Article

Incorporating High-Impact Practices for Retention: A Learning Community Model for Transfer Students

**Devon Thacker Thomas[1],
Eileen T. Walsh[1], Berna M. Torr[1],
Anthony S. Alvarez[1], and
Maria C. Malagon[1]**

Abstract

Transfer from one institution to another is increasingly common for students during the course of their higher education careers. The number of students moving from community colleges to four-year universities continues to rise. Transfer students report experiences of alienation, isolation, and other personal and academic challenges. To address this problematic transition, the authors propose a cohort-based learning community model that incorporates high-impact practices of first-year experience programs demonstrated to improve retention. These include enhanced advising, project-based student collaboration, application of knowledge across courses, collaboration of core faculty, peer support, and required participation in campus activities. This model, applicable to any major and particularly useful for those comprised heavily of upper division courses, is applied in a Sociology department. Findings from the pilot study suggest that students experience increased sense of community, improved academic and social integration, and great promise for retention. Ultimately, the comprehensive model and assessment plan detailed in

[1]California State University, Fullerton, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Devon Thacker Thomas, Department of Sociology, California State University, Fullerton, P.O. Box 6846, Fullerton, CA 92834 - 6846, USA.
Email: dethomas@fullerton.edu

this article can be implemented in a similar manner across disciplines and universities for a variety of student populations of concern.

Keywords

retention, transfer students, learning community, high-impact practices

This article presents a model with assessment plan for a transfer student learning community (TSLC) applicable to any major. The authors apply the model to a Sociology department at a comprehensive, regional, public university where 38% of the overall admissions are transfer students from community colleges. The sociology major comprises more than 85% transfers from community colleges. In addition, the university is a Hispanic serving institution that ranks near the top in the state and the nation for award of bachelor's degrees to Hispanics and ranks highly in the nation for award of degrees to underrepresented students. The TSLC model is aimed at improving retention and student success, overall. Herein, the authors demonstrate its application to incoming transfer students from community colleges who major in Sociology and discuss preliminary results from a pilot offering of the first semester of the TSLC model.

The students in the Sociology department, which largely offers and requires upper division courses, experience many of the barriers facing transfer students across the nation: poor academic preparation, inadequate transfer advising, and unfamiliarity with university academic expectations (Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010). In addition, because the authors' university is a commuter campus, students often have difficulty establishing social networks. They are less likely to participate in cocurricular activities and may feel less connected to the university—both risk factors for attrition (Fink, McShay, & Hernandez, 2016). Currently, the Sociology department retains approximately 90% of transfer students each year (students continue the following year or graduate). This suggests the department experiences an 8% to 10% attrition rate of students who are not retained and have not graduated. Because most transfer students need 2 years to finish, this means that between 16% and 20% are not retained over the 2-year period, and of course some take longer to finish. The TSLC is expected to improve retention of transfer students and also help improve student success of those who remain enrolled through the implementation of high-impact practices within a cohort-based, linked course learning community that moves students through four core sociology courses and one elective over three semesters.

The model, an expansion of a pilot program instituted during Fall 2017, incorporates aspects of first-year experiences demonstrated to improve

retention: enhanced advising, project-based student collaboration, application of knowledge across courses, collaboration of core faculty, and required participation in campus activities that includes attending and reflecting on plays, music productions, sporting events, and peer social activities. This article outlines the model, reports preliminary results from those enrolled in the pilot program, and specifies the plan for assessing the formal model using formative and summative evaluations.

Literature Review

Transfer students face somewhat different challenges adjusting to receiving institutions than first-time freshman. The process of transferring, often referred to as *transitional trauma*, presents challenges, and adjustment to a new campus can affect students' ability to succeed (Bennet & Okinaka, 1990). Furthermore, students who transfer from community colleges to universities are more likely to be first-generation students from lower income families (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). Ishitani and McKitrick (2010) argue that four-year universities pay more attention to first-time freshmen than to transfer students. Transfer students receive modest institutional support and are often not included in many activities on campus created to engage new students (Swing, 2000). Regardless of these challenges, the benefits from support in college are well known: students who receive institutional support and feel a sense of belonging show increased retention and grade point average (GPA; Deil-Amen, 2011; Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004).

