PEER COHORTS AND THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF FRESHMAN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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Abstract. First-year programs and freshman learning communities (FLCs) have become an institutionalized feature of the higher-education landscape. Although a vast amount of literature asserts the positive consequences of these programs, less attention has been devoted to the unintended, and occasionally negative, consequences of FLCs. The author identifies the formation of the “peer cohort” as the central intended consequence of FLCs that also produces unintended student behaviors that may hinder student learning, student development, and faculty-student relations. A number of social-psychological theoretical principles are used to illustrate the peer cohort dynamics that emerge in FLCs.

Keywords: *freshman learning community, homophily, peer cohort*

The “first-year experience” has become a major focus for institutions of higher education. Almost every university in the country has developed some type of special program for incoming freshmen. One of the most common components is the freshman learning community

(FLC) or freshman interest group (FIG). These first-year programs are designed to socialize, integrate, and retain new college students. They are based on a substantial body of research that identifies the factors contributing to student learning and academic success (Chickering and Gamson 1987; Gabelnick et al. 1990; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Tinto 1988, 1997; Tinto, Goodsell, and Russo 1994).

The argument for the positive consequences of FLCs is based on several factors. First, students learn best when they

are able to make substantive interdisciplinary connections across their courses (Austin, Hirstein, and Walen 1997; Hursh, Haas, and Moore 1983; Kain 1993; Wolf and Brandt 1998). When issues, topics, debates, and concepts introduced in one class are reintroduced and reinforced in another, there is a greater likelihood that students will develop a deeper understanding of the content and material. Second, learning is enhanced when students are able to interact and engage with their peers about the subject matter in their courses (Bruffee 1998; King 1990; Qin, Johnson, and Johnson 1995; Springer, Stanne, and Donovan 1999; Webb 1982). Third, students learn best when they are actively engaged, versus passively present, in the learning process through hands-on problem solving and application (Bonwell and Eison 1991; Hake 1998; Kuh, Pace, and Vesper 1997). Fourth, students tend to be more successful when they are able to develop a meaningful academic relationship with faculty (Endo and Harpel 1982; Kuh 2001; Lampert 1993; Pascarella 1980). FLCs are organized to foster these conditions.

In most FLCs, a relatively small group of students (about fifteen to thirty) register for a block of two to four linked courses, typically part of the first-year or general education curriculum, that integrate a common theme. Theoretically, this arrangement should build a peer-learning community among the freshmen, as they spend extended time together in a

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series of related courses and may also live together in a residence hall. The thematic linkage allows for connections to be drawn among the different courses. The small class size increases the likelihood of active learning, small-group interaction, social bonding, student participation, and a closer relationship with the faculty. These are the structural features and the intended consequences.

There is now considerable evidence that FLCs enhance student retention rates and academic performance (Baker and Pomerantz, 2000/2001; Hotchkiss, Moore, and Pitts 2003; Johnson 2000/2001; Pike, Schroeder, and Berry 1997; Soldner, Lee, and Duby 1999/2000; Tinto 2000), student engagement (Zhao and Kuh 2004), and student motivation and cognitive development (Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon 2001).

Many students benefit from the learning community experience. But positive outcomes are a contingent rather than automatic result of FLC programs. This is because the social-structural conditions in FLCs can generate a potentially wide range of outcomes and behaviors that can contribute to a harmonious student learning community. The literature on the first-year experience has largely ignored the unique social-psychological dynamics of the FLCs that can produce problems and unintended outcomes.

This article attempts to develop a critical sociological analytical framework to interpret and understand my experiences and observations of an FLC program. Over the past six years, I have directed and participated as a faculty member in an FLC program. I have had extensive conversations with FLC students and faculty about the strengths and weaknesses of the program. The analytical framework, developed from this informal data collection, identifies those sociological and social-psychological processes that are likely to yield unintended consequences in student peer cohorts. This article also considers the pedagogical techniques and mode of classroom authority employed in FLCs, and how these factors can impact the unintended consequences. This article suggests some faculty development strategies and interventions that can avert the more negative consequences while exploiting the learning community.

