ABSTRACT
                This paper describes a successful learning community and
curricular experiments with basic writing implemented on a college campus as
an example of curricular structures that enable faculty and staff to work
together to address students' individual needs. The paper begins by
discussing learning communities as effective and flexible institutional
restructuring models for working particularly with first-year students, and
it provides an example of one community, the Learning Alliance at Cal State
University, Long Beach. The paper then suggests methods of working with basic
writers within a learning community, including linking sections of basic
writing with other Alliance courses and mainstreaming first and second level
basic writing courses. The paper concludes by describing the success of the
model basic writing program. (Contains 10 references.) (EF)

Basic Writers in a Learning Community

by Mark Wiley

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Current debates over basic writing focus on the necessity and effectiveness of the course.

Critics on the left, such as Ira Shor, argue that basic writing is our "apartheid" and that students

forced to enroll in basic writing courses are being unfairly penalized. Those who defend basic

writing, among others Karen Greenberg and Harvey Weiner, argue that basic writing courses

offer instructional support for students who might fail and drop out of college without such help.

Between those who want to abolish basic writing and those who defend it are critics such

as David Bartholomae who recognize the historical necessity of basic writing programs but

question their current purposes. In his well known essay "The Tidy House," Bartholomae opines

that basic writing has perhaps become too much a fixed structure on our campuses. Instead of

serving a "strategic function" where questions about literacy and access to higher education can

be debated, our programs may have become our institutions' convenient responses to a literacy

crisis where student differences are ignored in order to make everyone the same.

Bartholomae is right. Writing program administrators need to determine whether our

basic writing programs have become fixed structures reproducing reductionist forms of literacy

and, worse, structures so rigid that they prevent alternatives from emerging, structures that might

promulgate other forms of literacy. Because basic writing has become institutionalized,

administrators of such programs may understandably be more concerned about protecting turf

than investigating curricular alternatives to what is by now the traditional arrangement of a course

or sequence of courses that basic writing students must take and pass before being allowed to

advance to the mainstream track.

Yet what's missing from this debate over basic writing in the composition literature is careful consideration of the larger academic environment that greatly influences whether or not basic writing students persist on campus and are academically successful. Scholars in composition remain singularly focused on the BW course and ignore other factors on campus that might affect student retention and success. These factors include, among others, required general education courses besides composition, the quality of student services, and the overall campus climate. The best basic writing program in the world may still not help students succeed academically and persist to graduation if these same students are failing other courses; receiving inadequate support services in such areas as financial aid, academic advising, tutoring, and personal counseling; and feeling unwanted on campus, whether because of race, class, age, a disability, or simply because BW students are labeled, pejoratively, as "remedial."[1]

What is therefore needed are curricular structures that enable faculty and staff to work together to address students' individual needs— certainly academic needs, but also psychological, social, and economic ones. In responding to dismal retention rates, my campus established what has so far been a highly successful learning community. In what follows I will describe this learning community and the curricular experiments we have so far tried with our basic writers.

The Learning Alliance: An Evolving Learning Community

As many two-and four-year institutions have already discovered, learning communities are proving to be an effective and flexible institutional restructuring effort for working with students at all levels (Lenning and Ebbers), but particularly with first-year students. The idea of using learning communities to ease the transition from high school to college and to provide special

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assistance where and when it is most needed makes learning communities an attractive alternative either to placing basic writers into university-level writing classes with minimal support or into separate classes where they are often not allowed to begin their general education courses until they have been successfully "remediated." Several scholars have discussed learning communities at length and demonstrated their curricular innovations and successes in increasing student retention and graduation rates, yet little has been published about the impact of learning communities on writing programs and particularly on basic writers.[2]

The learning community on our campus was created to attract primarily students who qualified for the regular university-level composition course. However, as the coordinator of the composition program, I saw this learning community as a potential structure for working more effectively with our large population of basic writers. Up until recently, approximately 50% of the entering first-year students had been identified as needing one or two semesters of basic writing in a class averaging 2,600 plus students.[3] The presence of so many basic writing students on our campus over the years has brought into strong relief the obstacles that most of our first-year students encounter to one degree or another. Nationally, the focus of learning communities has often been on the academic side, yet it has been clear to those of us involved with first-year students on our campus, and with basic writing students particularly, that we must seriously consider extracurricular factors, too. These factors are crucial out-of-class experiences that include contact with individual faculty and sustaining relationships with peer groups. Notable researchers, such as Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini, Alexander Astin, and Vincent Tinto cite these variables as highly influential on student growth and development, persistence and

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success.

