Together We Stand: Exploring Learning Communities in Trades Programs

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of learning communities on the educational experiences of traditional and non-traditional students enrolled in trades programs at Vancouver Island University. Literature on learning communities suggests that enhancing cohort enrollment to strengthen social and academic bonds between students, instructors, and the institution can significantly improve the educational experiences of all students. A survey and a series of individual interviews was used to assess the extent to which learning communities existed in trades programs and what their effects were on students’ social and academic experiences.

Participant responses revealed that learning communities do exist in varying forms from program to program and that many students felt these communities were beneficial. At the same time, there was evidence of a lack of cohesive policy when it came to using teaching strategies to enhance learning communities. There were also indications that a minority of students (15%) did not always feel included in these communities. For those students who did feel included, some expressed dissatisfaction with how group work was handled, and how non-participation and poor attitudes of some students affected the community as a whole.

Suggestions for building learning communities within trades program cohorts are discussed including the use of Universal Design Principles, to create flexible and equitable learning, and the use of Indigenous talking circles to build community.
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Chapter One: Problem to be Investigated

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of traditional and non-traditional students in post-secondary trades programs and to discover if the use of learning communities in these programs was contributing to student engagement and persistence. Another goal of the study was to examine in what way learning communities were being used and whether there was any relation between types of teaching strategies chosen and student satisfaction.

At the time of the study, post-secondary campuses in British Columbia were experiencing a rapid change in the make-up of their student populations. Dwindling populations of high school graduates in local catchment areas had resulted in administrators needing to become creative in how they recruited sufficient numbers of students to fill their programs (Vancouver Island University, 2014). This meant turning their marketing focus to non-traditional groups such as international students, students with disabilities and neurological deficits, and First Nations students (Vancouver Island University, 2014). Consequently, significant increases occurred in these groups of students in trades classrooms, and these increases are predicted to climb for the next several years while potential catchment recruitment levels remain low (Vancouver Island University, 2014). The instructors teaching these new class configurations are on the front lines of the challenge to provide a rich and meaningful educational experience for all students, while striving to meet the needs of students with poor English skills, significant mental and physical disabilities, and mental health issues. The personal circumstances of non-traditional students have the potential to amplify the normal anxiety and stress that most students feel when embarking on their post-secondary experience, to the point that the ability of non-
traditional students to persist and succeed in their programs is significantly impeded (Barnhill, 2014).

When I examined the literature on student integration and attrition, I found that most of it focused on academic institutions with very little research having been done on how these issues manifested themselves in trades programs. Given that trades programs are experiencing increasing rates of growth in non-traditional student groups, I saw value in discovering how these groups were succeeding and whether the use of some of the current theories of student integration and learning communities might improve their educational experiences and their rates of persistence.

**Justification of the Study**

There is an impressive body of research on the reasons for student attrition and persistence in postsecondary education. The two major theorists in this area were William Spady (1970, 1971) and Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987, 1997). Both researchers framed their work using Durkheim’s (1897) work on suicide, which suggested that rates of suicides increased as social cohesion and integration decreased.

Spady (1970, 1971) developed a model of student attrition suggesting that family background, which included variables such as socioeconomic status, parental education, and family relationships, was the major influence on academic performance and normative congruence (fitting in with the prevailing moral and social environment). In turn, successes or struggles with academic performance and normative congruence influenced grade performance, intellectual development, and development of supportive friendships. Finally, these variables influenced social integration, satisfaction, institutional commitments, and ultimately, the decision to drop out (Spady, 1970, 1971).

Tinto (1975) framed his research from an integration point of view. His model suggested that a student’s initial decision to attend college was a combination of family background,
individual attributes and pre-college schooling. These three variables affected the level of goal
commitment and institutional commitment that the student experienced when commencing his or
her studies. Grade performance and intellectual development determined the level of academic
integration achieved by the student, while peer group interactions and faculty interactions
determined the level of social integration achieved. The level of academic integration
experienced either increased or decreased the original level of goal commitment, while the level
of social integration experienced either increased or decreased the original level of institutional
commitment. According to Tinto (1975), a decrease in one or both of these commitments could
lead to a decision to drop out or to persist.

Other studies have built on and expanded the work of Tinto and Spady. These include
Kelly (2008), Thomas (2000), and Tinto (1997). Kelly used an action research approach and the
Tinto Model of Student Persistence to examine how at-risk college students viewed their social
and academic integration during their college freshman year. His main findings (student lack of
preparedness for rigor in college courses, lack of student contact with their teachers, and
students’ struggles with college freedom and social life versus academic discipline) aligned with
rates of attrition within his sample (Kelly, 2008).