Intended and Unintended Consequences of Freshman Learning Communities

This article applies a central tenet of sociological analysis—the law of unintended consequences—to explore and theorize some of the privately reported and observed, but unintended and undertheorized, consequences of FLCs. These include unruly student behavior, student resistance to learning, and student-faculty conflict. The law of unintended consequences asserts that goal-oriented activities will produce unexpected and often counterproductive results that can weaken or nullify the desired outcomes (Merton 1957; Portes 2000). Similarly, the notion of latent (versus manifest) functions identifies the unacknowledged and less obvious results of social action (Merton). Both recognize that every program designed to produce intended and manifest outcomes will also produce unintended and latent consequences. This is also the case with FLC programs.

A tradition of sociological work has investigated the social-structural and organizational dynamics of educational institutions and classrooms, and how they shape student behavior and learning (Bidwell 1965; Bidwell and Friedkin 1988; Bossert 1977; Hallinan and Smith 1989; MacPherson 1983; McFarland 2001, 2004; McLaren 1986; Stinchcombe 1964; Waller 1932). This sociological literature suggests that behavior and learning are heavily influenced by formal and informal organizational dynamics and characteristics (Hirschy and Wilson 2002). It is worth considering some of the fundamental sociological and social-psychological principles and properties that operate and contribute to the unintended student behaviors in the FLCs.

Most interesting and most paradoxical about FLCs is how the intended social organization produced creates a potentially wide range of outcomes that can both advance and undermine objectives of the program. The single most significant intended consequence of FLCs is the formation of a peer cohort. The literature on college student development has pointed to the significant impact of peer group interaction (Astin 1993; Terenzini et al. 1995; Whitt et al. 1999). In

fact, Astin's research concludes that "the single most powerful source of influence on the undergraduate student's academic and personal development is the peer group" (7). The FLC peer group takes a broad form, shaped by and incorporating members of the learning community who share a similar age and academic background. It constitutes a cohort through a common curricular experience of shared classes. The unintended features of the FLC arise in the internal dynamics of this peer cohort, and the relationship between the peer cohort and the teaching faculty. These dynamics have been reported in previous research on student cohorts in various education programs (Barnett et al. 2000; Maher, 2004; Radencich et al. 1998; Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott 2001; Teitel 1997). This literature tends to be more descriptive than analytical in its explication of the source of these cohort dynamics. For those involved with FLCs, it is critical to understand the particular social-psychological group dynamics that give rise to the unintended consequences and that distinguish FLCs from other freshman and nonfreshman classes. The key distinction centers on the networks and bonds of friendship, cohesiveness, and unity that characterize the FLCs. It is not just that the students are the same age. They also spend extended time together in class and out of class and, if the FLC is residential, they may even live together in the same residence hall.

Three familiar sociological or social-psychological principles can illuminate the way in which the dynamics generated by FLC peer cohorts contribute to some undesirable unintended consequences: homophily, primary group formation, and social class conflict.

Extended Homophily by Design

FLCs are designed to ensure that the "birds of a feather flock together" as much as possible both inside and outside the classroom. Community, in this sense, is largely based on the common age and academic inexperience of the students—that is, their homogeneity—coupled with copresence in several classes and, in some cases, a residence hall. Together, these collective experiences provide the social glue for community building. Ideally, this sustained proximity should produce not

just a social but also a learning community in which students will engage in extended interaction and dialogue to gain a better understanding of the subject matter encountered in the FLC courses.

These practices and expectations are consistent with the theory of homophily that suggests people with similar traits, attributes, and demographic characteristics will be more likely to associate with one another (Kandel 1978; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Their common beliefs, values, and experiences can create a more comfortable interaction environment for the exchange of information and smooth communication. The FLC peer cohort is a homophilous unit.

