Basic Skills / General Education Learning Community

The Basic Skills / GE Learning Communities align with the following *Effective Practices for Basic Skills* identified in the *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success* in California Community Colleges (Center for Student Success, 2007).

A.6 = Faculty that are both knowledgeable and enthusiastic about developmental education are recruited and hired to teach in the program.
D.2 = Curricula and practices that have proven to be effective within specific disciplines are employed.
D.3 = The developmental education program addresses holistic development of all aspects of the student. Attention is paid to the social and emotional development of the students as well as their cognitive growth.
D.8 = Developmental faculty routinely share instructional strategies.

The Case for Learning Communities

Community Colleges have responded to the alarming completion rates by developing a number of programs and services. Learning communities – a curricular model that links two or more courses together for a cohort of students – is one popular intervention being tried to help students (Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes, Schneider, 2008). For the most part, community college students take courses that are detached and isolated from each other. In learning communities with linked courses, however, a cohort of students enrolls in the same two or more courses, and the courses are designed to complement each other. The instructors of these courses work together to promote shared curriculum and support each other's learning goals. Linking courses together, therefore, has potential benefits for students, faculty, and institutional culture.

The literature suggests that learning communities positively support student outcomes including improved student success, retention and persistence (CSS, 2007). Tinto (1997) further claims that students who are part of a learning community appreciate the social connections they make with other students, and feel supported in their learning. The theory of change for learning communities in community colleges builds on the well-documented finding that the relationships that students form with faculty and other students enable and encourage students to persist and succeed in their educational pursuits (Tinto, 1993, 1997). Collaborative learning and other experiences offered by learning communities enhance a sense of belonging, which, in turn, leads to an increase in student effort; it is this effort and engagement in learning processes that drives student knowledge acquisition and the development of academically relevant skills (Tinto, 1993, 1997). In addition to improving knowledge acquisition, learning communities are theorized to facilitate cross-curricular connections, thereby deepening learning and promoting higher-order thinking skills (Fogarty and Dunlap, 2003). Curricular integration, initiated by linking courses, allows students to more easily make connections across disciplines and topics and with their own personal experience (Tinto, 1997). Figure 1 illustrates these relationships as a logic model. This logic model informs the evaluation efforts of learning communities at Las Positas College.

Las Positas College currently supports several different learning community models:

I. The College Foundation Semester (CFS)
   CFS is based on Diego Navarro's ACE (formally Digital Bridge) model. Students in the CFS take five classes together as a cohort. Students begin the semester with the College Foundation course that focuses on learning styles, communication and strategies for success in college. The students then become part of a learning community where they take four more classes together: English, Math, Computer Information Systems and Psych-Counseling. CFS also offers students academic support and strategies for school success, including: access to counselors, assistance with registration, access to financial aid, and information to facilitate the students' understanding of how the college works.

II. Early Childhood Development / English as a Second Language (ECD/ESL LC)
Las Positas College offers a learning community specifically for Early Childhood Development students who are primarily Spanish-speaking. The ECD/ESL learning community pairs four courses in ECD, with ESL coursework based on individual students' ESL assessment results. The ECD/ESL LC also integrates academic and student support services.

III. Basic Skills / General Education learning community (BS/GE LC)
A third learning community model pairs a basic skills English course with a transfer-level general education course.

*For the purpose of this BSI report, the BS/GE LC will be used to illustrate the programmatic approach and evaluation design that Las Positas College uses to analyze learning communities.

