Intended and Unintended Consequences of First-Year Learning Communities: An Initial Investigation

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Abstract. Most of the research on first-year student learning communities (FLCs) focuses on the impact of these programs on student success and retention. This paper reports on the investigation of the impact of FLCs on social community, peer friendships, and classroom dynamics. The researchers identify sociological principles that account for the positive effects of FLCs on these phenomena but also show how these principles predict potential unintended negative consequences of FLCs. Collecting data from three types of first-year classes, the researchers examined the relationship between student participation in learning communities and reported level and intensity of various social group dynamics. The results suggest that FLCs can produce both positive and negative consequences.

First-year student learning communities (FLCs) have become an established feature of the higher education landscape. One of the purposes of FLCs is the formation of a first-year "peer cohort" that provides a sense of community for its members. A large literature base extols the benefits of FLCs, but less attention has been paid to the unanticipated, and occasionally
negative, consequences of these programs. This article asserts that first-year peer cohorts can foster unintended social dynamics that may hinder student learning, student development, and student-faculty relations. After reviewing the sociological principles of peer cohort formation, we offer an analysis of survey data from a variety of first-year classrooms that explores whether the intended and unintended dynamics we describe affect the student experience in FLCs.

The Intended Consequences of FLCs

First-Year Experience programs now exist at almost every college and university in the United States. FLCs are one of the most common components of such programs. These learning communities are designed to socialize, integrate, and retain new college students (Williams, 2000). They are based on a substantial body of research that identifies the factors contributing to student learning and academic success (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1988; Tinto, 1997; Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1994).

FLCs typically bring together a small group of students (usually around 15-30) who share a common experience through enrollment in a linked block of courses that are part of the first-year general education program. The courses are often integrated through a common theme. The result is a peer cohort of first-year students who spend extended time together in their courses and who may also share the same living quarters. Learning communities create conditions associated with enhanced student learning, such as an interdisciplinary curriculum (Austin, Hirstein, & Whalen, 1997; Hursh, Haas, & Moore, 1983; Kain, 1993; Wolf & Brandt, 1998), peer interaction (Bruffee, 1993; King, 1990; Qin, Johnson, & Johnson, 1995; Springer, Stanne, & Donovan, 1999; Webb, 1982), active learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Hake, 1998; Kuh, Pace, & Vesper, 1997), and student-faculty interaction (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Kuh, 2001; Lamport, 1993; Pascarella, 1980).

The features of FLCs have given rise to a body of research investigating the impact of learning community participation on a range of student outcomes. Evidence shows that FLCs enhance student retention and academic performance (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000/2001; Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2003; Johnson, 2000/2001; Pike, Schroeder, & Berry 1997; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999/2000; Tinto, 2000), student engagement (Zhao & Kuh, 2004), and student motivation and cognitive development (Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2001).
There are also a range of assumed but largely uninvestigated social consequences of FLCs. Most FLC programs are founded on an appreciation for the social dimensions of student development and learning, as evidenced by the centrality of conditions designed to promote a sense of community among students. Informed by research on student development, particularly the work of Astin (1993), the role of peer group interaction stands out as especially significant (see also Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999). Astin concludes that “The single most powerful source of influence on the undergraduate student’s academic and personal development is the peer group” (p. 7). Hence, the literature on FLCs points to the desirable consequences deriving from the formation of a social organization typically known as a “peer cohort” (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Kellogg, 1999; Tibbetts, 2003). Students in FLCs are peers because they share similar age and academic backgrounds. They constitute a cohort by virtue of their shared common curricular experience, co-enrollment in several small classes and, in some cases, shared housing. It is within the context of this peer cohort that many of the positive developmental and academic consequences of FLCs are expected to emerge (Bruffee, 1993; King, 1990; Qin et al., 1995; Springer et al., 1999; Webb, 1982). The presumption is that FLCs foster a sense of community (Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1994) and strong peer relationships, which in turn eases the transition from high school to college via ready-made friendship networks. Taken together, this literature suggests that in FLCs we should expect to find higher levels of social integration as reflected by a sense of community, more frequent and intense peer interactions, and a smoother transition to college life. The study reported here attempted to assess these expectations.

