

The Relationship Between Linked Courses, a High-Impact Practice, and Student Success Rates at East Georgia State College

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This case study examines the impact of a student learning community (SLC) that linked sections of two courses, English Composition II (ENGL 1102) and U.S. History II (HIST 2112), on student success rates in the course. Ultimately, students in the sections of the courses in the SLC successfully completed the courses (earned a “C” or higher) at greater rates than those in non-SLC sections. Moreover, students reported additional gains associated with historical thinking.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Between 2018 and 2020, the average success rate for students completing English Composition I (ENGL 1101) was 51.99% and English Composition II (ENGL 1102) was 62.51%. As an open-access institution offering gateway courses, East Georgia State College’s (EGSC) greatest responsibility is guiding underprepared students to a college-ready level with equitable methods that engage them in deep learning while also removing unnecessary obstacles. During EGSC’s recent reaffirmation of accreditation, the institution identified a need to use institutional resources to support the G2C initiative in ways that target specific gateway courses and the implementation of high-impact practices. Thus, EGSC’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), now underway, was designed to support first-year generation, underrepresented, and underprepared students through student learning communities (SLCs). These learning communities link a pair of required first-year courses across the curriculum, especially targeting the gateway courses with the highest DFWI rates.

The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education (n.d.) defines learning communities as “classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme and enroll a common cohort of students” (para 1). As a high-impact practice, SLCs have been “widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds,” according to Kuh, (2008) because they have proven to “engage participants at levels that elevate their performance across multiple engagements and desired-outcomes measures such as persistence” (p. 14). The National Resource Center for Learning Communities claims SLCs should include, “at a minimum,” the following three characteristics: “1) strategically-defined cohorts of students taking two or more courses together, 2) robust collaborative partnerships between student and academic affairs, and 3) explicitly designed opportunities to practice integrative and/or interdisciplinary learning” (Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education, n.d., n.p.). By providing first-year students the social support needed to feel that they belong to a campus community and by building a collaborative academic community, SLCs are opportunities for student transformation from remedial or developmental learners to college students with a sense of purpose and belonging.

METHODS

A section of English Composition II (ENGL 1102) was paired with a section of U.S. History II (HIST 2112). The two courses were linked so that when students registered for one of the courses, they had to register for the other course because linked courses must share the same cohort of students. Both professors teaching the courses drew from pedagogies pertaining to diversity and inclusion, social justice, and mindset, in that the course materials reflected diverse voices and perspectives, group work provided opportunities to build a sense of social belonging, and students had opportunities to respond to feedback. The professors also used the backward design method in that they first identified what they wanted students to gain from the interdisciplinary experience. Specifically, both professors wanted students to recognize how interconnected literature and history are so that students could use literature to bring history to life or use history to find deeper meaning in the literature. Ideally, the recognition will promote a love for life-long learning while giving students different access points to history or literature. The ENGL 1102 course is a literature-based writing course that is organized by themes that focus students on the

certain arguments about society or humanity that may be found in the stories. For the SLC, the professor shifted focus on certain themes like “Arguments about War” and reorganized the course so that the assigned stories were illustrating the historical events or era covered in HIST 2112 class to allow students to learn the history and then use the history to understand and analyze the literature.

OUTCOMES

There were three shared writing assignments in the SLC that encouraged students to make interdisciplinary connections between the two courses as well as to their own society or lives. These assignments were designed to meet the learning objectives “to explore the “big questions” and critically examine the details that make up the “big picture” for history and society. The shared assignment that encouraged students to use a fictional text to make a point in an historical argument especially helped students connect the two disciplines, even as they explored the bigger picture. When students read William Faulkner’s short story, “A Rose For Emily,” they were to write an essay that examined the character of Miss Emily as a symbol for the Old South and the Lost Cause and how these ideas kept the South anchored in a mythical past and prevented the region from moving into a more enlightened future, even as they made an argument about keeping or removing Southern Confederate Monuments in public spaces. In the history class, students read several primary and secondary documents concerning the use of the Confederate flag and the building of monuments in the Jim Crow era. They wrote a discussion where they addressed the motivation behind these symbols that, as many argue, glorify a mythical past to justify Jim Crow racism and promote white supremacy. The students were expected to use the history explored in my discussion to better help them to understand Faulkner’s symbolism. By combining these assignments through an interdisciplinary approach, the students came to a better understanding how this perpetuation of Confederate imagery in public spaces in the twenty first century helps promote racial division and distorts the true history of the latter part of the nineteenth century.

At the basic level of analysis, the success rate for all gateway course sections taught as part of a SLC is compared to those for gateway courses not taught in a SLC. The goal was for the SLC courses to increase its successful completion rate by fifteen (15) points. The quantitative success outcomes for ENGL 1102 met the goal for linked courses. A total of 75% percent of students successfully completed English Composition II with a “C” or higher, exceeding the 59.6 % of students in non SLCs who successfully completed ENGL 1102 in Spring 2021. The fifteen-point increase in success rates also increased the course GPA by .44 percent, as the course GPA average for students in the SLC was 2.33 compared to the 1.89 course GPA average for students not in the SLC. The DFWI trends for students representing groups that have been marginalized were significantly lower in the redesigned ENGL 1102 course, even reduced by almost half for those identifying as African American. Moreover, though HIST 2112 is not part of the G2C efforts at EGSC yet, the linked History course also saw similar rates, with a 66.7 % successful completion rate and a course GPA average of 2.17 compared to a 2.07 GPA course average for students not enrolled in an SLC.

In addition to the quantitative gains, students also reported an increased sense of empathy, belonging, and deeper interdisciplinary learning. In comments from evaluations of the ENGL 1102 course, students stated that “historical thinking was a big new skill” but they enjoyed learning how to read literature through history, or they developed a greater understanding of history through literature’s dramatization of it. Students claimed they were taught to critically think through issues that impact their lives, even as they have a better understanding of how the past influences the present and shapes the human condition. Students said their experience was “pretty rigorous,” but they enjoyed the experience.

PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

Given the successful completion and the students’ reaction to the experience, we project a continued increase in course completion and retention. Therefore, we plan to expand the SLCs into other G2C redesigned courses or support faculty who are interested in teaching a linked course and designing/revising their gateway course in such a way that combines the G2C recommendations and pedagogies used in effective SLCs.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

By identifying gateway courses with high DFWI rates and creating SLCs to support the students enrolled in those courses, EGSC addresses issues of equity and access in accordance with G2C recommendations. By setting clear and high expectations, combining collaborative integrated teaching, co-curricular support, and collaborative group learning in the SLCs, EGSC students' experience the academic and social integration that leads to a greater sense of belonging in college, deeper learning, and greater academic engagement.

REFERENCES

Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education. (n.d.). *Learning community resources*. <http://wacenter.evergreen.edu/lc-resources>