

Teaching and Learning in an Under Prepared Culture: Lessons from a First-Year Experience Program

Whitney Cain & Teresa Holder
Peace College

Abstract

Increases in college enrollment offer many challenges stemming from open enrollment policies and a lack of student preparedness. As a result, institutions of higher education have to find ways to help students be ready for the academic challenges of college life. The researchers examined the introduction of a first-year experience program at an urban women's college for its impact on first-year student success and, in particular, under prepared student success. Comparisons were made between predicted grade point average and outcome measures including persistence, probations, and suspensions for two first-year cohorts. There were declines in probations and suspensions and an increase in persistence to sophomore status for students who participated in the first-year program compared with those who did not.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2002) has reported that over the past four decades, colleges and universities have experienced incredible growth with some 75% of all high school graduates entering post-secondary education within 2 years of their high school graduation. Although, the ethnic and socio-economic diversity resulting from this growth has undoubtedly enriched the classroom experience, because of the high correlations among poverty, under education, and minority status (e.g., Kozol, 1991), it has also presented challenges. As many as one-third of entering first-year students are classified as at-risk or under prepared (Ley & Young, 1998). Many students need assistance in writing and math

and 53% of students need remedial courses prior to beginning college-level work (AAC&U, 2002; Rouche & Rouche, 1999). This may not be particularly surprising, given that just over three-fourths of U.S. high school seniors have the reading skills at a level of a newspaper audience, and only 40% are able to apply what they read and what they learn in the classroom to their own experiences (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999; Haning, Donley, & Eckard 2002). Consequently, many entering college and university students are considered academically at-risk and have lower high-school GPAs and lower SAT scores as compared to their peers (Cole, Goetz, & Willson, 2000).

What accounts for these lowered performances and why are colleges and universities admitting students who are likely candidates for academic failure? Greater access to financial aid, gains made through affirmative action, more effective campus support systems for academically at-risk students, and some colleges' open admissions policies are among the reasons for greater numbers of under prepared students in higher educational settings (Cohen, 1984; Richardson & Sullivan, 1994). The AAC&U argues that "public policies have focused on getting students into college, but not on what they are expected to accomplish once there" (2002, p.1). These characteristics contribute to AAC&U's assertion that "preparation for higher learning has not kept pace with access" (p. 2) and form the basis of what we refer to in this paper as an *under prepared culture*.

So what does an under prepared culture mean for college students, their professors, and their campus communities as a whole? It means that academically risky students are the norm rather than the exception and that students are at greater risk for being placed in remedial courses or on academic probation or suspension once they are in college. This results in a culture where students, and oftentimes their professors, have lower expectations concerning students' academic ability and performance. It is also a culture that requires creative strategies for preparing students. Such strategies are also needed for retaining students since academically weaker students are less likely to persist to matriculation.

To further complicate these trends, students of all ability levels are attending colleges differently, with a "rapidly rising majority" attending two or more institutions prior to graduating with a Bachelor's degree (AAC&U, 2002). Indeed, more than one-fourth of all students leave the colleges where they completed their first year (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Thus, colleges and universities are faced with developing accommodations for academically weaker students, as well as strategies for retaining them.

Examining why students are under prepared for college level work is more arduous. Overall shortcomings in the U.S. K-12 educational system – especially as they relate to teaching literacy and writing skills – are likely contributors (Cohen, 1984). Supporting this, some cite that the lack of communication between secondary and postsecondary institutions encourages students' lack of preparedness for upper-level work (AAC&U, 2002). Additionally, because many students report that because they did not expect significant differences between high school and college, they avoided college-preparatory classes and

developed minimal and erratic study habits. Less than one-half of all college students completed even "minimally defined college prep courses" before beginning postsecondary work (AAC&U, 2002; Astone, Nunez-Wormack, & Smoldaka, 1989; Richardson & Sullivan, 1994). Certainly, those in higher education have anecdotal evidence supporting the latter proposed cause of students' under preparedness. Take, for example, the following exchange between one of the authors and a first-year student.

Author: So how are things going?

Student: Uhh. . . . I don't know. College just isn't for me.

A: Why do you say that?

S: This just isn't what I thought it would be. I didn't know there would be so much discussion. Some teachers even grade on it; on how much you talk in class. So that means you have to read – a lot – and then talk, too. I just didn't know about that.