**Unintended Consequences of FLCs**

Proponents of FLCs make a strong case for the positive effects of peer cohorts. However, the literature has largely ignored the potentially negative social dynamics that might emerge in FLCs. An expansive sociological literature demonstrates that in addition to the positive effects discussed above, close-knit social communities, like peer cohorts, can become insular, suppressive, and tyrannical (for a review of this literature see Crow, 2001). We assert that FLCs are not immune to these kinds of problems. Explaining how they emerge and persist requires outlining some fundamental sociological principles. Here we examine two such principles, the concept of homophily and the notion of primary versus secondary groups.
Homophily

The theory of homophily holds that people with similar traits, attributes, and demographic characteristics are more likely to associate with one another than they are with others (Kandel, 1978; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Common beliefs, values, and experiences create a comfortable environment for the exchange of information and social interaction. Thus, the FLC peer cohort is homophilous by design. Ideally, sustained propinquity should strengthen social ties and friendship networks. It is also intended to promote an active-learning environment in which students engage in dialogue about the course content.

Nevertheless, conditions of homogeneity and extended association among a small group of traditional-aged first-year students can also recreate and reinforce a “high school-like environment” with the attitudes and behaviors that accompany it (see McFarland, 2001; 2004.) Preliminary, informal inquiries among our colleagues revealed that this is among the most common complaints of students and faculty alike when asked about drawbacks and shortcomings of the FLC experience (Jaffee, 2007). This may be a direct result of designed homophily, since the high school environment would be less likely to emerge if the classroom was more differentiated by age. Age heterogeneity would afford new first-year students the opportunity to interact with older, more mature—and often more academically serious—role models. Such “near-peer” mentorship is unavailable in the FLC classroom. Hence, the FLC may resemble the high school classroom, and students may therefore employ high school behavioral scripts and norms. Ironically, then, a structural arrangement designed to prepare and socialize students for the transition to college life may inadvertently create conditions that can retard that process.

The homophilous concentration of students fresh out of high school increases the odds that FLC classrooms will exhibit the kinds of behavior that characterize adolescent social groups. These include: identity seeking, struggling for autonomy, needing acceptance, forming cliques and subcultures, privileging social affairs over learning, and engaging in disruptive behavior (Eder & Enke, 1991; McFarland, 2001; Milner, 2004; Ridgeway, 1983). Writing about the dynamics of high school classrooms, McFarland (2001) reports:

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 (p. 617)

Peer cohorts also pressure members to conform to group norms. Unfortunately, these norms may sometimes reject a serious posture toward academic engagement and student learning. While FLCs tend to provide a sense of identity and belonging, they can also be places where “groupthink” stifles innovative thinking. One symptom of groupthink is the “illusion of unanimity” which may give students the impression that the dominant position or perspective on a particular matter is common to all (Janis, 1982). This can put pressure on dissenters, reinforce the perception of unanimity, and silence students who do not share the dominant view. Nonconformists can be excluded or stigmatized. This is particularly problematic among members of a post-adolescent cohort group intent on acceptance by their peers.

Primary Group Formation

Student behavior in FLCs may also be shaped by primary group relations that emerge within the peer cohort (Cooley, 1962). Primary groups can be contrasted with secondary groups, which tend to typify the average college classroom. In a secondary group (Cooley), connections and relationships among students are less personal and usually do not extend beyond the classroom setting. Self-identity is not heavily shaped or sustained by classmates. By contrast, primary groups are characterized by personal, intimate, and enduring socioemotional bonds and relationships among members. FLCs are conducive to establishing primary group-like relationships that extend beyond the classroom. Under these conditions, students are more likely to look to the group to shape and validate their self-identity. Because of the breadth and intensity of interaction among students in a FLC, conflicts and tension that emerge in one classroom, or in the residence hall, can contaminate the overall learning environment. This is far less likely in classes with students who are neither a cohort nor members of a primary group.

This primary group dynamic can also affect interaction between students and faculty. At the authors’ institution, faculty members have sometimes reported a more adversarial “us-versus-them” attitude among FLC students than in their other courses (Jaffee, 2007). This can result in collective opposition to the faculty member or coursework, and foster a normative order that is dictated more by the peer cohort than by academic protocol.
Students may work in unison to redirect learning objectives or demand workload reductions. They may present organized resistance to assignments, readings, grading methods, or other aspects of the class ordinarily directed by the instructor. These dynamics have been reported in previous research on student cohorts (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Radencich et al., 1998; Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001; Teitel, 1997). More generally, as McFarland (2001) observes, “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” (p. 613). Such conflict also weakens faculty-student relations (Eder & Enke, 1991).

