled students to overcome barriers to educational success. Four ethnographers were then selected, one for each institution. The schools reflected a variety of urban settings across the country including Chicago, San Antonio, Philadelphia and Seattle. Four additional sites have been selected for study during the academic year 1995-1996 to make a total of eight sites to complete the project. In addition to extensive taped interviews, notes, and documentation from district offices, the four ethnographers participated in conference calls monthly with the directors of the project and met quarterly in Boston to compare notes and chart new strategies.

The research site

Seattle Central is but one of several community colleges in the Seattle area yet it is the only one which has the reputation of being an "urban school." Located between downtown and a large Multicultural residential area, SCCC has a reputation for attracting "interesting" people. Known for its tolerance for diversity and ambiguity, SCCC's student body of 10,000 claims to have 45% people of color, including an E.S.L. program for 3,000 students, many of them refugees, and a substantial and visible gay/lesbian population. The college offers the second largest deaf program in the country, a very progressive vocational program, a full arts and sciences transfer curriculum, and CSPs. Hence, when I speak in this paper of diversity or

multiculturalism I am not using these terms as euphemisms for color; I am speaking of variety in terms of age, ethnicity, income, life experience, perceptions, ability, and sexual orientation.

In contrast to popular belief about community colleges, most of the students who attend Seattle Central have come by choice. Indeed, many non-first-generation college students who are not working class are attracted to SCCC because of its diversity, location, and innovative educational format (SCCC, 1994). There is very little tracking at SCCC; most demarcation lines are purposely blurred. For example, faculty have no way of knowing which students in their classes are transfer and which are vocational. High school students who are part of the "running start program" or are connected to the alternative education program down the street sit alongside executives who have been downsized out of their jobs or individuals returning to the workforce after years away. The cross-over is viewed as logical and healthy, creating alliances and understanding that surpass visible stereotypes.

Coordinated Studies Programs (CSP)

In 1984 the Coordinated Studies Program (CSP) was implemented at Seattle Central Community College focusing on instructional programming in the humanities division of the College Transfer/Liberal Studies area (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990). As the name indicates, CSPs are interdisciplinary "courses" which are team taught by two to four

faculty members from different areas of the college. These in-depth seminars of approximately sixty students usually meet four days a week for five to six hours a day, totaling between 15-18 credits per quarter, the entire courseload of a full-time student. Each CSP is thematically organized, allowing students to fulfill distribution requirements as needed. For example a CSP on "Love and Sex in the Twenty-first century" might offer credit in psychology, English literature, history, and/or sociology as well as be deemed a writing intensive course. Students select credits in the area of their need to complete distribution requirements and then are assessed in these areas.

In addition to intensive reading and writing, students are expected to actively participate in class discussions which are broken down into smaller seminars of 20 students to one instructor. The process is often wrenching for both faculty members and students as values are questioned and critiqued. Numerous writing assignments and self-evaluations, in conjunction with individual conferences, measure the growth and understanding of the material. Contact with faculty is extensive and often flows beyond the classroom into the community. It is not unusual for a faculty member to go out for a drink with a student, or a group, at one of the dozens of cafes, bars, or restaurants that line "Broadway," the street where SCCC is located.

Due to the intensity of time commitment, coupled with the provocative nature of the readings, students tend to shed their "masks of identity" in exchange for acknowledgement of shared

belief structure. Such "masks" are common in urban schools where identity is tightly woven with appearance (Willis, 1977; Fine, 1986). At Seattle Central it was not unusual to see some students dressed in black leather from head to toe, purple or green hair, tattoos, or chains alongside those who were on their way to a job or an interview dressed in a uniform, a suit or "sweats." In CSP's the marginalized, the long-haired white, 20 year old middle-class, ex-druggy dropout who has travelled to Tibet and the bald, gay, black hairdresser of 35, meet to discuss Leslie Silko or Ralph Ellison. This cross fertilization of lifestyles and perceptions is the goal of CSP's, and at times it happens; but all too frequently those who are willing to take the risks associated with CSP's are neither working class nor students of color, and by color I include Asians and students from other countries, not just African Americans or Latinos.