Thomas (2000) used social network theory to map the various social and academic
networks constructed by freshmen college students at a small, four-year liberal arts college in the
Western United States. Thomas used Tinto’s Student Integration Model (Tinto, Russo, & Kadel,
1994) as a framework to develop a model to track a large number of variables and how they
related to each other. Thomas’ major finding was that academic integration had a net larger
effect on student persistence than social integration. Thomas (2000) was also able to
demonstrate the types and sizes of social groups that were most conducive to continuing student
persistence.
Tinto (1997) built upon his Model of Student Persistence by conducting a study of classroom communities in a Seattle community college. Here he used both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the impact of using a Coordinated Studies Program (CSP) on student persistence. This program enrolled a cohort of students in several courses with an overarching theme rather than stand-alone courses. Tinto also included a comparison group of students enrolled in stand-alone courses. The study found much greater rates of persistence in the CSP students than the comparison group. The other major outcome of this study was an expansion of Tinto’s original Model of Student Persistence which had separated social and academic integration into two separate entities. For this newer model, Tinto (1997) hypothesized that social and academic integration could work in tandem with each other if classroom methods like CSP were implemented.

When examining the causes of student attrition, it was important to identify and try to understand the experiences of student groups who were at greater risk of dropping out compared to the rest of the student population. In this study, these groups were students with disabilities (both physical and learning), students with neurological deficits, and international students who struggled with English language and literacy issues. Each of these groups faced a unique set of challenges when entering a college program that a typical student would not have encountered to the same degree. These may have included encountering physical barriers and restraints to movement, difficulties with course material, difficulties with organizing course work, social isolation and hostility, and having varying ability to communicate with others.

Siperstein (1988) stated that students with learning disabilities had problems with social isolation in college, and struggled to develop relationships with their instructors. Other research reported that learning disabled students needed more support from friends and campus organizations than the rest of the student population (Cosden & McNamara, 1997; Ryan, Nolan, Keim, & Madsen, 1999). Gobbo and Shmuly (2014) noticed several categories of academic
difficulties experienced by students with autism spectrum disorder that included lack of social understanding and social behaviour, deficits in critical thinking, and anxiety that was crippling enough to impede learning. International students struggled to communicate verbally with their peers and their instructors, and tended to have lower academic scores because of insufficient written English skills, all the while struggling to adapt to a new culture, and feeling homesick for the country they left behind (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008).

Two common and ongoing experiences that stand out for these diverse groups are depression and anxiety resulting from the dual stressors of social isolation and academic struggle that might not significantly diminish with the passing of time. These are the students who need help in becoming academically and socially integrated into their campus society (DaDeppo, 2009; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Sawir et al., 2008). Participating in learning communities is one way to help these vulnerable groups of students to achieve that integration. Although a learning community is intended to strengthen academic integration, by its very nature it also strengthens social integration because it promotes social interaction among students and faculty both in and out of the classroom (DaDeppo, 2009). Several studies have shown that college programs that actively use learning communities, demonstrate higher levels of student persistence across all student population groups than programs that do not use this strategy (DaDeppo, 2009; Engstrom, 2008; Tinto, 1997). All participants interviewed for this study were enrolled in cohort style programs which fit Engstrom’s (2008) definition of a basic learning community.

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

Given the increasing enrollment rate of non-traditional students at Vancouver Island University (VIU) and the higher rates of attrition found among these groups, I decided to investigate the following question: How does the use of learning communities affect the educational experiences of traditional and non-traditional trades students?
I hoped my research would describe the types of social ties being forged between students in trades programs. I also believed I would discover that the widespread use of cohorts in trades programs at Vancouver Island University would help to increase academic success across all groups but particularly in higher risk groups of students.

**Definition of Terms**

The use of a *learning community* in the classroom has increased in response to the growing diversity of classroom populations (Engstrom, 2008). A learning community can take many forms but its basic structure is to have a group of students taking two or more thematically linked courses as a cohort. In addition to this format, specific pedagogical methods such as faculty-student mentoring, group discussions, collaborative learning, and active learning will strengthen the learning community (Engstrom, 2008). *Educational experience* in this study referred to the level of academic success of the student in their respective program, and to the level of integration they experienced with their fellow students, their instructors, and the institution. A *non-traditional student* was a student from another country where English was not the first language, who was enrolled in Culinary Arts Foundation, Culinary Arts Diploma, Professional Baking and Pastry Arts Foundation, Electrical Foundation, or Hairdressing Foundation. Also included in this group were students enrolled in any of the aforementioned trades, who were diagnosed with any mental health or neurological disability, or learning disability.