Retaining Transfer Students

Transfer from one institution to another is increasingly common for students during the course of their higher education experience (Marling, 2013; Yeager & Pemberton, 2017). Often, this shift comes in the form of students moving from a community college to a university setting (Fink et al., 2016). Unsurprisingly, students who transfer are more diverse than first-time, full-time students in a number of ways. Transfer students more commonly are part of a "nontraditional" population; they tend to be "older, married, working full-or-part time, and are less likely to have been in the top ten (10) percent of their high school graduating class" (Jacobson et al., 2017, p. 423). Many transfer students experience *transfer shock* (Hills, 1965; Scott, Thigpin, & Bentz, 2017), characterized by an immediate drop in GPA following transfer. Transfer shock is often greater for those transferring from community colleges compared with other transfers (McGuire & Belcheir, 2013), and the vast majority of transfer students in the Sociology department transfer from community colleges.

   In addition, transfer students cite experiences of alienation and isolation (Jacobson et al., 2017). Terris (2009) suggests that transfer students are less

likely to be involved in student organizations and report having fewer informal interactions with peers and faculty, which contributes to their isolation and weaker social support networks. Ishitani and McKitrick (2010) find that transfer students are engaged in fewer cocurricular activities, such as internships, community service, and study abroad. Ultimately, considering the psychological, physical, and emotional struggles transfer students undergo, the retention of these students is, unsurprisingly, more difficult.

Research shows that for college students in general, academic momentum— the speed with which undergraduates initially progress in college—significantly affects their likelihood of completing a degree; this momentum is hindered when students have weak academic or social integration. This is particularly true for transfer students. D'Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine, and Ginn (2014) find that academic and social integration were key factors that predicted first year success of community college transfer students. In their findings on spring enrollment (i.e., first-to-second semester retention), the two positive predictors of second semester return are academic fit and participation in class. Academic fit refers to whether a school is the best match to ability, interests, and aspirations, which D'Amico et al. (2014) contend is the most consistent predictor of student retention in their study. Likewise, participation in class increases the likelihood that a student will successfully complete the course—an indicator of academic and social integration (Adelman, 2006).

Ultimately, institutional programs that encourage students to thoughtfully consider their academic choices, while also supporting active participation in classes, improve student retention. One such mechanism aimed at strengthening integration and, subsequently, retention includes participation in first-year experiences within the context of a learning community.

First-Year Experiences and Learning Communities

To meet these challenges, colleges and universities are instituting new and innovative efforts to improve transfer student retention and reduce time to graduation. A recent strategy uses learning communities, including first-year experience programs, for transfer students. Such programs include, "special orientation; interest groups; academic advising; and co-curricular orientation regarding the expectations of their new institution" (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 446).

First-year experience programs bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis. They are designed to ease the transition to college by assisting students in their academic and social development (Finley & Kuh, 2016; Hunter & Linder, 2005). Students matriculate in cohorts, providing a built-in peer group. Studies show that the highest quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies (Finley & Kuh, 2016; Kuh, 2008; Permzadian &

Credé, 2016). Although the programs vary by institution, they typically provide extra support services and are optional. Participation in first-year experiences provides positive effects on students' successful transition to college and are associated with improved likelihood of retention into the second year and academic performance while in college (Jenkins-Guarnieri, Horne, Wallis, Rings, & Vaughn, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Rogerson & Poock, 2013). Students in first-year experience programs and other learning communities meet with advisors frequently, have a clear understanding and use of resources on campus, and know about degree completion requirements (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Although learning communities are usually for first-year freshmen, one study with upper division (junior/senior) STEM students finds some positive outcomes, particularly in student retention and academic achievement, as a result of participation in learning communities (Scott et al., 2017). In addition, Fink et al. (2016) assess a learning community at a research university that focuses on community college transfer students' well-being and student success by integrating both curricular and cocurricular offerings. The two-semester learning community focuses on topics related to developing academic success skills; discovering and exploring campus resources; encouraging leadership; and developing academic, social, and civic identity. The course engaged students in 6 weeks of experiential learning, offered a faculty mentor to students, and provided additional resources: for example, free luncheons with faculty members; liaisons to advising, counseling, and career centers; and tickets to campus events. There is also some evidence that TSLCs can reveal student perceptions of inadequate campus services (Fink et al., 2016). And, learning communities may also reduce student stress by fostering a sense of community and belonging (Coston, Lord, & Monell, 2013). Similarly, high-impact practices, especially collaborative learning, also seem to contribute to increased student success within learning communities (Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015) especially for Latino students (Huerta & Bray, 2013). Paralleling this, Gonzales, Brammer, and Sawilowsky (2015) found that by fostering a sense of community between students, faculty, and staff and through requiring a cohort-based model for several courses, Latino students experienced increased retention rates.