RESULTS

High participation rates in CSPs for middle-class, white, non-first generation college students

If an institution has a large population of working-class students and students of color and a fairly large proportion of students transferring to four-year schools, it is common practice to conclude that those who transfer are working class and/ or students of color. While "class" is not a factor that is measured in most institutions, a study by Tinto and Russo on Seattle Central's CSPs in 1993 provides quantifiable data which support the thesis that few first-generation college students

participate in Coordinatied Studies Programs, one of the main forums for preparation for advanced degree work. In comparing two groups of SCCC students, one set who took CSPs and one who did not, they found that parents of CSP students tended to be more educated as measured by time spent in college. 32.2% of CSP fathers and 33.1% of mothers held college degrees in contrast to the comparison group with 25.9% fathers and 27.4% mothers. The gap increases for advanced degrees with 24.4% CSP fathers and 18.6% CSP mothers continuing on for Masters or Ph.D.s in contrast to 16.7% fathers and 8.5% mothers in the comparison group.

What these data do not show but is revealed in my ethnographic work is the number of CSP parents who themselves came from educated families but who did not complete college because of "the times." Many CSP parents were in college in the 1960's when priorities moved away from academics to politics, travel, economic survival and social issues. CSP students I interviewed stressed how their parents' education and lifestyle had impressed them. For some this led to an openness to engage the unfamiliar, for others a self-destructive involvement in drugs and alcohol, and for still others boredom with traditional schooling. These behaviors and attitudes are reflected in their high school grades with most students performing below their potential, at around a B average. Again in the Tinto and Russo study more than three times as many students in the comparison class reported receiving B+ to A averages in high school than did the CSP students (17.2 to 5.3 percent respectively). In my

interviews with CSP students, most stated that "high school was a joke" and saw it as a waste of time. Several chose to attend alternative schools, dropped out, or opted to receive a GED. In many cases these were the same students whose parents held advanced and professional degrees. However, for these non-first generation, middle-class students, the correlation between their intelligence and time in high school was negligible. Coming from professional homes, their mental and verbal skills were exceptionally high. Many had escaped from "schooling" through self-education: reading, experimenting and traveling.

Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this fact, my findings, as well as those by Tinto and Russo, demonstrate that CSP students held much higher educational and occupational aspirations than the comparison group. More students from CSPs expected to earn advanced degrees than did students from the comparison group (62.8% vs 45.3%). Graduates of SCCC who were now in four-year colleges that I interviewed expressed concrete and complex plans for their professional futures. When asked how their parents were responding to this turnaround, they assured me that their parents had never lost faith in their potential.

One interesting and significant thread that wound its way into many a conversation was how one defines one's current socioeconomic class. Most faculty held the misconception that their students were predominantly working-class due to the fact that they worked long hours in jobs outside of school. Students, however, understood very clearly what class status they held. If

their father was a psychiatrist or economist, they knew that their current requirements for working a job had nothing to do with how they were raised, their parents' expectations, their academic background, their exposure to ideas, or their freedom of expression; it had to do with current economic realities, independence, and identity. It is interesting to look at some of the apparent contradictions. While more CSP students came from middle-class families than the comparison group, more CSP students were employed (74.2% vs 67.7%). CSP students also worked longer hours (41.9% worked 31-40 hours per week vs. 26.2% of comparison group). Nevertheless, they also claim to spend more time studying (56.3% studied over eleven hours a week vs 40.4% comparison students). This distinction between class as background versus class as current economic condition is significant and seldom discussed.

However, many CSP students discussed the life histories of their families in terms of downward mobility. At least half of the CSP students that I interviewed who had transferred to four-year schools indicated that they had come from upper-middle class, professional families in which the parents had divorced, leaving the mother with the responsibility of raising the children often when they were around ten years of age. The woman usually had little work experience even though most had college degrees. The divorce required that the mother return to school for additional education or take an entry level job, either way forcing the new family to move into lower income (not low-income)

housing and at times move the children from private to public schools. How this downward mobility affected these students cannot be speculated upon at this time, but in every case the mother has continued to be the dominating and stabilizing force in these young peoples' lives. In many cases the way in which she responded to the crisis continues to serve as a basis for the educational and occupational decisions being made by these students even today.

One of the main reasons that middle-class white students, like the ones I have described above, come to Seattle Central is because of the diversity. Many of the white students who attend SCCC were either raised to appreciate a multicultural environment or see themselves as part of a marginalized group who are most comfortable in an environment which values difference. These same students are attracted to innovative learning programs such as CSPs because of the critical pedagogy and multicultural content. The combination of intense, small group discussion around compelling social issues with close faculty contact provides students with an excellent foundation for university life and beyond. The openness and flexibility of CSPs appeal to students who perceive themselves as self-starters, independent, creative, and bright.