Research took place at VIU, located in Nanaimo, British Columbia, on the west coast of Canada. VIU is a mid-sized university that offers Master Degree programs, Bachelor Degree programs, diploma programs, and a variety of trades programs. VIU first opened its doors at its current location in 1946 as a trades and vocational training centre and has evolved since that time into a special purpose teaching university.
Brief Overview of Study

This study used a mixed method design to examine student learning experiences and the use of learning communities in post-secondary trades at Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo, British Columbia. The study was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Board of Vancouver Island University. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Dean of Trades at VIU, and the Chairs of the programs involved.

Part one of the study consisted of a cross-sectional paper survey (Appendix A) that was administered to willing, anonymous participants and consisted of four sections. Section A used Likert scale questions to ask students about their goal commitment and institutional commitment. Section B used Likert scale questions to ask students about their perceptions of the learning communities that they were participating in. Both sections provided space at the end for participants to comment in an open-ended fashion on any of the previous questions. Section C asked participants to indicate whether they had a learning or neurological disability, or were an international student. This section also provided space for these self-identified individuals to elaborate on their experiences in their program. Section D was printed on a separate sheet of paper and asked students to participate in a post-survey interview, and to provide their contact details if they were willing to do so. The paper surveys were returned to drop boxes located at the various program locations. After the surveys were collected, a research assistant separated the interview invitations from the surveys in order to preserve participant anonymity.

Part two of the study consisted of interviews (Appendix B) with four of the surveyed participants. Interview questions asked about student perspectives on academic integration and their educational experiences in their programs.

The quantitative question results from the survey were tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative survey questions and the interview questions were coded for emergent themes.
Chapter Two: Review of Literature

This study examines the use of cohorts or learning communities in trades programs at VIU and their effect on the educational experiences of traditional and non-traditional student groups. One result of cohesive learning communities may be increased rates of academic success, which in turn can increase program persistence. The major original theorists to examine post-secondary persistence and attrition were Spady (1970, 1971), and Tinto (1975). Both researchers used Durkheim’s study on suicide which proposed that rates of suicide increased as social cohesion and integration decreased (1897).

Spady (1970, 1971) suggested that student attrition was dependent on family background, which was influenced by variables such as socioeconomic status, parental education, and family relationships. These variables influenced academic performance and normative congruence (ability to fit in with prevailing moral and social environments), which in turn, influenced grade performance, intellectual development, and formation of supportive friendships. Ultimately, these variables influenced social integration and satisfaction, institutional commitment, and the decision to persist or drop out (Spady, 1970, 1971).

Tinto’s (1975) literature review of research on college dropout rates marked the beginning of his support of the cohort or learning community model of learning in post-secondary education. Many more researchers in this field have built upon Tinto’s work or have collaborated with him to explore various aspects of his research (DaDeppo, 2009; Kelly, 2008; Thomas, 2000; Tinto, 1997). In his literature review, Tinto (1975) examined the components of academic and social integration that he thought were mainly responsible for a student’s persistence or attrition. Although he readily acknowledged that both factors could influence a student’s decision to persist or drop out, Tinto considered these two factors to be separate entities. Academic integration was determined by evaluating grade performance, goal commitment, and institutional commitment. Social integration was determined by how often
campus social systems were used by the student and by how many peer relationships they had (Tinto, 1975).

However, as time went on, it became clear to Tinto, and others, that academic and social integration were not necessarily separate entities on the college campus (Sawir et. al, 2008; Tinto, 1997). By using the cohort model of enrollment, a classroom could become a place that engaged students both academically and socially. In turn, this has prompted an examination of pedagogies that enhance the cohort experience as well as studies looking at how learning communities affect outcomes for at-risk student groups (DaDeppo, 2009; Engstrom, 2008; Tinto, 1997).

**Student Attrition and Persistence in Post-Secondary Education**

Tinto (1975) conceived a model of college dropout synthesized from his review of literature on the subject. Tinto theorized that a student would enrol in a college with a certain amount of goal commitment and institutional commitment based on his or her family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling. Goal commitment would be strengthened or weakened by the student’s grade performance, and intellectual development, which determined the level of academic integration. Institutional commitment would be strengthened or weakened by the number and quality of peer-group interactions and faculty interactions, which determined the level of social integration. Low levels of either goal commitment or institutional commitment (or low levels of both) could lead to dropout (Tinto, 1975).

