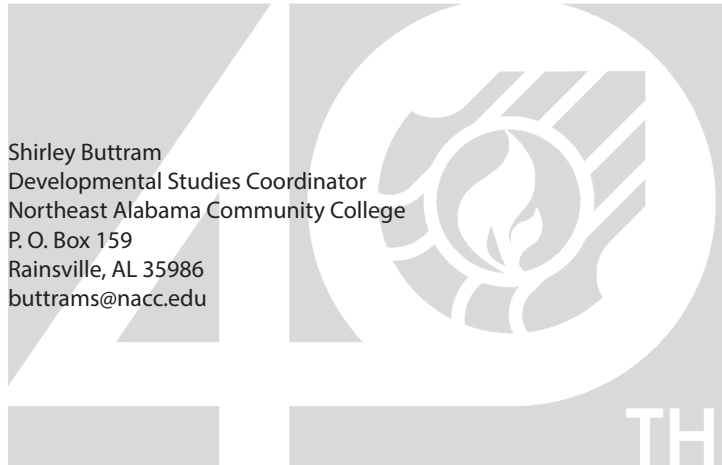


Beginning a Learning Community: Pilot Fall 2006

By Shirley Buttram



Colleges and universities across the United States are still enrolling students who are underprepared for college-level courses of study. Tinto (1998) stated at the Conference on Replacing Remediation in Higher Education: “Students are entering college with no more than a sixth-grade education in basic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics.” Therefore, colleges and universities across the nation continue to spend considerable revenue to provide academic support to developmental students.

Tinto’s (1998) research posed a serious problem, which was the enrollment of “at-risk” students in college institutions across the nation. By 2006, the problem of preparing developmental/transitional students for college-level courses had intensified. Northeast Alabama Community College (NACC) experienced the same problem. NACC is an open-door admissions institution that serves two counties. In 2006, the institution served approximately 2800 students, consisting of a varied student body with a majority (91%) being of Caucasian origin (Northeast Alabama Community College, Office of Institutional Planning and Assessment, 2006-2007, pp. 1, 5).

In fact, during Fall 2006, 57% of 492 incoming first-time freshmen placed into one or more developmental education courses (Northeast Alabama Community College, 2006-2007, p. 41). Even by Fall 2014, 51.4% of 529 incoming freshmen were placed into one or more developmental education courses (Northeast Alabama Community College, Office of Institutional Planning and Assessment, 2014-2015, p. 89). These statistics show that the continuing enrollment of “at-risk” students each fall semester would demand new innovations within the pedagogics to provide for students’ affective and academic needs. Therefore, NACC was challenged

to implement the necessary interventions (such as a learning community) to empower students to be successful in college completion.

Program Strategy

Tinto (1998) advocated enrolling “at-risk” students into a learning community initiative; by Fall 2006, NACC had established the first Mustang Learning Community (MLC) with the intention to provide MLC students a smooth transition between developmental/transitional courses and college-level courses. The implementation of the learning community initiative involved administering the following components:

Advisors discreetly enrolled students into the MLC, so that a possible stigma might be lessened.

- advisement,
- learning style inventory,
- learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI),
- mentoring and support systems,
- intervention activities,
- supplemental technological assistance, and
- assessment and evaluation.

These components were important for the overall assessment and for the evaluation of the learning community project.

However, NACC encountered several obstacles in the implementation of the Mustang Learning Community (MLC); for example, the Math Chair and English Chair made the decision that students who placed into both English 093 and Math 098 would be eligible for the MLC. Unfortunately, the MLC courses had not been advertised in the fall schedule nor had advisors been informed that select students were to be enrolled into the specific MLC courses (ENG093, BSS090, and MTH098). Therefore, the coordinator immediately compiled the Registrar’s data and found the names of students who were eligible for the MLC. After 40 drop/add forms had been completed by the coordinator, students were placed correctly into the MLC or into basic ENG093 and MTH098 courses.

By the next semester, the MLC courses (ENG093, MTH098 and BSS090/115) were specified on the schedule, and advisors were made aware that those three courses and section numbers were designated only for the MLC students. Prior to the next spring semester, a list of eligible students was compiled and sent to all advisors, telling them about the possible eligible candidacy for the MLC. By spring, advisors discreetly enrolled students into the MLC, so that a possible stigma might be lessened.

After the preliminary problems, the classes began to run smoothly. The three instructors collaborated and provided assignments embedded with

activities to show connections between the three courses. The theme of the learning community was “Making Connections between Interdisciplinary Courses.” The lessons were designed so students could build a sense of camaraderie between themselves and their instructors.

For example, activity assignments were given that integrated the three disciplines into projects that allowed for definite connections in math, study skills, and English. Also, the students and faculty participated in a trivial pursuit game composed of questions from the three courses, a pizza luncheon, Minute-Essay cards, theatre attendance, and dinner with the instructors. Likewise, when students asked questions about one of the disciplines, the missing concept was taught by a peer. The MLC faculty collaborated to provide assignments that featured teaching and learning units which required students to become active learners. Overall, the instructors collaborated on the MLC design, methodology, and support/mentorship mechanisms.

The learning community was a popular method in the 1970s, and researcher McKeachie (1994) reported that collaborative learning was one of “the most effective forms of learning.” He also found another effective form of teaching was “students teaching other students” (p. 144). In addition, in researcher Patrick Hill’s 1985 speech, he said, “The learning community movement . . . was not a response to one problem in higher education: In actuality, it is a response to a whole complexity of issues and the fundamental issues identified by the national reports.”