The Learning Alliance at Cal State University, Long Beach is embarking on its eighth year. As noted in its literature, this program seeks to help first-year students "make a positive transition to university life and to be academically successful." On our campus we think of the Learning Alliance as an attempt to design a small liberal arts college within a large, impersonal, metropolitan university where most students commute and spend little time, except to attend their classes. The savvy director[4] who designed the Learning Alliance and who still oversees its operation and evolution was originally asked by the dean of the College of Liberal Arts to set up a program that would turn around dismal retention rates and help students graduate in a timely manner. A few key administrators and staff, more so than any faculty, were the first to recognize the challenges facing our entering first-year students: they arrive at the university understanding little about college life and university expectations; many are the first in their families to go to college and so cannot rely on their parents for guidance; a majority work either full or part time while taking four or more college courses. These learning community organizers also had the dismal statistics to document the inevitable results: about a third of our students are on academic probation by the end of their first year; 52% are gone after their second. In response, the College of Liberal Arts sponsored the creation of the Learning Alliance, a comparatively complex learning community.

In a frequently cited definition, Faith Gabelnick, Jean MacGregor, Roberta Matthews, and Barbara Leigh Smith claim that learning communities

> purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work

so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as

increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students...[L]earning

communities are also usually associated with collaborative and active approaches

to learning, some form of team teaching, and interdisciplinary themes. (5)

Although Gabelnick et al. originally described five types of learning communities in the

1980s, they have since identified three fundamental underlying models that can be varied and

combined to fit a given context. Anne Goodsell Love and Kenneth Tokuno describe these three

models as

1. Student cohorts in larger classes

2. Paired or clustered classes

3. Team-taught programs

In the first model, cohorts of students are enrolled in the same sections of larger courses. The

number of these courses can vary from two to four. This is the simplest of the three models. In

the second, student cohorts take the same classes together and are often the only students in those

courses. Although faculty teach separately, they try to make intellectual connections between or

across courses. These paired or clustered courses can be linked by a common theme that is

explored differently but in a complementary fashion in each course. Love and Tokuno cite the

example of Western Washington University where "The Narrative Voice" links oral history,

literature, and health courses.

The last model is also known as a Coordinated Studies Program and is the most intricate

of the three. Student cohorts travel together in several courses and can meet together in both

large and small groups. Faculty form teams and plan the curriculum to integrate the content, assignments, and activities for three or more related courses. They can also teach in each other's classrooms, and there is frequent teacher-to-student contact. Seattle Community College offers a Coordinated Studies Program called "Speaking for Ourselves: You Cannot Shut Us Out." This integrated set of courses includes world cultures, non-Western art, composition, modern world literature, and a library research course (Love and Tokuno 10-11).

The Learning Alliance is a variation of model two. In the first semester students travel as a cohort in three courses, two general education courses and a one-unit class introducing them to the university. This third class has recently been increased to two units because students wished to maintain the regular contact with staff and receive the practical information offered throughout their first semester. In their second semester students enroll in two linked courses, but they change cohorts. Since students usually take a composition course in their first semester, it is linked with another general education class offered through the college of liberal arts. This second course also satisfies one of several of the university's general education requirements. Some of these links have paired composition with psychology, history, political science, anthropology, sociology, speech communication, and literature. Students are encouraged to build explicit connections between ideas and disciplines; involvement and active learning are emphasized along with lots of discussion, group work, workshops, and frequent writing assignments. Faculty work together to create links between their courses. Most go through summer and winter institutes to design their respective curricula, and each faculty pair meets regularly throughout the semester to assess and, if necessary, fine tune the curriculum jointly

constructed. The Alliance faculty are offered a modest stipend per semester for the extra work such collaboration requires. Some of these pairs have been together since the Alliance began, while others may be together for a few years or for a single semester only.