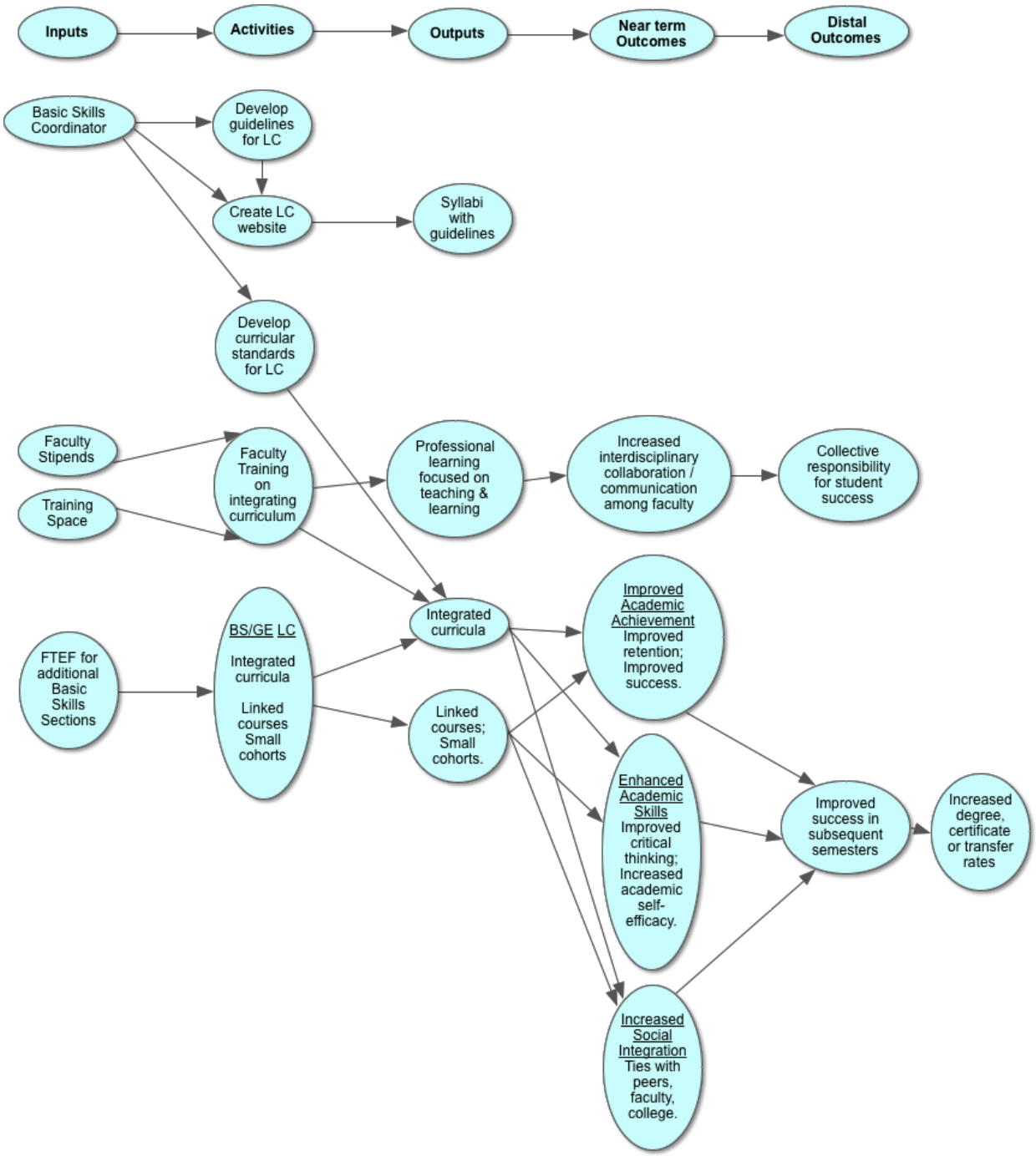

Figure 1. Logic Model for Learning Communities in Community Colleges

The Basic Skills / General Education Learning Community at Las Positas College

The Basic Skills Committee at Las Positas College is a campus-wide planning body responsible for identifying and coordinating effective practices for meeting basic skills students' educational needs. Based on a review of the literature and the effective practices identified in Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community Colleges (CSS, 2007), the Basic Skills Committee identified the expansion of learning communities as one of its goals.

During 2009-2010, the Las Positas College Basic Skills Committee held a series of workshops open to the campus community to select a learning community (LC) model. A multidisciplinary approach, which pairs a basic skills course with a transfer-level general education course, was selected. The first LC paired a basic skills English course (English 102) and a transfer level GE course (Health 1). The first Basic Skills / General Education Learning Community (BS/GE LC) was piloted at Las Positas College in Fall 2010, with two separate sections of English 102, and one section of Health 1 (Figure 2).

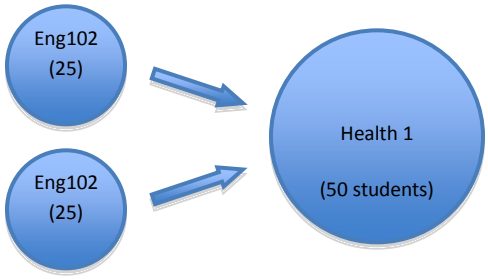

Figure 2. BS/GE LC Fall 2010 Pilot

Evaluation Method for BS/GE LC Fall 2010 Pilot

Various outcome measures have been cited in the literature as evidence of the effectiveness of basic skills programs. Quantitative measures typically include course success, course retention, program persistence, progression through sequential levels of developmental courses, progression to college-level courses, and course GPA (CSS, 2007). Qualitative measurements include student perceptions and satisfaction with various elements of the program (CSS, 2007; Tinto, 2000). According to the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, the ultimate measure of success in basic skills is truly reflected only in the student's ability to successfully complete college-level work (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2004). These same measures are appropriate to evaluate the effectiveness of learning communities.