However, there are several unintended consequences of this structural arrangement. The very conditions of homogeneity and extended association that should promote community—a relatively small group of postadolescent freshman-age students taking a cluster of classes together—can also re-create a mutually reinforcing high school-like environment with the associated demeanors and behaviors, characterized by excessive socializing, misconduct, disruptive behavior, and cliques. This is one of the most immediately noticeable unintended consequences routinely reported by students and faculty. Ironically, the high school environment might be less likely to emerge if there were a more age-heterogeneous, but potentially less cohesive, population that could afford the newly arrived freshmen the opportunity to interact with older, more mature, and often more academically serious students. Such informal “near-peer” support, mentorship, and role modeling is unavailable in the FLC classroom. Rather, students find themselves in an environment that closely resembles their high school classroom and they, therefore, may employ high school student scripts and norms. Thus, a structural arrangement designed to prepare and socialize students in the transition to college life may inadvertently create conditions that potentially prevent or retard their academic development.

The age and level of development of this population is a significant factor fueling these dynamics. The homophilous concentration of postadolescent students increases the likelihood that the classroom will be

characterized by the various behaviors expected in an adolescent social group. This includes identity seeking, the struggle for autonomy, the need for acceptance, the formation of cliques and subcultures, a preoccupation with social affairs rather than learning, and disruptive and rebellious forms of behavior (Eder and Enke 1991; McFarland 2001; Milner 2004; Ridgeway 1983). McFarland says that

... adolescents are a disaffected class or subculture in relation to adults. Curricula frequently entail topics unrelated to students' current lives, and tasks often do not call upon active student participation. In such a context, it is argued that most any adolescent possessing a cohesive peer group will likely create problems for the teacher. (616–17)

Homophily is also associated with pressures for normative and behavioral conformity among group members. It can mean that the students will adapt and conform to the high school-like environment and that few will feel comfortable, at least in the presence of their peers, deviating from a normative climate that may militate against academic engagement and student learning.

Such behavioral conformity can also give rise to the groupthink phenomenon that produces mutually reinforcing views and perspectives (Janis 1982; Turner and Pratkanis 1998). According to Janis, there is a range of symptoms of groupthink, and some will clearly develop within FLCs. First, the belief in the inherent morality of the group combined with the illusion of unanimity gives students the impression that their position and perspective on a particular matter is unassailable and shared by all. This can pertain to a group's opinion about an assignment, reading, form of evaluation, or faculty member (Barnett et al. 2000; Maher 2004; Radencich et al. 1998). When students develop strong attitudes in opposition to any of these various aspects of the course, there will be negative consequences for student-faculty relations and the assessment of the instructor's performance (Eder and Enke 1991).

Second, the symptoms of self-censorship and direct pressure on dissenters can act in tandem to not only reinforce the perceptions of unanimity and morality, but also silence any potential expression from students who may not share the

majority position. Independent and deviant expressions are even less likely among members of a cohort of postadolescent novice students seeking acceptance from their peers. For the majority of students in the FLC, one would expect opinions and sentiments to be influenced more by the peer cohort than the faculty or the larger academic ethos.

Primary Groups and Role Conflict

Sociologists have tried to distinguish among groups on the basis of member familiarity and cohesiveness. The classic distinction between secondary and primary groups, first introduced by Cooley (1962), continues to provide insights into social group relations and dynamics (Boyesen and Bru 1999; Burke 2003; Mehan 1980). In this conceptual framework, members of a secondary group come together in pursuit of a common activity but interaction tends to be impersonal and instrumental. Primary group interaction, in contrast, is characterized by more personal, intimate, and enduring socioemotional bonds and relationships among members. For purposes here, we can think of these two “ideal type” primary and secondary groups as representing two ends of a continuum. Students in most college classrooms form something closer to a secondary group. Connections and relationships among the students tend to be less personal and typically do not extend beyond the classroom setting. Under these conditions, self-identity is not heavily shaped or reinforced by classmates. When students join an FLC peer cohort, they are more likely to develop primary group-like relationships that extend beyond the classroom. This primary peer cohort interaction can shape and validate a student's self-identity.