The proposed TSLC combines elements of the designs described earlier, including mechanisms to identify shortcomings in campus services, and also includes a dynamic advising process. The authors believe this provides an effective approach to address the challenges community college transfer students experience as they transition to their 4-year institutions.

Advising Literature

Academic advising is a key and critical aspect of student success. Light (2001) concludes that "good advising may be the single most underestimated

characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. 81). Academic advising affects students' retention and time to graduation, grades, career goal setting and planning, and overall satisfaction (Kolenovic, Linderman, & Karp, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Research on retention and degree completion suggests academic advising is a possible tool for increasing graduation rates (McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005) and notes advising can serve as a protective factor against student attrition and transfer shock.

While the link between academic advising and student success is clear, students often voice dissatisfaction with the advising, particularly following transfer from a community college setting to a university (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2014). The approaches an institution or major department takes in its advising may affect this sentiment. For a variety of reasons, many institutions are forced to employ a prescriptive advising model wherein the advisor primarily tells students which courses to take and what should be included in their educational plan. While the Sociology department has historically engaged in prescriptive advising, the proposed model replaces this with a developmental, proactive, and strengths-based approach.

A developmental approach to advising positions the advisor and advisee in a collaborative partnership (Hatch & Garcia, 2017). This approach is widely preferred to the prescriptive approach, as it acknowledges the individual needs of students, encourages integration of life, career, and educational goals and provides students the opportunity to practice decision-making and problem-solving (Smith & Allen, 2006). Adding to this, proactive advising, historically known as intrusive advising, encourages advisors to address key variables of student attrition, such as chronic lack of course attendance, unsatisfactory grades or low GPA, withdrawal from courses, or the need to repeat courses, before they transpire (Swanson, Vaughn & Wilkinson, 2017; Varney, 2013). Abelman and Molina (2001) find that the more intrusion students received, the more their GPAs improved and the more likely they were to be retained at the university.

Lastly, strengths-based perspectives suggests individuals experience greater and more positive outcomes when they recognize and build on their talents instead of solely focusing on and remediating areas of weakness (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). These talents, or strengths, may include "ways of processing information, interacting with people, perceiving the world, or navigating the environment" (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005, p. 22). There is also evidence that making students more aware of their strengths can positively impact student's sense of belonging and increase the odds of retention (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). Soria, Laumer, Morrow, and Marttinen (2017) find that students who experienced strengths-based advising demonstrated lower rates of attrition and improved rates of time to graduation. The advising component of the proposed TSLC continues the shift away from prescriptive advising and towards the combined application of the developmental, proactive, and strengths-based approaches.

Proposed TSLC Model

Currently, the Sociology major does not require sequencing of core courses or require students to meet with a major advisor at any point prior to graduation. The TSLC offers transfer students a three-semester, cohort-based model for the completion of core courses and one elective. The proposed course sequencing and advising approach adopts characteristics of a learning community (e.g., taking linked courses as a group, working closely together on group projects, engaging in cocurricular activities embedded in the curriculum, and collaboration among the professors). In addition, the TSLC approach also serves as a strong first-year program for the transfer students since the model emphasizes high-impact practices that are noted for "critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, [and] collaborative learning" (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2018). Finally, the TSLC model incorporates a three-pronged advising approach. Drawing on the work of Rogerson and Poock (2013) who found that populating first-year seminars purposefully benefited retention efforts, the proposed model includes only sociology majors and each cohort has an assigned advisor for all cohort participants. Rogerson and Poock (2013) show that populating first-year programs by major fosters peer connections and populating them by shared advisor facilitates connections with faculty; both outcomes are known to improve retention and student success.