In short, the effects of homophily and primary group membership suggest that the same peer cohort that promotes the highly touted positive features of FLCs may also spawn social dynamics that can hinder student learning, student development, and faculty-student relations. However, neither the positive or negative aspects of peer cohort formation, as they relate to social organization in FLCs, have been adequately researched. Existing studies have not sufficiently investigated the ability of FLCs to provide a sense of social community among students or the potentially problematic aspects of these programs. It is important to know if negative aspects exist because if they do, working toward their elimination may enhance the positive effects of FLCs, and improve their ability to involve and retain students and positively impact the experience of the faculty and staff who work with them. The study reported here tested a number of hypotheses designed to measure both the positive and potentially negative consequences of FLC peer cohorts.

Method

In order to assess whether FLCs facilitate the formation of a “peer cohort” with its associated positive and negative consequences, survey data was collected from students in three distinct types of first-year classrooms. These are:

1. Residential Freshmen Learning Communities (RFLC). In these first-year student learning communities, 25-30 students co-enroll in three thematically linked general education courses, and also room together (in pairs) on the same floor of a residence hall. Based on the literature cited above, we would expect to find the highest levels of
peer cohort and community formation for this group. We collected data in one RFLC (N = 28).

2. Non-Residential Freshman Learning Communities (NRFLC). In these first-year learning communities, 25-30 students co-enroll in three thematically linked general education courses, but do not live together. Based on the literature cited above, we would expect to find moderate to high levels of peer cohort and community formation for this group. Our data are from two such NRFLCs (N = 50).

3. Conventional Freshman Courses (CFC) classes. These are typical first-year classes of 25-35 students. The students are not in a learning community, and they are not co-enrolled in multiple classes. Based on the literature cited above, we would expect to find the lowest levels of peer cohort and community formation for this group. Our data are from two CFC classes (N = 57).

All of the courses were taught in the same semester at a medium-sized regional public university, and every student in the selected courses was surveyed. Most research to date has not compared the effects of FLCs on participating students and courses with non-FLC students and conventional first-year courses. The inclusion of three conditions of variation—between a residential FLC, FLCs, and CFCs—not only provided a control group, but also the ability to hypothesize a linear, monotonic relationship between the intensity of peer cohort interaction and the positive and negative consequences of each classroom arrangement.

Our sample has some limitations. First, we were only able to survey courses where instructors granted us permission. We attempted to compensate for this by matching the classes we chose based on size, time of day, and content. For instance, the courses we surveyed were centered on the humanities and social sciences to minimize differences in the kinds of assignments and instructional methods that students might encounter. Descriptive statistics from our sample show no significant differences in the gender or ethnic make up of the courses.

A second limitation in our sample is the potential for selection bias. Students at the institution under study are free to select and register for FLCs if they choose. Thus, because respondents were not randomly assigned to their specific classroom environment our investigation should be considered preliminary and instructive. We also did not collect pretest data and acknowledge that FLCs may be inherently attractive to students who seek a more
Consequences of First-Year Learning Communities

cohesive classroom community. However, the magnitude and consistency of the observed effects encourage us to believe that the community dynamics seen in these courses are illustrative of the effects of peer cohort formation across different types of first-year student classroom environments.

To measure the presence and intensity of the positive and negative consequences of FLC peer cohorts, survey items were used to determine students' level of agreement with statements about classroom dynamics. Responses were coded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). To measure the positive aspects of FLC peer cohort formation we used the following seven items:

- A sense of community developed among students in this class.
- In this class, I considered many students to be my close friends.
- I have developed close personal relationships with other students in this class.
- The friendships I have established in this class have increased my satisfaction with college life.
- I socialized with other students in this class outside the classroom.
- I expect to spend time with some of my classmates next semester.
- Other students in this class have assisted me in my adjustment to college life.

To measure potentially unanticipated, negative aspects of FLC peer cohorts we used the following five items:

- In this class, the students were divided into different cliques.
- Sometimes the environment in this class felt like high school.
- There were strong peer group pressures operating in this classroom.
- In this class, I sometimes felt that other students were evaluating me.
- In this class, a lot of socializing took place during class time.

Responses are from surveys administered at the end of the semester when students would have had sufficient time to form opinions about the nature and strength of their peer cohort. Items in the scale were constructed after consultation with instructors and students involved in FLCs at the institution. This is the first phase of a study intended to develop the instrument and reach face and construct validity of items on the scale.