The Learning Alliance differs from other learning communities because it extends beyond the first semester. In fact, students in the Learning Alliance have opportunities to be involved through their senior year. Moreover, the Learning Alliance focuses on out-of-classroom experiences in addition to the academic. We want students to get involved quickly in campus life, to meet others, and to come to know the university as a place that offers many opportunities -- intellectual, social, and cultural. In their initial semester, first-year students must attend three campus events, and there are also numerous other informal social events sponsored by the Alliance throughout the academic year.

Alliance students receive priority registration each semester, an aspect that appears to be the main selling point for most first-year students. However, they must come in for academic advising each term during their first two years (the third is optional). We want to ensure that Alliance students are taking the classes they need in the proper sequence and are receiving sound advice about what courses might fit their projected majors and professional careers. During both their sophomore and junior years, all Alliance students must contribute ten to fifteen hours of community service. They also have the option of enrolling in a core course that might include other non-Alliance students and that satisfies another general education requirement. One other option for juniors and seniors is to enroll in a 400-level Psychology course that will prepare them to become one of thirty-nine peer mentors to other Learning Alliance students. The peer

mentoring program has been a valuable addition since these now older and wiser students can teach first-year students about navigating that difficult transition from high school. Some of our basic writing students have become outstanding peer mentors, a gratifying outcome for a few individuals who we initially feared would not remain in school for long.

The Learning Alliance is a relatively small learning community compared to those offered at other colleges and universities; nevertheless, growth has been incremental. There were ninety students in the initial Learning Alliance cohort; now in its eighth year, close to 300 students will be coming on board. Although these numbers seem slight in terms of students served, bear in mind that Learning Alliance students continue in the program through their junior year so there are always approximately 600 to 800 students participating to some degree. The success of the Learning Alliance has raised eyebrows around the university. Since 1992 the annual retention rate in this learning community has averaged 89% with the probation rate at about 13%. By contrast the retention rate for the rest of the university after the second year has been 48%, and typically over 30% of first year students have been on academic probation by the end of their second semester. These overall success of students in the Learning Alliance mirror the success of basic writing students in the Alliance as well. In the following section I offer the details of the work with basic writers.

The Success of Basic Writers

The majority of our work with basic writers in this learning community has consisted of linking sections of BW to other Alliance courses and having these basic writing students participate in the full range of activities and benefits available to all Alliance students. However,

we have tried one successful mainstreaming experiment and one where we combined students from the first- and second-level basic writing courses into a single course and linked sections of this course to other disciplines. Since 1992 when we began experimenting with different configurations of basic writing, we have kept data on how successful these BW students have been in terms of retention, academic performance, and persistence to graduation.

The first small group of eleven BW students who were recruited in the Learning Alliance's inaugural 1992 year was quite successful. Six of the eleven students graduated within five years or less, and although four students eventually left the university before they graduated, two transferred to the University of California. None of these students was ever on academic probation. A much larger group (thirty-nine students) joined in 1994. These students were in two sections of a second-level BW class that was linked to another discipline course. The '94 students have so far been the least successful cohort to date in terms of persistence to graduation. Ten of these students (25.5%) eventually had to leave the university due to poor grades. On the other hand, another 25% of this 1994 group graduated in five years or less.

When I joined the Alliance in 1995, I taught two sections of basic writing, each linked to an Introduction to Psychology course. I have continued to teach in the Alliance each fall semester since. Of the thirty-eight students in my two 1995 sections, four graduated in four years or less and to our surprise their cumulative GPA was 3.3. Only four students (10.5%) were disqualified from the university due to poor academic performance. The data for '96, '97, and '98 reflect similar low percentages of students disqualified for poor grades, except, of course, that the later the year the less time students have been enrolled. Still, these numbers are very encouraging. So

far only 5% (two students) of the thirty-nine student cohort group from my two 1998 basic

writing sections have left the university because of poor grades.