Course Sequencing in the Model

First Semester: Writing and Research Methods Courses

During the first semester, one section of writing and one section of research methods are designated for the TSLC. Courses are linked through assignments and readings as well as prior coordination between instructors on the learning objectives and skills to be demonstrated and mastered. The writing course is structured as a hybrid course and, therefore, includes both face-to-face and outside-the-classroom instruction. The writing instructor meets with the entire class one academic hour a week. The instructor uses the other hour to meet with students in small groups—one third of students each week. Thus, every third week a small group meets with the professor during assigned class time for guided peer review sessions about writing drafts, editing, organizing, and discussion of the assigned seminal sociology books. For the 2 weeks during which students do not attend the class on the second day, they attend cocurricular campus events such as musical presentations, plays, university lecture series, sporting events or group activities such as bowling on campus. Students' written reports on those experiences are part of the expository writing exercises. The cocurricular activities are key opportunities to increase student connection to the university and, crucially, to one another.

Instruction in the research methods course section includes librarian-led research orientation sessions at the campus library. The students work closely with the instructor and research librarian to find empirical and theoretical articles on their chosen topic. The instructor uses the seminal sociology books assigned in the writing class to facilitate methodological discussions and to illustrate different research designs. Students participate in hands-on research projects on a topic of their choice; the writing class includes drafts of their research reports—thus further linking courses. The course includes a visit to the campus center that conducts empirical social science research with entities outside the university, illustrating the practical application of course concepts and relevance for possible future career opportunities.

Second Semester: Statistics and Sociology for Career Success

The statistics course and Sociology for Career Success are offered to the TSLC in the second semester. Currently, students have the opportunity to take research methods and statistics in any order they prefer. Ideally, however, the statistics course builds on concepts and material students learn in research methods. As such, sequencing the courses for the TSLC provides a common foundation for learning statistics and an opportunity to cover materials in greater depth. The students' familiarity with each other is aimed at facilitating study groups and peer support for this difficult class. Students learn to use the statistical software SPSS and conduct analysis of data sets to explore a sociological question of their choice building on material in the previous two core classes and their substantive electives.

The sociology for career success course is an applied sociology course that allows for early post-baccalaureate planning. This course builds on the foundation of the other core courses through students' exploration of particular career interests. Using data analysis demonstrated in the linked statistics course, students study job projections for the career and investigate average salaries and standard requirements. Drawing on material learned in the methods course, students use content analysis to identify themes in hiring ads for their job interest, apply interview techniques to interview someone in their chosen field, and employ participant observation when they engage in job shadowing. Working in small groups, they prepare an empirically based presentation on the cluster of jobs in their chosen field.

In addition, using network analysis, they explore and build their networks, helping them to discover how both weak ties and strong ties in their social networks provide links to career opportunities. Finally, students prepare a resume, cover letter, and portfolio in preparation for job interviews. With instructors in the department as faux employers, students participate in mock interviews. Instructor(s) introduce a variety of resources on campus for the postgraduation transition (e.g., the Career Center, internship and career fairs,

alumni panels, graduate and professional school opportunities, and campus support programs). In addition to reflective assessments, students complete the Strong Inventory and the course also includes advising workshops, alumni panels, a discussion of mentorship, and career planning.

Third Semester: Social Theory

The theory class builds on the material from the first four core courses; the sequencing permits the instructor(s) to assume familiarity with core concepts from research methods and to expect a foundation in the discipline. As students approach these more advanced and difficult courses, the cohort model and small group activities of the first two semesters help develop peer-support and organic, self-selected study groups.

Their third and fourth subsequent semesters also include the completion of electives in the major, any remaining General Education requirements, and electives from other disciplines. In addition to successful completion of the sequenced courses, students meet with a Sociology advisor once a semester to complete or update an academic pathway toward graduation. In exchange for participation in the TSLC, students gain access to preregistration, reserved seats in the TSLC, and subsidized cocurricular activities. Finally, the proposed TSLC model offers courses in the same, student-preferred time slots, which provides course stability and planning advantages for the participating students.

Advising in the Model

Allen, Smith, and Muehleck (2014) find that students desire an individualized and personal meeting during advising. Accordingly, the proposed model provides an assigned academic advisor for the students in the TSLC to allow a constant and reliable relationship with a single advisor. The consistency of a single advisor also allows more thorough documentation of student goals and plans and notes the rationale for decision-making on educational and career choices. This aspect of the model also facilitates increased connectedness between student and advisor, and possibly between student and department.

The TSLC employs a developmental, proactive, and strengths-based advising model. The department mandates students in the TSLC meet with an assigned advisor the summer before classes begin at the transfer institution. Students in TSLC also must participate in major advising each semester. Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, and Pino, (2016) suggest the need for advisors to reach out to students, in lieu of expecting students to approach the advisors. Noting Upcraft and Kramer's (1995) work on first-year students, incoming transfer student members of the TSLC may not recognize barriers to their success, the need for support, or the need to seek assistance. This mandated, proactive advising prior to the first semester in TSLC and throughout the duration of

the three semesters catalyzes increased student support, provides accountability, and assures a pathway for a strong advisor–advisee relationship.