Low participation rates for working-class first-generation college students and students of color

What was not appealing and, in fact, was the most frequent criticism made by white students about CSPs, was the lack of

ethnic diversity among the students who took them. As one student stated,

> I came to SCCC because I wanted to be around people of color; I went to Garfield [inner city multicultural high school] and have lots of Black and Asian friends. I expected CSPs to reflect the diversity that I see in the halls [of SCCC] but it's like you close the door [on the CSP] and you're in another world. They're all white. I like CSPs and the books and discussions we have are multicultural and so are a lot of the faculty but where are the students of color?

First-generation college students, including many students of color, tend to shy away from CSPs. Interviews with these students revealed a variety of reasons why they hesitated to plunge into this innovative educational format but foremost was their unfamiliarity with the process. What did "coordinated studies" mean anyway? How would interdisciplinary learning prepare them for the workplace or for a specific major at a four-year institution? What does a CSP in "Ways of Knowing" have to do with their future as a nurse or an engineer? How can interdisciplinary work satisfy graduation requirements in the disciplines?

Seminar discussions posed a threat to some students who were used to lecture formats and did not want to expose themselves or discuss personal and difficult issues. Depending on the student,

the reasons varied. Some Asian students found this process unacceptable in a public setting and unrelated to their academic needs. Some working-class women wanted to keep their private lives separate from their school lives. The less discussion, the better, for opening up takes energy and there are things that are better not revealed. Some of the men just wanted to get on with the material and the tests. They perceived the CSP context as too informal, too emotive.

Non-traditional assessment presented another concern for working class-students. Familiar with traditional grades, many students felt uncomfortable with the nebulousness of "evaluations." Some wondered how "evaluations" could be translated into grades, whether they would be respected by four-year institutions, or for that matter by their parents. How would this all translate out in the real world?

Lastly, CSPs lower the possibility of identifying "supportive" faculty ahead of time since there are usually three to four instructors who participate. By supportive, I am alluding to a common argument at SCCC around race-based teaching. Some administrators believe that African-American students learn best from African-American faculty, even if these students have been raised in white or multicultural settings. This was not a concern for students from other visible minorities.

As disconcerting as these factors are, the discrepancy between middle-class students and working-class students' ability to handle the process required in innovative educational settings

increases over time. Those students who take CSPs quarter after quarter, and many do, are familiar with the format and commence each additional quarter with skills for debate and discussion intact. They are aware how far they can push the faculty; they know what is expected and acceptable. They are ahead before they even begin.

DISCUSSION

If one word could describe the reason why first-generation college students resisted signing up for CSPs, it would be "risk." Working-class students in urban areas live a precarious existence in higher education with few safety nets. The demands of job, family, peer pressure, isolation, lack of transportation, and for many women, lack of support from a partner, inhibit the possibility of full-time commitment to schooling. To many of these individuals education is a luxury even as they are aware that it many be essential in order to keep themselves and their children out of poverty.

It is within this framework of piecing together a life as well as an education that most working-class, first-generation college students enter community college. Knowing the tentativeness of their lives, they make sane decisions to prevent total disaster to their education and their outside obligations. Rather than committing to one CSP of 15-18 credits which meets four days a week for three to five hours a day, they opt to piece together a schedule of independent, and at times unrelated, courses. The logic maintains that if things start to fall apart,

they can drop one course or opt to let one slide while focusing attention on another, hoping that the average grade at the end of the quarter will pull them through. They are playing it safe; they know how precariously this "new life" is woven together. Traditional courses in familiar disciplines where a teacher lectures, uses a textbook, and doles out grades, enable students to keep track of where they are and where they are going.

CSPs, in contrast, appear unpredictable with their non-traditional discussion format, assessment, and level of disclosure. Based as much on what students bring into the CSP as what they learned, first-generation college students are at a disadvantage. Unsure of how to draw on past knowledge and unable to see how to translate life experience into academic discourse, working-class students are often intimidated at the prospect if not the actual process. The potential for loss of face is great. They are paralyzed by process.

CSP could work well for working-class students

While these considerations are valid, most first-generation college students would benefit tremendously from CSPs. CSPs validate and respect diversity of opinion and life experience. Critical pedagogy within an open discussion format has the potential to level the playing field so that all can participate. CSPs require learning to articulate and defend complex, socially-charged ideas in front of a large audience. Working-class students who are more verbal and desire to speak from experience are afforded the opportunity to bring the theoretical together

with the practical, to see their lives reflected in literature and film.