Because the FLC classroom takes a more primary group form, there is a much greater likelihood of identity and role conflict. If a student is a member of a secondary-like group of classroom strangers, where he or she can be relatively anonymous, it is easier to sustain the unitary student role. In classrooms that take a more primary-group character, in contrast, the conflict and tension between the role of close friend or intimate (in relation to other students in the learning community), and the role of student (in relation to the instructor and larger institution) can be more pronounced. The

required performance and role expectations of each role may be diametrically opposed. This tension is usually managed, according to Goffman (1959), through the "segregation of audiences" (137). In projecting particular identities associated with conflicting roles, the prescribed practice is to make sure the particular roles can be performed in different places with the appropriate target audience. In the case of the FLC student, the peer-to-peer role would be performed in the absence of the instructor, and the student-to-faculty role would be performed in the absence of the peer cohort. However, no such segregation is possible in the FLC classroom. The merging of the two audiences, with potentially contrary expectations, can produce conflict, stress, and tension. This may make transitioning to the college-student role more challenging. Resolution of the conflict is usually settled in the direction of the group that is most salient (Shaw 1981). The conflict can also produce withdrawal or apathy as a coping mechanism (Katz and Kahn 1966), or the embracement of one role and distancing from the other (Goffman 1961).

Class-in-Itself and Class-for-Itself

As a result of homophily and the primary group environment, the FLC students engage in unusually high levels of intra-cohort communication. Again, this is an intended and desired form of association that can facilitate community building, social ties, and peer-to-peer learning. It can also contribute to tension and conflict between the peer cohort and the faculty.

The Marxist theory of social class formation is instructive here. Class, in this context, can be used to refer to a class of students rather than a class of workers. In a typical non-FLC arrangement, the class tends toward a secondary group of weakly connected and heterogeneous students that constitute a class-in-itself. That is, the students occupy a common classroom location, but the level of interaction, communication, and esprit de corps is minimal. These students may have some common interests, but they are not clearly defined, crystallized, or salient. In contrast, students in the FLC possess the more favorable social-psychological properties, outlined above, that can intensify the level of cohesion and bonding. The class is transformed to a class-for-itself, from a

mass of relatively disorganized strangers into a mobilized alliance with a much stronger sense of class identification and common interest. To extend the analogy further, we can say that the peer cohort is characterized by a higher level of class consciousness.

Faculty who teach in FLCs frequently report a greater adversarial "us-versus-them" student orientation in comparison to other courses. This can manifest itself in collective opposition, resistance, and recalcitrance as has been reported among other student cohort groups (Barnett et al. 2000; Maher 2004; Radencich et al. 1998; Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott 2001; Teitel 1997). It can mean a normative order that is dictated more by the peer cohort than academic protocol. The students may work in unison to redirect learning objectives or demand reductions in workload. In short, student behavior may be influenced less by the perceptions and authority of the faculty than the social-psychological forces operating within the peer cohort. Class conflict and tension can result. McFarland (2001) observed,

The social processes generating student defiance in classrooms are similar to the social processes generating factory strikes, changes in worker productivity, collective protests, social movement recruitment, and political change. (613)

In summary, the social-structural and social-psychological conditions—namely the peer cohort and correlated group dynamics—created by FLCs can generate a range of unintended consequences that hinder and pose challenges for student learning. These unintended consequences include a high school-like environment and associated student behaviors, an absence of role models and mentors encouraging academic focus, an inordinate preoccupation among students on social versus academic affairs, the formation of cliques and subcultures, groupthink and a limited expression of diverse perspectives and opinions, social conformity and a striving for social acceptance, classroom role conflict, and collective opposition to faculty authority and prerogatives.

The Student-Faculty Interface: Situating the Peer Cohorts

There is no question that these patterns of group behavior and social interaction

are found in freshman peer cohorts and FLCs. Formal and informal modes of data collection, from FLC faculty and students on my own campus and at other institutions, confirm the presence of these distinct classroom dynamics. However, the extent to which these behaviors emerge, or actually hamper the learning environment, is highly dependent on the conditions and climate of classroom instruction produced by the FLC faculty. That is, the potential for tension and conflict depends on how the FLC peer cohort interfaces with the existing and constructed social and normative order of the classroom and the academy. The potential negative unintended consequences cited above are not exclusively the result of the social-psychological dynamics stemming from the FLC social-structural arrangement alone, but rather the coupling of the FLC with institutionalized patterns of college teaching and learning.