Two noteworthy mainstreaming experiments have led to major changes in our basic

writing program. In 1996, thirty-five students in the upper half of the second-level basic writing

course were invited to join the Learning Alliance and be mainstreamed into the university-level

writing course. The SAT verbal scores for all basic writing students invited to join the Alliance

have ranged from 480 to 330. These thirty-five students were divided among eight sections, with

four instructors teaching two sections apiece. Each instructor had his or her two sections linked

with another discipline course in the College of Liberal Arts. We also mixed into these eight

experimental sections students admitted to the university as advanced scholars, so there was a

broad range of student expertise represented across all sections, expertise based on high school

courses taken, high school GPAs, and SAT scores. However, none of the students in these

classes knew who the basic writing students were.

Our team of four instructors monitored the progress of these mainstreamed BW students

throughout the term. We compared notes regularly and reviewed end-of-semester portfolios. If

the basic writing students who were mainstreamed met all course requirements and their

portfolios were judged satisfactory by two other instructors on our team, the students received

the appropriate passing grade and full university credit for satisfying the writing requirement.

Students who failed were required to repeat the university-level course the following semester.

For the most part the basic writing students were successful across all sections. Twenty-nine of

those thirty-five students earned at least a *C* grade or higher in the university-level composition

course. Sixteen earned an *A* or *B*. Remarkably, three years later, of the thirty-five basic writing students who in 1996 were mainstreamed, only four have left the university because of poor grades. The grade range for these same BW students in the discipline course paired with the composition course reflected a typical grade-distribution pattern: about a third received either *A 's* or *B 's*, another third received *C 's*, and the remaining one-third received mostly *D 's*, although one student withdrew from the anthropology course. Interestingly, after their first year in college taking full course loads both semesters, the average GPA for all basic writing students who were mainstreamed was the same as the GPA for the rest of the first-year Alliance students--2.9.

All faculty involved in this mainstreaming experiment recognized and appreciated the help our basic writing students received from the Alliance staff. Whenever we instructors believed one of our students might be having a problem, whether personal or academic, we could immediately contact an Alliance staff member who would make sure the student received appropriate counseling or the necessary referrals. More importantly, though, in addition to the support, students felt welcomed: all basic writing students were accepted as equals among the several hundred students participating in the Alliance. In short, BW students were motivated and encouraged to succeed.

In the fall of 1997, we combined students in the Learning Alliance from the lower-level basic writing course with students from the second level. A total of fifty-eight BW students participated and traveled as two separate cohorts. To date this has been the single largest contingent of basic writers who entered the Alliance at the same time. It was also a group which included students with the lowest SAT verbal scores so far. Happily, all fifty-eight students

satisfied their BW requirement after the first semester, although a couple were close calls. Yet

even these "close calls" were not necessarily students with the lowest SAT scores. After two full

academic years, only six of the initial fifty-eight have left the university because of poor academic

performance. On the other hand, eight of them have attempted to become peer mentors with four

selected to be mentors in their junior year. The Learning Alliance has kept track of cumulative

GPAs for all the basic writing students involved in the program since 1992. For the six years we

have data (up to 1998), cumulative GPAs for these BW students have ranged from a low of 2.5

(the '97 group) to 2.9.

What Have We Learned?

While those of us involved in this learning community are not ready to draw any grand

conclusions, we have seen promising trends. We know that basic writing students in the

Learning Alliance have stayed in school in percentages above the university's average for all

students. Moreover, fewer end up on academic probation. What has perhaps been most

surprising are some of the dramatic changes we have been able to witness. Besides the four basic

writers from the cohort of 1995 who graduated in four years or less with average GPAs of 3.3,

eleven of those students sought to become peer mentors, with nine eventually being selected.

Rarely are faculty able to witness the long-term maturation process our students often undergo

because we typically only see students for a single semester. It is particularly gratifying to see

how much basic writing students can develop over a relatively short time. Beyond the statistics,

teachers in the Learning Alliance can keep track of what happens to students once they leave their

introductory courses. It is easier to find out what has helped students be successful in their

education and conversely learn what faculty and staff need to do better during students's first year on campus.