We hypothesize that each of the three types of learning environments will differ in their mean scores on our survey items, and that means will be
highest for those in the residential first-year learning community (RFLC),
lowest for those in conventional first-year courses (CFC), and somewhere
in between for students in nonresidential first-year learning communities
(NRFLC). Hence we hypothesize differences in mean scores, rank ordered
as follows:

\[ \text{Mean Scores RFLC} > \text{Mean Scores NRFLCs} > \text{Mean Scores CFCs} \]

Analysis

For both intended positive and unintended negative consequences, we
used a hierarchical approach to examine effects. To control for inflated Type
I error, MANOVA provided an initial omnibus examination. Following a
significant MANOVA, a series of One-Way ANOVAs and Tukey post-hoc
comparisons explored the direction and trend of significant effects noted in
the MANOVA. Additionally, for all dependent measures, we tested statistical
assumptions to ensure that the techniques we employed were appropriate.

Positive Consequences of FLC Peer Cohorts

A significant MANOVA that included the seven items addressing the
positive aspects of peer cohort formation showed statistically significant
differences across FLC conditions: \((F[14, 188] = 2.96, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.18)\),
and a series of one-way ANOVAs showed statistically significant mean
differences across FLC conditions for each of the dependent variables: (a) “sense
of community” \(F(2, 99) = 11.55, \eta^2 = 0.19\); (b) “close friends” \(F(2, 99) =
5.40, \eta^2 = 0.10\); (c) “personal relationships” \(F(2, 99) = 9.76, \eta^2 = 0.16\); (d)
“increased satisfaction” \(F(2, 99) = 6.22, \eta^2 = 0.11\); (e) “outside socialization”
\(F(2, 99) = 9.82, \eta^2 = 0.17\); (f) “spend time next semester” \(F(2, 99) = 15.42,
\eta^2 = 0.24\); and (g) “assisted adjustment” \(F(2, 99) = 9.57, \eta^2 = 0.16\).

Table 1 displays the means for these seven items. A visual inspection
shows that mean scores increase for the various classroom environments in
the hypothesized direction. We also employed post hoc Tukey’s HSD tests
for detailed comparisons. These show that students in the RFLC reported
a greater “sense of community” than CFC students \((M_{diff} = 0.86, p < 0.01)\).
Likewise, those in NRFLCs scored higher on this measure than those in
CFCs \((M_{diff} = 0.86, p < 0.01)\). However, the RFLC and NRFLC did not
differ significantly on this item \((M_{diff} = 0.20, p = 0.57)\). Thus, while two
types of first-year communities differed little from each other, both were
associated with a greater sense of community than the non-FLC classes. We
observed this same pattern for the following items: “close friends,” “outside
socialization,” and “spend time next semester.”

Table 1
Intended Consequences: Community/Friendship Formation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Residential FLC</th>
<th>Non-Residential FLC</th>
<th>Non-FLC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A sense of community developed among students in this class.</td>
<td>4.43 (a)</td>
<td>4.23 (c)</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In this class, I considered many students to be my close friends.</td>
<td>3.21 (a)</td>
<td>2.90 (c)</td>
<td>2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I have developed close personal relationships with other students in this class.</td>
<td>4.33 (ab)</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The friendships I have established in this class have increased my satisfaction with college life.</td>
<td>4.13 (a)</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I socialized with other students in this class outside the classroom.</td>
<td>4.54 (a)</td>
<td>4.00 (c)</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I expect to spend time with some of my classmates next semester.</td>
<td>4.38 (a)</td>
<td>3.73 (c)</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Other students in this class have assisted me in my adjustment to college life.</td>
<td>4.04 (ab)</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(a\) Residential vs. Non-FLC, \(p < .05\)
\(b\) Residential vs. Non-Residential FLC, \(p < .05\)
\(c\) Non-Residential vs. Non-FLC, \(p < .05\)
There was a different pattern for the “personal relationships” and “assisted adjustment” variables. For these two items, means for the RFLC were significantly higher than both the NRFLCs and CFC classes, but the NRFLCs and CFCs did not differ significantly from each other. Finally, for the “increased satisfaction” variable, the RFLC presented a significantly higher mean score than the CFCs, but none of the other relationships were statistically significant.