Students' beliefs about the nature of knowing and learning also contribute to the culture of under preparedness (Jehng, Johnson, & Anderson, 1993; Schommer, 1990). Cole and her colleagues (2000) assert that under prepared college students view knowledge as innate rather than earned through work and study. This type of thinking fosters under prepared students' assumptions that studying is of minimal importance while providing insight into the motivational factors contributing to under preparedness (Yarwarski, Weber, & Ibrahim, 2000). Demographic characteristics such as learning disabilities, perceived learning disabilities, first-generation college attendance, low socio-economic status, and/or minority status also contribute to students' under preparedness (e.g., Dunn, 1995; Grimes & David, 1999). Thus, shortcomings on a national level within the

context of our educational system, as well as shortcomings on an individual level within the context of course choices, study habits, and views of knowledge, clearly promote student under preparedness and the culture that supports it.

How might the national statistics and themes characterizing an under prepared culture relate to a private, liberal arts women's college? The current study examines under prepared students in such a setting, in which all entering first-year students participated in a comprehensive, required first-year program aimed at encouraging students' academic adjustment to college.

Method

Participants

Intervention group. All first-year, first-time students attending a small, liberal arts women's college in the southeast participated in the study. The 175 participating students were of traditional college age (18 – 19 years). Ethnically, students were quite homogenous; 90% were white, 5% African American, and 7% classified as "other." Like the entire student body ($N = 634$), a majority of the sample came from rural backgrounds.

Participants completed the Cooperational Institution Research Program (CIRP, Higher Educational Research Institute, 2001) survey during new student orientation prior to the start of the academic year. Less than one-third rated themselves as "above average" in academic ability and 66% had never taken an advanced placement course. Twenty-seven percent of the students had a predicted grade point average

(PGPA) under 2.0¹ and the entire group's average SAT score was 740 (range 440 – 1070). One-half of the students indicated they would require remedial work in math, more than one-third in foreign language instruction, and 20% in writing. Finally, almost half (48%) of the students were from communities 11 to 100 miles from the college and over half (53%) were from rural communities. Moreover, the CIRP's own classification system for comparing participating institutions categorized the student body at this college as "low selectivity." Taken together, these indicators point to a culture of under prepared students at this institution and reflect national trends cited by AAC&U (2002).

Comparison group. Students who were admitted to the same college in the previous year and who did not participate in the first-year program served as a comparison group ($N = 163$). CIRP data were not available for this group; however, PGPA and SAT scores were similar for the two groups. Twenty-two percent of this group's students had PGPA's under 2.0 and their average SAT score was 720. In terms of ethnic background, the sample matched well with 92% being categorized as white and 8% categorized as African American or "other." Likewise, almost half (48%) came from communities of fewer than 20,000 residents, while just one-fourth were from urban areas.

¹ Students' predicted grade point average was calculated by dropping all non-academic courses (e.g., band, PE, etc.) from students' high school transcripts and then applying the following formula: $.000063$ (SAT-Math) + $.8$ (High School GPA) + $.15$.

Intervention

Faculty and staff at the college participated in a task force to develop a comprehensive first-year program for all students. Based on Tinto's (1993) model of student persistence and withdrawal, the program focused on strengthening students' academic performance and encouraging their adjustment to campus. Key components from other first-year programs were tailored to promote under prepared first-year students' learning and success on this campus (Barefoot, Warnock, Dickinson, Richardson, & Roberts, 1998). However, because research finds that these components encourage all students' success – not just those who are considered under prepared – first-year students who might not be considered under prepared (e.g., those with PGPA's above 2.0) also participated in the intervention.

Common summer reading. The first component involved a common summer reading for all first-year students. The book, Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1989), provided a topic of discussion for first-year students and their advisors during a 1-hour session that was part of a 3 day orientation session prior to the start of classes. This component of the program was directed toward introducing the student to a college faculty member, as well as modeling the type of discussion expected in college-level courses through providing a campus-wide shared intellectual experience.

First-year seminar. Faculty who also served as first-year advisors taught a required, 1-credit seminar designed to meet the needs of first-year students. Tinto and colleagues note that the “classroom functions as a gateway for student involvement in the academic and social communities of a college” (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). Based on these and others' ideas (e.g., Astin, 1993; Hagerty,

Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwseman, & Collier, 1992), seminar discussions emphasized the importance of students' “sense of belongingness” with regard to both their personal and academic experiences.