Another assignment for NACC’s Mustang Learning Community was the development of the student’s learning profile: The Mustang Learning Community students completed a Learning and Study Strategy Inventory (LASSI), which showed that the students lacked the following characteristics overall: organization, motivation, and attitude. Not only did the students have problems with these characteristics, but they also experienced problems with the selection of main ideas, test anxiety, and a lack of time management skills along with attendance. Another instrument used in the creation of a learning profile was a learning style inventory that was administered to evaluate each student’s specific learning style; these inventories indicated that very few of the MLC students were auditory. This result helped the instructors to have patience when students did not listen well and did not remember assignments that were given verbally. In fact, approximately 90% of the MCL students were combination learners, so they needed to see, to hear, and to practice concepts. In order to provide support for the MLC students with these issues, the three instructors taught students to create better methods of studying by utilizing concepts taught in BSS 090,

which addressed test-taking, note taking, anxiety, time management, and the importance of attendance.

The goal of NACC’s learning community initiative was to effectively meet the academic and affective needs of developmental students. The crucial focus was for the MLC students to be involved in a positive learning experience that was validated by research. It advocated that students be involved in an academic environment where they would experience a sense of community, feel safe, and find academic success. According to researchers Malnarich and Lardner (2003), a learning community is not focused on putting students together as a group; it is about “creating a space where learning occurs, what happens within that space, however it is configured, is what matters most for students” (p. 1).

Outcomes and Evaluations

Northeast Alabama Community College purposely kept the learning community project small. From 5 to 20 students enrolled in each MLC throughout the semesters. As shown in Table 1, NACC had enrolled 172 students over the semesters, with 106 (61%) successfully completing their educational goals (transfer, long certificate, short-term certificate, or an AS, AA, or AAS associates degree). These successful recipients of associate degrees have become welders, technicians, cosmetologists, educators, and nurses. On the other hand, the unsuccessful completers (39%) of the MLC did not attend, dropped out immediately, or left school after a couple of semesters.

Following are narratives about a couple of MLC students whose names have been fictionalized. Suzie enrolled into the learning community because

her mother wanted to return to school to earn a business degree. Both students enrolled into the learning community project. However, the only reason Suzie enrolled (which she shared with the study skills instructor) was to minimize her mother’s anxiousness about attending college. She had planned to finish one semester of college in order to support her mother, and then she would drop out to find a job. However, after the semester ended, Susie was offered a paid math tutoring position which she accepted. Today, Suzie is enrolled in a master’s program at a university, and she has received her first math teaching position for the Fall 2016 school year in Florida.

Likewise, Suzie’s mother also has finished an Associates in Science degree and has transferred to a university. She has almost completed her Bachelor of Science degree, but she has had to drop out of school because she lacked money; however, she only needs two classes at the university and plans to complete her Bachelor’s degree in the Fall 2016 semester. Currently, she works for the recruiting office for the university.

Another student Zeke, also enrolled into the MSL. He was older than most of the other participants. He was timid and somewhat ill at ease around his peers and his instructors. However, he began to involve himself within the learning community often sharing his own educational and life experiences. Several semesters after the MLC, Zeke stopped by his MLC instructor’s office and said that he was finishing his plan of study, an AAS in industrial systems and a short certificate in welding. He said he just wanted to share that his participation in the MLC was directly responsible for his perseverance at NACC. He said, “If it had not been for the MLC program, I would not have remained past the first semester.” He received his short certificate in welding at the end of Summer 2010/11 and his AAS, a year later (Summer 2011/12). There are many other stories to share, but these narratives seemed more poignant because these particular students were at risk of not succeeding at the beginning of their educational journey.

Another effective form of teaching was “students teaching other students”.

Table 1
Learning Community Results from 2006 Implementation until 2013

Total Enrollment	Transfer Students	Students
	Who Completed a Plan of Study or Certificate	Who Did Not Complete the MLC
172	106/61%	67/39%

Finally, the narratives show that a learning community can provide a sense of belonging that is necessary for the incoming freshmen who really require the extra nurturing from the academic and affective perspective. As this researcher and other learning community instructors agree, this initiative did indeed provide a sense of community for the MLC students, their peers, and the faculty. When implemented correctly, a learning community does have the potential to increase productivity at all levels for students and faculty alike. In fact, a transformation occurs which is poignant for everyone involved.

On the end-of-term surveys, MLC students rated their learning community experience in the 90th percentile. Some of the most frequent student comments follow:

1. What did you like most about the MLC experience?
 - “I enjoyed learning how I learn.”
 - “Working together.”
 - “I do not like being sick and missing my time in the MLC.”
 - “Yes, I would strongly recommend the MLC to every student.”
2. How could the MLC be improved?
 - “No improvements needed.”
 - “I was pretty happy with the way it was.”
 - “By announcing it more. I was not aware there was a MLC, and I could have benefitted from it” (Northeast Alabama Community College, 2010, p. 25).

However, as with all new initiatives, modifications and adjustments are needed to improve the program because it is a work in progress for all the stakeholders. The program must be continuously evaluated by surveys, end-of-term data, and the percentage of student success. Overall, the instructors have believed that the MLC fulfilled its potential to meet the students’ needs as they entered college for the first time. Innovative programs such as the MLC can enhance retention and academic success.

The following quote, stated by Ursula K. LeGuin (as cited in Roueche, Milliron, & Roueche, 2003), aptly describes NACC’s Mustang Learning Community initiative: “It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters in the end” (p. 33).

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