To aid in fostering a strong, positive relationship between the students and advisor, the TSLC also incorporates a strengths-based approach to advising. Students will complete a strengths assessment, the results of which the student and advisor will review together. The advisor will work to increase student awareness and appreciation of their strengths through discussions of how those strengths are seen in settings outside of academia. Then, together, the student and advisor will discuss career goals, student intellectual interests, curiosities, and which of the strengths the student wishes to develop further. Based on the student's decisions, the advisor will support the student in making an action plan, inclusive of suggested courses, cocurricular activities, and university opportunities, for success within both the major and at the university.

During the initial meeting between advisor and student, the advisor provides as much information as possible, students review and complete the informed consent form for participation in the TSLC, as well as the individualized study plan that outlines the pathway to graduation. This initial meeting also serves as an opportunity for the advisor to discuss the student's strengths and to learn more about the student's concerns transferring to the university. Subsequent advising meetings emphasize students' responsibility for course and scheduling decision-making with the advisor serving in only a support role.

In addition to the one-on-one advising meetings required through the TSLC, the department provides topically based group advising sessions and workshops within the sequenced core (required) courses. For example, group advising sessions during the second semester of the TSLC in the Sociology of Career Success course focus on reiterating educational planning and future course planning, but place more emphasis on postgraduation planning. Implementation and incorporation of advising into the TSLC sequenced core courses give participants additional support and validation in their academic planning and also allow for the advisors to focus on the strengths-based and needs-based discussions during the one-on-one meetings.

Data and Method

The proposed model aims to increase the retention rate and graduation rate of Sociology transfer students, while also reducing time to graduation. The latest available retention rate for undergraduate transfer students (2013–2017) averages 93% (see Table 1). Between 2013 and 2015, the latest for which the authors have complete data, 55% of Fall 2013 undergraduate transfer students graduated within 2 years. Seventy-eight percent graduated in 4 years (excluding 2015 for which we do not have 4-year data yet). Although this exceeds the graduation rates for both the college more generally (see Table 2) and a statewide graduation initiative goal, the authors' focus is continual improvement of

Table 1. Retention Rates for Fall Entering Undergraduate Transfers, Department of Sociology, 2013–2016.

	Retention in subsequent years					
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Year of entry						
2013	100	92	90	87	84	
2014		100	94	88	87	
2015			100	97	92	
2016				100	89	
2017 TSLC pilot					100	96

Note. TSLC = transfer student learning community.

Table 2. Two- and 4-Year Graduation Rates for Fall Entering Undergraduate Transfers, Department of Sociology and College Overall, 2013–2015.

	Sociology		College	
	2-Year graduation	4-Year graduation	2-Year graduation	4-Year graduation
Year of entry				
2013	55	81	43	77
2014	47	77	47	73
2015	55	NA	47	

departmental successes in student retention (i.e., 2- and 4-year matriculation rates) by employing student-centered, innovative practices like the TSLC.

Descriptive Statistics for the Pilot Learning Community

An analysis of institutional data reveals that for the university as a whole, approximately 59% of undergraduate transfers were women, and 63% were a member of an underrepresented racial or ethnic group. Transfer students, who make up a majority of the major, are more likely to come from these groups. The Sociology department mirrors the institutional trends as Fall 2017 records show that 79% of the Sociology majors were female and 62% were Latino.

A total of 48 students were enrolled in one or both of the two pilot courses. About one fourth of these students subsequently enrolled in another class that is part of the proposed sequence in the following semester. The students in the pilot courses were more likely to be both female (81%) and from an underrepresented group (71% defined as either Latino or African American) than Sociology majors overall. In addition, 78% of those in the pilot courses identified as first-generation college students. In fact, these students were much more likely to come from households where either their father (49%) or mother (51%) had

not finished high school, versus one in which a parent is a college graduate (6.4% and 2.2%, respectively). A substantial number are students with financial needs, as 74% received Pell grants. The pilot program appears to be serving those students most likely to benefit from support. The expectation is that the TSLC would also serve primarily first-generation and underrepresented students.