A variety of classroom methods facilitated students' academic and personal discovery. Students worked together in small groups to solve problems or to educate one another on particular topics through “jigsaw” activities. In addition to small group work, faculty lead large group discussions modeled on Bloom's Taxonomy of Critical Thinking (Bloom, Mesia, & Krathwohl, 1964). It was our belief that, particularly for women as feminist scholars point out, this “sharing, expanding, and reflecting . . . lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule 1997, p. 26). Finally, students served community agencies as part of their class requirements so that they could examine their own ideas concerning leadership and community involvement, as well as become acquainted with services and centers around the college.

Small group activities, large group discussion, and service activities linked to topics noted as important for first-year students (Barefoot et al., 1998) and included personal and academic transitions, wellness, communication, relationships, conflict, and career exploration. To maintain consistency in course content, instructors used class outlines compiled in instructor manuals. Thus, the first-year seminar encouraged adjustment to campus by focusing on transitional issues salient to first-time, first-year students. Secondly, the seminar format, like the summer reading discussion, modeled the expectations for students to be active participants in their classes and active consumers of information outside of them.

Learning community. A course and residence hall pairing constituted the third program component. Each seminar section was paired with a first-year English composition course and a first-year residence hall. Thus, students in a particular seminar section also attended English together and lived in the same residence hall. These pairings or learning communities promoted social adjustment by creating smaller communities within the larger campus community and thus increased opportunities for students to interact with classmates in the residence halls and residence hall-mates in the classroom. Hoffman et al. (2002) provided support for the value of learning communities by documenting that students participating in learning communities on their college campus were better able to establish friendships than students who were not participating in these communities. Moreover, in addition to increased perceptions of social support, students reported academic benefits of learning communities that non-learning community students did not. Finally, students in Hoffman et al.'s study also reported feeling more comfortable asking questions in class, making presentations in class, and approaching their instructors – behaviors that are likely to contribute to academic success. Thus, the researchers expected that the learning community experience would facilitate students' academic and social adjustment to college. It was our hope that the relationships begun in the first-year seminar would become transformative. As Belenky and her colleagues (1997) found in their research, these experiences of “mutuality, equality, and reciprocity” would be important elements in each student's development of “voice.”

Peer Educators. The fourth key component involved outstanding upper-level students serving as Peer Educators. Peer

Educators were assigned to particular seminar sections and co-taught the seminar with faculty members. Peer Educators also lived with first-year students in first-year residence halls and designed community service opportunities for first-year students. In these ways, Peer Educators acted as resources for new students and offered opportunities for new students to engage in “valued involvement” (Hagerty et al., 1992) as well as models for academic engagement and leadership. Nelson (1999) reported that small group discussion with peers has been found to increase content learning, the ability to apply information, and enthusiasm. Peers contribute positively to learning because of “speaking the same language” (Nelson, 2002).

Focus Groups

At the end of the fall semester, researchers asked first-year students to participate in focus groups concerning their first-year experience. Focus group discussions took place in March and April of the students' second semester.

Participants. Researchers invited 40 randomly selected students from each of the first-year seminar sections to participate in one of two focus group discussions. The 22 students who elected to participate matched the college demographics well. PGPA's for the group ranged from 1.6 to 3.0 ($M = 2.52$), and their mean SAT was 760 (range 560 to 1000).

Discussion format. At the beginning of each focus group, researchers asked students to write about their first semester at the college. Researchers prompted students with the following: “As you reflect back over this year, how would you evaluate the first year program as it has impacted your adjustment to college life?” They were given 20 mins to write. This written activity was meant to prepare students for the focus

group discussion, as well as provide an outlet for additional information that the student might choose not to articulate in the group discussion.

After the pre-discussion writing activity, a faculty member at the college who did not participate in the first-year intervention program asked students open-ended questions about their first-year experience. Discussions were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim (see Appendix A for the focus group discussion questions).

Written narratives and transcribed focus group discussions were examined for themes by the principle investigator and an undergraduate assistant. Once the key themes were determined, inter-rater reliability was 98%.

Results

Researchers analyzed participants' academic performance for both the fall and spring semesters and compared it to the previous first-year cohort who did not participate in the first-year program intervention. Particular attention was paid to the intervention group's academic improvements in relation to the comparison group, as well as the two groups' persistence to the second year. Researchers analyzed focus group discussions and pre-focus group discussion narratives for themes.