With respect to the assumptions of MANOVA, a Q Q plot demonstrated no substantial departures from normality. And, although Box’s M demonstrated significant heterogeneity in the covariance matrix (Box’s M (56, 17079.19) = 133.58, \( p < 0.01 \)), the MANOVA is resistant to violations of this type as group sizes approach 30, as our groups do.

**Negative Consequences of FLC Peer Cohorts**

A significant MANOVA incorporating the five items measuring potentially negative aspects of FLC peer cohorts found statistically significant differences across FLC conditions: \( F(10, 198) = 5.97, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.23 \) and a series of one-way ANOVAs found statistically significant mean differences across FLC conditions for each of the dependent variables except “peer pressure.” These include: (a) “cliques,” \( F(2, 102) = 13.62, \eta^2 = 0.21 \), (b) “high school environment,” \( F(2, 102) = 6.11, \eta^2 = 0.11 \); (c) “feel evaluated,” \( F(2, 102) = 10.45, \eta^2 = 0.17 \); and (d) “socializing during class” \( F(2, 102) = 9.24, \eta^2 = 0.15 \).

Table 2 displays means for these five variables for the various classroom types. Once again, a visual inspection generally supports the linear trend hypothesis, and post hoc Tukey’s HSD tests across the significant variables (“cliques,” “high school environment,” “feel evaluated,” and “socializing during class”) provided a more fine-grained analysis.

First, for each of the four variables, the RFLC demonstrated significantly higher mean scores than the CFCs. Second, for every item except “high school environment,” the RFLC also presented significantly higher means than the NRFLCs. Third, except for “high school environment,” the NRFLCs did not differ significantly from the CFCs. Thus, the residential FLC was most associated with the negative consequences of the FLC peer cohort. A Q Q plot demonstrated no substantial departures from normality nor did Box’s M demonstrate significant heterogeneity for these variables.
Table 2
Unintended Consequences: Negative Social Dynamics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Residential FLC</th>
<th>Non-Residential FLC</th>
<th>Non-FLC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. In this class, the students were divided into different cliques.</td>
<td>3.88&lt;sup&gt;a,b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sometimes the environment in this class felt like high school.</td>
<td>3.63&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. There were strong peer group pressures operating in this classroom.</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>2.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. In this class, I sometimes felt that other students were evaluating me.</td>
<td>4.00&lt;sup&gt;a,b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. In this class, a lot of socializing took place during class time.</td>
<td>3.96&lt;sup&gt;a,b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>2.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Residential vs. Non-FLC, p < .05
<sup>b</sup> Residential vs. Non-Residential FLC, p < .05

Discussion and Conclusion

As noted above, this research is preliminary, and the size and limitations of our sample temper the strength and generalizability of the conclusions. Nevertheless, our findings generally support the notion that FLCs foster peer cohorts among students, and that these cohorts can also have both positive and negative properties. FLCs promote a sense of community and provide friendship networks that students believe will last beyond the current semester. However, under certain circumstances, intense interaction can have negative consequences, such as cliques and behaviors reminiscent of high school.
More importantly, the analyses suggest that FLCs can be structured in order to produce the positive effects of peer cohorts while minimizing their problems. Recall that, for the most part, the positive consequences of FLC peer cohort formation were significantly more evident in both the residential and nonresidential FLCs than in the conventional first-year courses, whereas the negative consequences were largely confined to the residential FLC. This implies that the level of propinquity required to induce the positive aspects of FLCs is lower than the level at which the negative effects begin to emerge. Hence, when it comes to peer cohorts, there may well be a “sweet spot” where community and friendship flourish, but cliques and immature behavior are held at bay. For instance, the FLCs examined consisted of three courses in which students were co-enrolled—a typical configuration at this institution. Could the benefits of the peer cohort be retained and the drawbacks eliminated in residential FLCs if the number of courses were lowered to two?

Until now, research on FLCs has been primarily focused on how these programs affect student retention or academic performance. Such outcomes may be further enhanced by attending to the ways in which configurations of first-year student classes promote and sustain certain types of community dynamics. Future research should consider the full range of potential consequences that can emerge from assembling a homophilous group of neophyte students. Moreover, administrators, faculty, and staff participating in FLCs should be aware that these dynamics—for better or worse—are a possible byproduct of the peer cohorts produced in these programs. Preparatory workshops for faculty and staff that introduce pedagogical methods and social interaction strategies can minimize the likelihood of dysfunctional classroom social dynamics (see Lichtenstein, 2005; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Springer et al., 1999; Wheelan & Lisk, 2000).

References
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