Assessment of GPA, Retention, and Course Enrollment for the Pilot Learning Community

Both quantitative and qualitative data suggest that the pilot test was promising and would be even stronger if implemented as a formal three-semester cohort learning community. For the pilot cohort, the average GPA in the writing course was 3.44 compared with a department average for that course of 3.2. However, the average GPA in the pilot cohort methods course was 2.83 compared with a department average for that course of 2.96. The overall semester GPA and cumulative GPAs were slightly higher for the pilot group. The Fall 2017 semester GPA was 3.05 for those in the pilot classes compared with 3.02 for all transfers who entered in Fall 2017. Similarly, the cumulative GPA for those in the pilot group was 3.20 compared with 3.16 for all transfers who entered in 2017. The pilot program does not include all of the high-impact practices outlined in the formal TSLC; therefore, the authors expect even greater results from the formal model.

The preliminary data represent evidence of encouraging retention in the limited time frame available—all of the students enrolled in the pilot courses were also enrolled in courses for Spring 2018. Second-year enrollments of transfer students show higher attrition (11%) in the university population, whereas for the TSLC pilot, overall, 96% of students were enrolled (see Table 2). This is an improvement over the department's *typical* retention rate and suggests the TSLC is likely to help with retention going forward. The potential of taking the theory course with other members of the TSLC community may provide incentive not only to continue to work towards graduation but also to enroll in the TSLC theory course specifically.

A total of 12 students who enrolled in one or more of the pilot courses enrolled in the career course offered in Spring 2018 even though the course was not formally part of the learning community. Given that the enrollment rate for all Sociology majors (total 958) into this class is roughly 4% for Spring 2018, the 25% from the pilot group is significantly higher and suggests that students in the pilot use resources in the learning community to their advantage. Specifically, it is indicative that a sense of community led students in the initial courses to discuss and also enroll in this course together.

Another six students enrolled in statistics together. The instructor for that course provided some qualitative evidence that the TSLC improves a sense of community. The instructor noted that students identified themselves as part of

the cohort. The instructor observed how well they worked together and that they *took ownership of their education* in a way he or she does not normally see. This is indicative of the *development* theory of learning communities discussed by Zhao and Kuh (2004, p. 117). Perhaps, most promising, the sense of community translates into higher levels of performance. The instructor noted that he or she was able to increase the difficulty of the work assigned in that course because of the students' ability to meet that higher standard. In part, this may be reflective of Coston et al.'s (2013) findings suggesting that participation in learning communities leads to a reduction of both academic and personal stressors. Lower experiences of stress allow students to more productively engage with and focus on course materials and each other.

There are already encouraging, though not definitive, signs of the effectiveness of the TSLC. The GPAs of cohort members are generally similar to or slightly higher than other students in the department and with a complete and formal implementation of the proposed high-impact practices, student success in these classes is expected to increase. Early results on attrition are favorable, and there are also signs of a sense of community emerging, with students identifying themselves as part of a cohort, enrolling in noncommunity courses to take with one another, and working together to complete course assignments.

Plan for Assessment of GPA, Retention, Graduation, and Other Factors for the Proposed Learning Community

While the pilot considered student demographics and outcomes for any student who enrolled in at least one of the proposed TSLC courses, to be a member of the TSLC, students must enroll and follow the sequencing of all proposed courses. After the first year of the pilot, the authors administered an online Qualtrics survey consisting mainly of open-ended questions about their experience in the pilot courses. The following is a discussion of these data and some of the themes that emerge from those responses. After the first semester of the TSLC, the authors plan to conduct focus groups with the participants to describe their experiences and concerns moving forward and to administer a refined and expanded version of the online Qualtrics survey. Building on the department's previous robust assessment efforts and on best practices in assessment of learning communities (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2018; Iowa State University Learning Communities, 2015; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), this also provides an opportunity to construct and refine indicators for a survey that will assess the students' experiences across each subsequent semester.

The pilot survey was distributed to all 48 students who were enrolled in one or both of the pilot courses in Fall 2017. A total of 14 students responded (29%) to the survey and 11 students (23%) provided answers to the survey questions,

while 3 declined. Of those who answered the questions, there were some clear themes that emerged.