Table 1

Number (and Percent) of Student Suspensions and Probations for Comparison and Intervention Groups

Indicator	Comparison Group (<i>N</i> = 163)	Intervention Group (<i>N</i> = 175)
Fall Probations	17 (11.6%)	8 (4.6%)
Fall Suspensions	11 (7.5%)	4 (2.3%)
Spring Probations	4 (2.7%)	2 (1.1%)
Spring Suspensions	5 (3.4%)	2 (1.1%)

Quantitative Analyses

In relation to the comparison group, the intervention group significantly decreased in academic probations, $\chi^2(1, N = 338) = 5.10$, $p < .05$, and suspensions, $\chi^2(1, N = 338) = 5.42$, $p < .05$. Table 1 summarizes the differences in the two groups.

Although all students appeared to benefit from the program, those who were academically weakest (PGPAs of < 2.00)

benefited the most as evidenced by the finding that they exceeded students with PGPA's of above 2.0 in outperforming their predicted GPA (see Table 2). More students in the intervention group persisted to the sophomore year (74.9%) than in the comparison group (71.2%). However, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 338) = .85$, $p > .05$.

Table 2
Students' Success as Measured by PGPA for Students with PGPA's Above and Below 2.00

	Average PGPA	Cumulative GPA (+ increase over PGPA)	Percent Outperforming PGPA (number)
PGPA < 2.0	1.84	2.23 (+.39)	71% (27)
PGPA > 2.0	2.66	2.81 (+.15)	59% (81)
Total Sample	2.47	2.68 (+.21)	61.7% (108)

Qualitative Findings

Changes in the academic indicators were quite positive. However, it was anecdotal evidence gathered from the spring semester focus group sessions that was the most enlightening for understanding the program components that students perceived to be most beneficial. Students' pre-discussion written narratives were examined for themes. One predominant theme emerged from examining the pre-discussion narratives: the significance of strategies for community adjustment for students' success. Three commonly cited intervention components supported this theme: the first-year seminar's importance to college life adjustment, the value of the learning community, and the benefits of working with Peer Educators and seminar instructors. The following summarizes data from the pre-discussion narratives and provides comments from the both the narratives and the focus group discussions to provide examples of these data.

The first-year seminar's importance to college life adjustment. Twenty of the 22 students wrote about the importance of the first-year seminar in their academic and social adjustment. The following quote from one of the focus group discussions summarizes students' written ideas concerning the seminar.

I just thought it was a good place to go and get ideas

about how to do stuff better – sometimes school stuff, sometimes roommate stuff. It just helped to get to know how things go here, because sometimes it's really different than what I'm used to.

Some students' writing reflected conflicting ideas about the seminar and the benefits of the class. For example, one student wrote:

I didn't like having to go to the class every week, but once I got there, I learned things about myself and my class members.

A quote from one of the focus group discussions also reflects these sentiments.

Overall, I didn't like it. I guess some of the material we went over helped me adjust, though, and it made me think about my values. My Peer Ed was there to help through things and I liked my teacher. OK, I liked it; I'll admit it. . . . I learned some things about how things work in college and with new people.

Two seminar topics were particularly salient for students. Sixteen of the 22 focus group participants wrote about the seminar

sections focusing on personal values. For example, one student reported in her written narrative that it “helped set some guidelines away from family and friends . . . that was very hard at first.” Likewise, students in the focus groups noted that the stress and time management sections were beneficial. One student summarized in her written narrative:

This class helped me with my stress management and time management. We talked a lot about how to manage stress. This helped me most because I found it extremely hard not to get stressed out before tests. High school just wasn’t like that; I never even had to study, let alone get stressed before a test.

The value of the learning community. Although analyses of the pre-discussion narratives indicated that the seminar was most central in students’ first-year experience, the learning community component of the intervention was also positively reviewed and frequently cited. Fourteen of the 22 students wrote about the value of living and learning with their classmates. Dialogue between two students in one of the focus group discussions reflects this theme.

Student A: I can say I have friendships with each of the girls in my seminar; I can’t say that about other classes. Oh, except English ‘cause they’re in my seminar. Living with the same people who are in your class . . . you can study together and stress about studying together, and avoid studying together (just kidding). It’s nice.