Evaluating the effectiveness of "learning communities" is particularly challenging for several reasons. First, there are very different approaches/models of learning communities. Some learning communities pair two classes together with little to no integration of curriculum and learning goals; while other learning communities may pair multiple courses with all instructors in the same room all the time. Second, the target population for individual learning communities varies dramatically. Some learning communities, such as the Freshman Experience Program at Santa Anna College, simply targets new students, while others, such as Puente or Tinto's ACE (formally Digital Bridge) target "high risk" student populations. Third, learning communities are often designed as "wrap around" programs, in which a multitude of interventions, including instructional changes, counseling, advising, and cohort creation, all are applied at the same time. Thus, teasing out the specific interventions that had the greatest impact is nearly impossible. Evaluating learning communities, therefore, considers whether the package of the learning community leads to different student outcomes compared with unlinked, standard courses.

So, to evaluate the effectiveness of a learning community, it is essential to introduce a *counterfactual* — that is, some means of determining what would have happened if the program did not exist (Brock, 2010). The

evaluator's job is to find an appropriate comparison group to estimate the "value added" of the program. To measure the "value added" impact of the BS/GE LC a comparison group will be created. Post-learning community observations of the experimental group (E) will be compared to a non-equivalent, but similar, comparison group (C):

X O_{E1}
O_{C1}

The comparison group that was created is comprised of a group of students who concurrently enrolled in English 102 (or English 104) and Health 1 during the Fall 2008, Fall 2009, and Fall 2010 semesters. We were hoping to limit the comparison group to students who enrolled in the respective courses with the SAME instructors as the LC, but even after going back three years, the number of students (N) was too small to proceed.

An analysis of the BS/GE LC Fall 2010 Pilot seeks to answer the following research question.
Research Question:

1. What impact, if any, does the BS/GE LC have on student academic achievement, as measured by retention, success, and persistence?

Evaluation Results for BS/GE LC Fall 2010 Pilot

For the purpose of the BS/GE LC Fall 2010 Pilot, a limited evaluation was performed. Success rates and persistence rates for the experimental group and a comparison group were analyzed. Data for the pilot indicates that there is no substantial difference between the success rates of BS/GE LC students and the comparison group (Table 1).

Table 1: Success Rates for BS/GE LC Fall 2010 and Non-LC Comparison Group

Success Rates

Las Positas College
BS/GE LC Students
Success Rates of Students Concurrently Enrolled in English 102 and Health 1
Fall2010

	ENG 102		HLTH 1		Total	
	Num	pct	Num	pct	Num	pct
Success	38	78%	36	73%	74	76%
Non-success	5	10%	8	16%	13	13%
Withdrawal	6	12%	5	10%	11	11%
Total	49	100%	49	100%	98	100%

Notes: Success is a grade of 'A', 'B', 'C', 'CR', or 'P'. Non-success is a grade of 'D', 'F', 'NC', 'NP', or 'I'. Withdrawal is a "W"

Las Positas College
Non-LC Students
Success Rates of Students Concurrently Enrolled in English 102/104 and Health 1
Aggregated Data for Fall 2008, Fall 2009, and Fall 2010

	ENG 102/104		HLTH 1		Total	
	Num	pct	Num	pct	Num	pct
Success	116	80%	111	77%	227	78%

Non-success	14	10%	20	14%	34	12%
Withdrawal	15	10%	14	10%	29	10%
Total	145	100%	145	100%	290	100%

Notes: Success is a grade of 'A', 'B', 'C', 'CR', or 'P'. Non-success is a grade of 'D', 'F', 'NC', 'NP', or 'I'. Withdrawal is a grade of 'W''. Success rates from distance education sections were excluded.

Data for the pilot indicates a substantial difference in the persistence rates for BS/GE LC students compared to the comparison group (Table 2). 94% of the BS/GE LC persisted to the following Spring semester, compared to 88% in the comparison group.

Table 2: Persistence Rates for BS/GE LC Fall 2010 and Non-LC Comparison Group

Persistence Rates

Las Positas College
Learning Community Students vs. Non-Learning Community Students
Fall to Spring Persistence Rates

	Persisted to the Following Spring		Did Not Persist to the Following Spring		Total	
	Num	Pct	Num	Pct	Num	Pct
Fall 10 Learning Community	46	94%	3	6%	49	100%
Falls 08, 09, 10 Students in Non-Learning Communities	128	88%	17	12%	145	100%

Notes. In order to be included in this data, students had to be concurrently enrolled in English 102/104 and Health 1.