To consider the interaction between instructional approach and peer cohort, it helps to conceptualize some ways in which the FLC might differ from the standard college classroom. In most undergraduate college courses, students are not organized into cohorts. There is typically greater student diversity in age, background, and academic orientation than one finds in an FLC. Students also tend to be more atomized and disconnected in a nonlearning community classroom. Therefore, we would expect the level of unity and cohesion to be lower. Most college classrooms more closely resemble a "community of strangers"—students come together in a classroom for a relatively short duration. Given the continued prevalence of the lecture as the dominant pedagogical strategy, the primary communication flow is typically from instructor to student. At the conclusion of the class session, most students disperse rather than remain together as a group. Under this less cohesive social-structural arrangement, faculty can command a more authoritative presence. They can more directly shape the normative order of the classroom and the associated modes of acceptable behavior. Authority relations are structurally hierarchical and formally bureaucratic; authority resides primarily in the formal position and expertise of the faculty member. In short, faculty are likely to exercise greater social control over the students in a conventional

classroom arrangement than in an FLC. Because this constitutes the modal institutionalized classroom social structure with which the faculty are most familiar and comfortable, it is not surprising that many faculty approach the FLCs with the same classroom management and pedagogical strategies employed in non-FLC courses.

I hypothesized that this institutionalized mode of authority and classroom management is much less effective and legitimate when working with an FLC peer cohort. Again, this is evidenced by the significant number of FLC faculty who complain about unruly student behavior, immaturity, and general classroom management difficulties. Often, these are faculty with considerable experience teaching freshmen, but not freshmen who have formed a peer cohort within an FLC. This frequently reported "deviant" behavior is the result, as noted above, of the distinctive social-psychological dynamics operating within the FLC peer cohort alongside the application of conventional pedagogical and classroom management techniques. The mismatch generates classroom tensions.

Understanding the social sources of classroom power, authority, and influence can make a significant contribution to the success of FLCs. Research on cohort groups suggests that a successful learning community is highly dependent on the relationship between the type of cohort group and the teaching style employed (Scribner and Donaldson 2001; Springer, Stanne, and Donovan 1999; Wheelan and Lisk 2000). Finn, Goulet, and Neal (2002) developed a typology of cohort groups based on two dimensions—the level of group cohesiveness and the level of student competence. Distinguishing between high and low levels on the two dimensions yields four types of cohort groups. In this scheme, the FLC peer cohort would be defined as high on cohesiveness and low on student competence. Finn, Goulet, and Neal label this group "counterdependent" and note that "this particular combination of group dynamics leads to some interesting teaching challenges" (12). One of the primary challenges facing instructors working with cohort groups is overcoming the role of the outsider and establishing a meaningful connection with the cohort. For the FLC-type cohort group, this requires the exercise of a high degree of

referent power (French and Raven 1959). Finn, Goulet, and Neal observed, "Referent power is possessed by faculty who are strong in relationship skills. These faculty are seen as caring, interesting, and/or entertaining and funny" (10). More specifically, this would suggest that faculty exercising "referent" forms of power will have the greatest success with counterdependent groups.

Based on my conversations with faculty participating in the FLC who report the most positive experience, there is anecdotal evidence for this thesis. That is, these faculty tend to be the least traditional and most flexible in their pedagogical style. They are more likely to depart from the "sage-on-stage" lecture delivery mode, emphasize student-driven active learning over faculty presentation of content, make an extra effort to connect to and become familiar with the students, encourage extended class discussion and participation, employ small-group activities and problem solving in the classroom, and—perhaps most important—try to maximize opportunities for formal and informal interaction with their students. This pattern is supported by the research of Lichtenstein (2005), who examined factors associated with positive and negative classroom environments in FLCs. She finds that "positive classroom environments (PCEs) were characterized by . . . an emphasis on experiential and active learning, accessible and attentive faculty, a sense of community, and support for academic and social adjustment to college" (347–48).

Establishing interpersonal rapport is an especially vital ingredient for a successful FLC. This suggests the need for a more relationship-based (as opposed to position- or expert-based) authority and management style. The former serves to break down the status barriers built into the hierarchical classroom social structure, creating a more casual classroom environment that reduces the social distance between instructors and students. This instructional style also increases the likelihood of greater faculty-student interaction outside the classroom (Wilson, Woods, and Gaff 1974).