By design our experiments with basic writing have been small scale. Yet there have also been some important changes in the basic writing program as a direct result of these experiments. When we combined the two levels of BW in 1997, we used some of the writing program's veteran and most respected instructors. This experiment helped convince the rest of the composition faculty and pertinent administrators to eliminate the lower-level basic writing course and extend the second-level course (which is now the *only* basic writing course) from three to four hours per week. All basic writing students will be eligible to advance to the regular composition course if their writing portfolios pass at the end of a single semester of instruction. These several experiments have shown what several of us in the composition program have recognized: cut-off scores for course placement are arbitrary. When we provided some choice of what course to take and motivation for students to try harder, they responded positively.

I want to be clear that I do not hold up our learning community as "the model" to be replicated. Rather, the Alliance serves as a hybrid institutional structure for curricular inquiry and for examining the campus climate. It has helped us think through what is needed in order to better help our first-year students make the often rough transition from high school to the university's culture. The Alliance has become the catalyst for creating a teaching community on our campus, and the basic writers in several experiments have helped us become effective teachers and more astute observers of the real needs of our students, needs that are both academic and social, sometimes idiosyncratic, but needs that a single teacher working alone in his or her

classroom might never see. The debate over mainstreaming should not be reduced to an either-or question. Rather we must consider the structures we have in place on our respective campuses: will these structures truly meet the needs of our basic writing students? In answering that question, we must also determine what sort of curriculum and pedagogy will enable our students to extend their developing literacies to meet the challenges they will face in other courses and beyond as they move into their major areas of study. Compared with other academic programs on campus that have kept data over several years, the Learning Alliance has been more successful in terms of academic retention and persistence to graduation than any other program in the history of the university. It's a success worth pursuing and will probably mean the former "tidy" home where our basic writing program resided will get messier— and more comfortable.[5]

Notes

1. Although I realize the scholarly literature in the field shuns using the term "remedial," its rhetorical resiliency in the wider society indicates the greater political forces that shape the discourse surrounding basic writing. I use this term only in instances reflecting the views of those outside the field of composition studies who tend to view the presence of basic writers on campus as a problem. I am often indicating this attitude by using quotation marks when I use the term.

2. Despite the little that has been published on learning communities, there is a tremendous amount of learning community activity at two- and four-year institutions throughout the country. At a recent national conference on learning communities in Seattle, WA, over two hundred

postsecondary institutions were represented. In addition to the sources on learning communities I cite in other parts of this essay, interested readers can find out more by contacting the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education. Also see their publication describing several FIPSE projects. It is called *Strengthening Learning Communities: Case Studies from the National Learning Communities Dissemination Project (FIPSE)*.

3. The percentage of first-year students identified as needing basic writing is typical of several large urban campuses in the Cal State University system. The population of the state is growing at a tremendous rate with about three quarters of a million more students predicted to be graduating from high schools over the next decade. The demographic shift in California throughout the nineties has been no less dramatic. At my campus in Long Beach, for instance, from 1990 to 1996 the white population has gone from a 58% majority to a 38% minority. In contrast those students self-identifying as Hispanic have nearly doubled on campus, rising from 12.7% to 23% in 1996. I am not implying a cause and effect relationship between the demographic shift and the increase in the number of basic writers. In fact, the percentage of students identified as needing basic writing at CSU, Long Beach has dropped slightly the last two years. But because enrollment of first-year students has increased substantially (3,500 in fall 1999 and a projection of 4,600 for fall 2000) the actual number of students needing basic writing will increase. The rise in enrollment plus the rapid shift in the ethnic make-up of the student population indicate that our campus must respond to different needs posed by students from various backgrounds--social, cultural, and linguistic--and that the large number of students

identified as basic writers is part of a complex situation that has impacted the secondary schools particularly and their ability to respond adequately to the swift increase in and diversity of their student populations.

4. A special thanks to Bron Pellissier, the Learning Alliance Director, and to Cindy Milkovits, her Administrative Assistant, for their help in gathering the data on Learning Alliance students. I am also grateful to Bron for her continued collegiality and friendship.

5. A special thanks to Barbara Gleason for her comments on an earlier version of this essay, and to Susan Marron for her helpful editorial suggestions.

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