Student B: Yeah, I know what you mean. I felt more comfortable expressing my

ideas. Usually the other girls already knew them anyway from discussions on the hall. So why not say them in class?

Likewise, another student reported in her pre-discussion narrative that she “loved that the program joined me and the people who lived on my hall. It was a great way to get to know them and to make friends.”

The benefits of peer educators and instructors. Fourteen students indicated that the link to both a faculty member and a Peer Educator was also beneficial. Finding “it was cool to talk about stuff you were thinking about with a professor instead of just learning formulas and stuff.” Another student said, “my Peer Ed was great; she still sends me notes and stuff.”

Less frequently cited themes. Other program components that were noted with less frequency in the narratives and discussion included the summer reading ($n = 6$), the seminar’s corequisite co-curricular activities ($n = 3$), the program components as a whole ($n = 2$), and orientation discussions concerning the summer reading ($n = 2$).

Discussion

With greater numbers of under prepared students entering post-secondary institutions, it is imperative to develop and implement innovative strategies for strengthening their scholastic skills, while maintaining the academic standards of the college. Certainly, not all students who are categorized as under prepared are destined for academic failure. Indeed, many of these students will develop new attitudes and study strategies that allow them to be academically successful or at least outperform their academic expectations with or without the help of institutional programming aimed at these ends.

Nonetheless, most would agree that developing such programming provides academically weaker students with a clearer path toward academic success, and thus benefits the institutions that serve those students in many ways.

The data reviewed here indicate that this study's first-year intervention program encouraged students' academic success, perhaps through contributing to attitudinal changes and behavioral practices that encouraged students to outperform their PGPA's. However, from students' own perspectives, it was the program's focus on and strategies for social and community adjustment – whether through seminar topics, the learning community or Peer Educator and instructor interaction – that they appreciated most. Hosts of researchers have documented the merit of institutional fit and overall campus adjustment as a strong predictor of student adjustment and persistence (e.g., Astin, 1993; Kanoy & Woodson-Bruhn, 1996; Tinto, 1993; Strumpf & Hunt, 1993). Consequently, it's not particularly surprising that a program focusing on encouraging students' social adjustment would result in higher levels of persistence than one focusing wholly on academic improvement.

What is more consequential is the possibility that students' under preparedness extends beyond academic preparedness and into social arenas, as well. It's likely that a culture of under preparedness has challenging aspects in areas beyond the academic, and these areas are likely to offer additional challenges for at-risk students' success. For example, under prepared students may be less savvy to the social clues and self-monitoring that encourages adjustment to campus settings. If this is the case, academic strategies and interventions targeting under prepared students may not be particularly effective because they are treating only one area of deficit. Future work

should focus on these variables to determine more effective strategies and best practices so as to optimize students', as well as their campuses', success.

Postscript

Since the introduction of the first-year college seminar in 2001, we have continued to see fewer suspensions and probations than before the program was implemented. Perhaps the most significant measure of success has been indicated by the percentage of students who outperform their PGPA. This has been most pronounced among students who were identified in our study as under prepared and therefore, more at risk (PGPA < 2.0).

The program has continued to experiment with its design. This year, for example, the 1-hour course is meeting twice a week for the first half of the semester (as opposed to once a week during the length of the semester) in part, because students' need for survival information for college tends to peak at the beginning of the academic year and wane by mid semester. In evaluations, students indicated wanting some of the course topics earlier in the semester than when they were discussed (personal wellness and safety, for example). The role of the peer educator has continued to be emphasized and participation by deans, directors, and vice presidents within the college has been used as a strategy to connect students with a diverse group of instructors, in hopes of personalizing the college campus, building community, encouraging retention, and better preparing students for higher education.

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Authors Note

We would like to thank Peace College's class of 2001 for their participation in this research. Correspondence concerning the article should be addressed to Whitney J. Cain, Department of Child Development, Peace College, 15 East Peace Street, Raleigh, North Carolina, 27604 – 1194. E-mail: wcain@peace.edu.

Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

In what ways has your first year met with your expectations?
 How has it not?
 What surprised you this year?
 How have you changed this year?
 What do you like about that?
 What do you not like about that?
 How would you evaluate these aspects of the first-year program . . .

- academics?
- reading topics?
- paired classes?
- living and learning (residence hall and class pairings)?
- peer educators?

Is there anything I should have asked, but didn't?