At this point, we can return to the notion of unintended consequences and note that, although they may be inevitable, they can

take a variety of forms. In Portes' (2000) systematic explication of the various ways unintended consequences come to fruition, he identifies "the unexpected outcome" where "the goal is what it seems but the intervention of outside forces produces unexpected consequences different and sometimes contrary to those intended" (8). In the case of FLCs, a community is intended and created, but it is often more of a social than learning community as a result of the peer cohort dynamics. All is not lost, however. Another form taken by the unintended consequence, according to Portes, is "the lucky turn-of-events," where the "goal is what it seems—but its achievement depends on fortuitous events, foreign to the original planners" (8). To a large extent, FLCs combine these two forms to produce regularly (but not necessarily) successful outcomes due to the learned and improvised action of instructors who either adjust their pedagogical and interpersonal style on the fly or heed the accumulated wisdom shared in faculty workshops about what works with this unique student population.

Along with establishing rapport and developing a personal connection with the student peer cohort, there is also evidence for the effectiveness of cooperative and collaborative learning strategies (Bruffee 1993; Goodsell, Maher, and Tinto 1992; Lichtenstein 2005; Smith and MacGregor 1992). Both cooperative and collaborative learning involve group-based methods that rely on the active participation of students for the achievement of defined goals or the construction of new knowledge. In the context of FLCs, these approaches may be particularly appropriate for at least two reasons. First, cooperative and collaborative methods build on and exploit the existing levels of community and interpersonal comfort. These established intra-cohort relations, coupled with the student desire for social interaction and dialogue, can be channeled toward class discussion, problem solving, active engagement in substantive content, and other learning objectives. Second, collaborative learning is a particularly effective way to break down the barriers between the student cohort and the instructor. It is based on principles that directly address classroom authority, the responsibility for learning, and teacher-student relations (Bruffee;

Gamson 1994). Bruffee's extended analysis of collaborative learning highlights the processes of reacclimation of students, discourse across boundaries, and the building of transition communities that provide social support during life-course transitions. These pertain to socializing students, reducing hierarchical and cultural differences, and transitioning students into a new institutional environment. Each of these is a central aspect and objective of FLCs.

Conclusion

Much of the existing rhetoric and literature on FLCs has been couched in the language of theoretical intention rather than practical consequence. While this may serve to attract both students and faculty, it can also produce disappointment when participants feel they have failed to realize the intended outcomes. First-year programs must confront these difficult questions head-on and prepare faculty and students for the inevitable collisions. Such conversations can constitute "teachable moments" of critical self-reflection for both students and faculty, which will hopefully further advance the noble mission of FLCs.

For those who plan and coordinate the FLCs on their campuses, recognition of unintended peer-cohort effects and their relationships to pedagogical style have some obvious implications. First, teaching in an FLC is not for everyone. It is advisable to develop a method for recruiting and screening FLC faculty to avoid the mismatch between peer-cohort dynamics and faculty teaching style. Second, faculty training and preparation for FLCs should explicitly focus on the unique nature of the FLC students and classrooms. Participating faculty must understand the peer-cohort phenomenon and the interpersonal and pedagogical techniques that prove most effective with this student population.

This article has combined argument, theoretical framework, and hypotheses based on direct experience with and observation of FLCs, with supporting anecdotal evidence from students and instructors. Needed now are more systematic methods of inquiry for uncovering the extent and depth of these group dynamics and their real and perceived impact on student learning and student development.

On a final note, it should be strongly emphasized that this article is not an argument against student learning communities. The author supports, promotes, and coordinates learning community programs and has firsthand experience with, and knowledge of, the positive impact of these learning environments on student engagement, achievement, and success. However, organizational learning and continuous improvements require critical reflection and an awareness of the inevitable unintended consequences. In the words of the late political economist Alec Nove (1983), "... we must never forget that perfect systems exist only in books ... we must learn from the things that go wrong, in the hope that by doing so we will diminish the ill-effects of predictable troubles" (141).

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