Five of the students mentioned that it was helpful to be explicitly introduced to campus resources, such as the library, writing center, databases, and so forth, and did not assume that they already knew about them. They also reported making use of those campus resources. One student's comment represents this theme:

> Other classes assumed that we knew the resources available to us, such as the Sociology writing and statistics tutors, academic advising, resource centers for veterans, dreamers, etc. In the transfer only course, [the professor] explained not only what the resources were but where they were, so long as they were relevant.

Three students explicitly mentioned that they had formed strong friendships or social networks with other students in the pilot class. For example, one student noted that she had gotten an internship on the basis of a connection made through one of the other students in the class. While another said,

> The main resource I used, and still use, is a pretty extensive network [of] classmates that I bonded with over the two classes. I use them for study groups, help choosing classes, group projects in other classes that we have together, etc. Again in my 8 years of college, I've never formed a network like this with classmates before and it's amazingly helpful.

Three students noted that the transfer only classes seemed more welcoming and more of a community. While two students explicitly mentioned using material from their research methods class in their statistics class the following semester. Finally, 7 of the 12 students who responded said they would recommend participation in the program to other students because it was helpful. As one student expressed:

> It's so helpful and you don't feel like you're walking through this 2 year transfer journey alone. This program gives a solid foundation to make you feel like you're part of a group and share a ton of things in common.

The expanded survey to be administered to those in the formal TSLC program is an online Qualtrics survey given in the students' classrooms (research methods, sociological writing, and statistics are all taught in computer labs). The survey will focus particularly on measures of connectedness at different levels: at the level of the university—how aware are students of campus resources, how frequently do they use these resources, and how much support and satisfaction do they feel. At the level of the department, the authors will measure satisfaction with advising, knowledge of major requirements, and progress towards

major-related career goals. Finally, at the level of student social networks, the authors will measure engagement with peers, feelings of community within the classroom, cooperation on classroom performance (e.g., study groups), and achievement of student learning outcomes.

Part of the informed consent that students sign during their initial advising meeting is permission to allow us to match their Qualtrics survey data with the available institutional information, such as grades, withdrawals from courses, and repeated courses. Using institutionally produced data on student success and retention—GPA, retention, repeated courses, and time to graduation—the authors can then investigate how these qualitative and quantitative measures correlate with student success. This also allows us to compare with *control* groups: either (a) students in different sections of the same courses who are not part of the TSLC or (b) transfer students in the major who are not part of the TSLC. In the spring semester, we will give all TSLC participants access to the anonymized survey data collected after the fall semester so the TSLC statistics class may conduct their own analyses, adding an experiential component to that class.

Upon completion of the TSLC sequence, the authors will examine measures of student success (GPA, time to degree, and repeat courses), retention, student connectedness and engagement (including activities, peer engagement, and support) for first the Fall 2017 pilot group and the subsequent Fall 2018 cohort. The authors expect to conduct assessments using a variety of tools to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the learning community. The authors conduct a comparison of their progress to those of other transfer students in the major and to recent sociology graduates who entered as transfer students in the previous 5 years. This allows a comparison of the progress of TSLC cohort to all transfers to gauge the success of retention, time to graduation, and achievement gap.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the TSLC model, the authors propose combines components of existing models with proven positive outcomes with new and innovative mechanisms based on empirical research about improving student success and retention. The TSLC model holds great promise not only as an institutional mechanism for aiding students during their transition from the community college setting to the 4-year university context but also as a tool for strengthening academic momentum toward retention and, ultimately, graduation.

Findings from the pilot study of the TSLC show great promise for student retention and success. Similar to what Coston et al. (2013) found, the pilot TSLC discussed here suggests that participants who self-identified as part of a cohort developed a sense of community and made connections with one another beyond what normally occurred in other classes. In addition, following the first

semester, students took initiative to enroll in noncommunity courses with one another. Likewise, while in courses the students felt comfortable working together to complete course assignments, which suggests efforts at both academic and social integration. While data for retention into the second year (third semester) of this cohort is not yet available, the attrition of students who chose to participate in the cohort-based pilot courses reveals promising results from Semester 1 to Semester 2 within the initial year and from Year 1 to Year 2. Students also reported that the campus resources they were introduced to as well as the course material were helpful for subsequent classes.