This quasi-experimental evaluation, demonstrates that the BS/GE LC may support students to persist to the following semester at higher rates, compared to students taking stand-alone courses.

Limitations to the BS/GE LC Fall 2010 Pilot Evaluation

1. Since the BS/GE LC was being piloted and only a small number of students (max of 50) could be accommodated, the number of students participating in the BS/GE LC Fall 2010 Pilot was small (N=49). The BS/GE LCs offered in Fall 2011 will allow for a larger N.
2. Students self-selecting into the BS/GE LC could be a confounding variable, but this is highly unlikely. The BS/GE LC was not advertised, nor did it recruit students to participate. Furthermore, the reduced number of courses available to students due to the current workload reductions mandated by the California State budget crisis, most likely reduced "self-selection" into the LC. It is highly probable that the enrolled students did not seek out the LC, but rather ended up in the LC based upon class availability and scheduling limitations.
3. The comparison group may differ from the experimental group. While efforts were made to create a comparison group that closely resembled the experimental group, it is possible that the two groups differed.

Recommendations for the Future

Based on the analysis of the BS/GE LC Fall 2010 Pilot and informal feedback from students and faculty, the BS/GE LC model will be expanded for Fall 2011 (Figure 3). Expanding the LC model for Fall 2011 will allow for a more robust evaluation in the future.

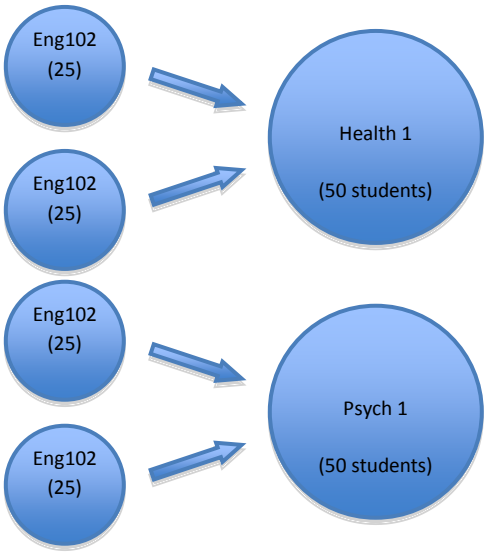

Figure 3: BS/GE LC Offerings Fall 2011

A more robust evaluation, one which captures the BS/GE LC's impacts on students, faculty, and the institution, is planned. The future evaluation will research the following questions.
Research Questions:

1. What impact, if any, does the BS/GE LC have on student academic achievement, as measured by retention, success, and persistence?
2. What impact, if any, does the LC have on student's perceptions of belonging, academic skills, and social support?
3. What impact, if any, does the LC have on building a shared responsibility for student success among faculty?

We anticipate three parts to the future evaluation:

1. Evaluation of Academic Achievement

Post-program observations of the experimental group will be compared to a non-equivalent, but similar, comparison group:

X O_{E1}
O_{C1}

2. Student Perceptions of Belonging, Academic Skills, and Social Supports

Post-program student perceptions will be gathered through a LC Student Survey. The survey responses will be used to compare responses of the experimental group to a non-equivalent, but similar, comparison group:

X O_{E1}
O_{C1}

3. Faculty Perceptions of Collaboration and Communication

Post-program faculty perceptions will be gathered through a LC Faculty Survey. The survey responses will be used to provide a qualitative perspective to the study.

Table 3 summarizes how these three parts will be operationalized.

Table 3. Summary of variables to be measured, and how will they be operationalized:

Variables	**Operationalized as…**	**Data Sources**
Academic Achievement		
Student success in BS course	Retention rate Success rate	IR Database
Student success in GE course	Retention rate Success rate	IR Database
Student persistence to following semester	Persistence rate	IR Database
Student Success in program semester	Credits earned GPA	IR Database
Student's success in subsequent semester English course	Success rate	IR Database
Student's success in subsequent semester GE courses	Success rate	IR Database
Student's critical thinking	SLO – linked to critical thinking Core Comp.	eLumen or Instructor
Student Perceptions of Belonging, Academic Skills, and Social Supports		
Student's sense of belonging	Student perceptions as measured by survey questions	LC Student Survey
Student's self efficacy in reading, writing ability	Student perceptions as measured by survey questions	LC Student Survey
Faculty Perceptions of Collaboration and Communication		
Faculty sense of collaboration	Faculty perceptions as measured by survey	LC Faculty survey