Over the past few years, the college administration has made concerted efforts to increase the participation of students of color in CSPs: by encouraging more faculty of color to teach CSPs, through advising minority students who are undecided on their schedules to take CSPs, and in developing themes that would appeal to more students of color. When discussing students of color, I am including Asian students who have a very strong presence at SCCC, 24 percent of the student body, but are virtually absent from CSPs, especially if they are first-generation Americans. Some of the CSPs which are developed around the theme of African-American history or culture attract predominantly African-American students and are usually taught by African-American faculty. While an argument can be made which would validate this learning environment, it can also be argued that for a CSP to be successful in providing a transfer function, it needs to model a four-year school environment.

So what is happening here? There are few working-class students or students of color participating in one of the most academically-suited routes for transfer, the CSPs. As a result many first-generation college students are missing an opportunity to acquire the skills and education required for survival and success in four-year institutions. Similarly they are less likely to have as in-depth or prolonged contact with faculty who provide essential feedback and networking. However dire the

situation, whether it be low transfer rates overall, or few students of color continuing on to university, there is no one apparently to blame. The administration and faculty are making concerted efforts to remedy the situation by increasing advisement, creating CSPs specifically for students of color, and funding more transfer activities. Students, on the other hand, are making rational choices based on their perception of how to acquire a quality education to prepare them for a productive future. For first-generation college students this often means selecting programs that involve the least amount of risk: vocational programs or courses in disciplines that directly fulfill graduation requirements. For non-first-generation college students it means finding innovative programs, such as CSPs, that expedite the degree process by combining disciplines and hence, alleviating the burden of juggling multiple course demands. As a result of this apparent "choice" we have a perpetuation of differential access to four-year colleges based on race and class. This does not mean that there are no students of color entering CSPs or transferring to four-year schools, it does mean that their numbers are few. We are left then with the contradiction of an urban, community college which differentially rewards non-working class students by providing them with a powerful educational avenue into four-year institutions, the CSPs. It could be argued that CSPs have, in fact, increased the transfer gap by improving the quality of education for middle-class students.

Theoretical issues/Conclusion

While the mythology persists that students who attend community colleges are either working-class and/or individuals who have low academic abilities (Pincus, 1974; Karabel, 1986), this research demonstrates that such is not the case at all urban community colleges. In contrast to the stereotype that community colleges are dumping grounds for poor and/or unprepared students who have nowhere else to turn to "cool-out" (Clark, 1960), this study reveals that many students **chose** to attend Seattle Central Community College not just over other two-year schools but instead of one of the four-year institutions in the state to complete their first two years of college.

In contrast to Ira Shor's classic piece, "The working class goes to college," in which he refers to community colleges as "warehouses" for surplus labor (1980), the majority of students in this study claim to have come to Seattle Central either because of a perceived need to improve their options in an uncertain and ever changing world or because it provided a safe haven for students who perceived themselves as marginalized due to sexual orientation, ethnicity, drug or alcohol abuse, language differences, deafness, disability, or their passion for political and social issues. They were not being warehoused. In fact, some students would claim that those individuals who move directly from high school to university blindly accepting the aspirations of their parents and lacking a critical edge that this community college provides are indeed the ones who are being

"warehoused."

This research refines the traditional image of community colleges as centers of reproduction (Brint & Karabel, 1989) in the face of more and more middle-class non-first generation students entering community colleges (Astin, 1985). While some of the reasons are similar to those found in other studies (Tinto, 1987; Cohen, 1989): smaller classes, closer contact with faculty, lower cost, and greater flexibility, the main reasons why students decided to attend Seattle Central Community College had to do with the diversity of the students, faculty, staff and administration. As valuable as diversity remains, even at this community college which had a high proportion of students of color and a high transfer rate to four-year schools, those who used CSPs as a route to four-year institutions tended to be neither first-generation college students nor students of color.

Under these conditions resistance rhetoric (Willis, 1977; MacLeod, 1987; Foley, 1990; Weis, 1985) requires clarification and qualification if such rhetoric assumes that resistance correlates with resistance to the institution, the administration, the faculty, and/or the curriculum. In many ways working-class students and students of color at Seattle Central were active participants in the creation of their academic options and the milieu in which they learned (Mehan, Hubbard & Villanueva, 1994; Ogbu, 1990). Their decisions were intertwined with an understanding of life based on their home culture with that of an institution which provided multiple venues but no

dominant ideology or identity to either resist or to conform to. It is perhaps most ironic then that at an institution like Seattle Central which attempts to blur the demarcation lines of class, race and gender, we see class reproduction actually intensified as a result of choices by working-class students and students of color to resist innovative educational options such as CSPs which might best prepare them for future academic and professional success.

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