In addition, as extant research shows that first-generation and underrepresented student populations often experience the greatest challenges during their educational pathways to graduation, the proposed TSLC has particularly strong implications for these groups. Given the Sociology major is largely composed of women, minorities, and first-generation students, the findings from the pilot indicate positive outcomes for catalyzing retention and academic momentum in these groups. Our findings are consistent with previous research that suggests that collaborative learning is particularly beneficial for underrepresented students (Huerta & Bray, 2013). Thus, while the TSLC is promising as a tool for college and university students generally, it suggests particular benefit for traditionally underserved populations, such as women, minorities, and underrepresented college students.

While collectively the strengths of the model proposed are supported through the pilot study, the findings are not definitive. Not only has the complete timeframe for the sequencing of courses not yet occurred (only two semesters have been completed to date), but students were not required to follow the sequencing of all TSLC courses to have their data considered in these preliminary findings. In addition, students did not have to engage in once-a-semester advising, courses were not linked (via scaffolded material), and cocurricular activities were not actively integrated into the pilot courses.

Despite the limitations, the pilot does suggest many advantages to students. Ultimately, perhaps the greatest strength is that it is not discipline-specific and though the authors implement it for transfer students, it could be implemented in a similar manner as a learning community for first-time freshman and other populations for whom the transition to higher education, whether at a community college or 4-year institution, is known to be difficult (e.g., students who are first generation, low income, or other underrepresented populations). By identifying specific challenges to a given population, as the authors have done with the required major courses for transfer students, institutions can more assuredly develop avenues for students to successfully matriculate and, ultimately, graduate.

The proposed model is based on proven strategies of improving student success and retention and, therefore, other colleges or universities could implement similar programs and expect similarly positive results. Once a complete cycle of

the TSLC is implemented and assessed, assuming positive outcomes for its students, the Sociology department plans to leverage the flexibility and proven benefits of this model to increase access to this approach and, ultimately, improve student success and retention in other targeted populations.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Author Biographies

Devon Thacker Thomas: is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at California State University, Fullerton. She received her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Colorado at Boulder, where she also received a Certificate in College Teaching. Her primary research tract employs an intersectional lens to examine gender-based violence , law, and policing. She uses qualitative methods to examine the (un)intended consequences of state law and policy on different groups and stakeholders. She also practices the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) wherein she engages in the scholarly examination of student learning through varied means. She serves as an undergraduate advisor and is the assigned advisor for the first cohort of the new Transfer Student Learning Community.

Eileen T. Walsh: is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at California State University, Fullerton. She holds a PhD in sociology from the University of Southern California with a research focus on race, class, and gender. Interested in K-12 educational inequalities, she is a former elected Member of the Governing boards of both Laguna Beach Unified School District and the Capo-Laguna Regional Occupational Programs. Prior to her return to the academy, she spent twenty years in Orange County government conducting evaluation research, managing the medical care delivery in correctional facilities, and directing administrative functions and infrastructure finance for the Board of Supervisors. She teaches one of the required courses in the Transfer Student Learning Community model.

Berna M. Torr: is associate professor in the Department of Sociology at California State University, Fullerton. She received her PhD in Sociology from Brown University, where she was also a trainee at the interdisciplinary Population Studies and Training Center. Her research focuses on immigration and well-being. She is also an applied demographer and conducts original research used for departmental assessment and curriculum development in conjunction with graduate students in the department. She teaches courses on demography, family, statistics, and research methods at the graduate and undergraduate levels, as well as the career success class that is now part of the new Transfer Student Learning Community.

Anthony S. Alvarez: is an assistant professor of Sociology at California State University, Fullerton. He received his PhD in Sociology from UCLA. His work is primarily focuses on economic sociology, poverty/inequality, and social policy. His current research is on how households use payday loans and how these loans fit into their broader pattern of financial behaviors and beliefs, particularly how they impact patterns of financial support among friends and family. He serves as an undergraduate advisor and will be an assigned advisor for future cohorts of Transfer Student Learning Communities through the department.

Maria C. Malagon: is an assistant professor in Sociology at California State University, Fullerton. Dr. Malagon has a PhD in Social Sciences and Comparative Education, with an emphasis in Race and Ethnic Studies from UCLA. Her research examines various segments along the Latina/o educational pipeline, specifically by using feminist analysis to interrogate how discourses of racialized femininities and masculinities manifest in educational policy and practice. She has a professional background in gender education programs and juvenile "delinquency" prevention and intervention programs. Her published work can be found in several education, social justice, and legal studies journals. She serves as an undergraduate advisor and will be an assigned advisor for future cohorts of Transfer Student Learning Communities through the department.