What was interesting about Tinto’s (1975) model were his choices of what constituted social integration: namely peer-group and faculty interactions. Tinto defined peer-group interaction as being the number of friends or acquaintances a student might have on campus, and the influence these friends might have on the student. Positive interactions could be with other students who had similar academic goals. Negative interactions might lead to excessive
socializing that lowered grade performance. Tinto specifically identified fraternities as a source of negative social interactions. Faculty interaction could be characterized by whether an instructor knew student names, smiled at students, was approachable, and offered assistance. For Tinto, peer-group interactions took place mainly on the campus at large with very little consideration given to social interaction taking place in the classroom. Even the student-faculty interactions were frequently described as taking place in extra-curricular settings on campus (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto’s model was important for clearly defining variables that could lead to a student’s success or failure. His model was also significant because his depiction of peer-group interactions occurring outside the classroom may have helped to draw attention to the difficulties faced by at-risk groups of students. The social and physical barriers that were being encountered by these students on their campuses would certainly have hindered their social integration and may have been responsible for higher rates of dropout in these groups. For example, an international student who did not speak English fluently, or a student with a mental health disability, may have had a difficult time making friends or participating in campus social events. The feeling of social isolation could have had an effect on academic performance which may have led to dropout or transfer to another institution. From these types of situations, the idea of forging social bonds and interactions within the classroom setting, by enhancing cohort enrollment, developed as a way to improve student retention.

An example of research that built on the work of both Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto (1975, 1994) was a doctoral dissertation by Kelly (2008) that used action research to address the problem of college student retention. Kelly stated that about half of all college students, at the institution he studied, failed to obtain their undergraduate degree within six years of their original admission date. Kelly remarked on the extensive literature that had been written on this subject but noted that this research had not been successful in determining the exact cause or
causes for student departure. Kelly cited the work of Tinto (1994) and Spady (1971) who both stated that the complexity of reasons that caused students to leave college early made implementing effective policies to prevent this attrition difficult.

Kelly (2008) examined the problem of student attrition through two lenses. First, he used the theoretical framework of the Tinto model of student departure to study how at-risk college students viewed their social and academic integration during their first year. Second, Kelly examined the perceptions of faculty involved with a student retention program at the target institution, where Kelly himself was an instructor. One of the outcomes Kelly was hoping to establish was the effectiveness of the Tinto (1994) model of student attrition as a predictor of student attrition rates in his target group of students, and within the target institution, based on the unique characteristics of the students and the institution. Kelly noted that no action research studies on this particular application of Tinto’s model existed at that time and he hoped to fill that void.

Kelly’s (2008) major research question was “to what degree does the Tinto model of student persistence predict institutional success for at risk college students?” (p. 71). Kelly further sub-divided this question into eight related research questions. Four questions were asked of the student participants of the study and the other four questions targeted the faculty administrating the student retention program. Students were asked for their perceptions of their own academic and social integration during their first year and what recommendations they might have for improving the student retention program. Administrators were asked how well they thought these students fit in socially and academically and what their suggestions were for improving the student retention program (Kelly, 2008).

Kelly (2008) conducted his study over a period of two consecutive college semesters. He obtained his student sample by asking for volunteers from the one year program for at-risk students at the target institution. Kelly purposefully selected his sample using criteria that
included age (18 years or older), at risk groups such as minorities or first generation students, and students with academic scores below the institution’s normal acceptance criteria. The faculty sample was drawn from an institution based task force created to deal with student retention. Kelly’s research methods included semi-structured individual interview questions for both the student group and the administrators (conducted three times) and focus groups (conducted once) for both students and faculty. Kelly used qualitative measures to ensure valid and reliable results including persistent observation through deliberate research engagement with study subjects, member checking (all participants read and commented on data collected), and triangulation (data collected in both individual interviews and focus groups, coding for emerging themes, and cross-checking with administrative data). Kelly felt that his own employment at the target institution and the relationships he formed with his student sample put him at risk of bias. This concern influenced his decision to use member checking as well as multiple methods of collecting data (Kelly, 2008).

I thought that Kelly was successful in collecting valid data to answer his research questions. His main findings (student lack of preparedness for rigor in college courses, lack of student contact with their teachers, and students’ struggles with college freedom and social life versus academic discipline) aligned with rates of attrition within his sample. As a result of Kelly’s research, the target institution made several improvements aimed at improving student retention. These included re-designing their College Survival Skills course, making an effort to place first-year students in less rigorous courses with more “student-friendly” instructors, and creating learning communities, where blocks of students were enrolled in the same courses and housed in the same area of the dormitories (Kelly, 2008).

Kelly’s study was useful for my own work on the social experiences of non-traditional college students because of how he applied Tinto’s body of work on student attrition to his own research. I also thought Kelly’s observations regarding social experiences for his sample were
very relevant. Some students were social butterflies while others were quite withdrawn. Both extremes appeared to be factors leading to those students dropping out.

Thomas (2000) was another researcher who utilised Tinto’s work to examine student persistence and attrition. Thomas used social network theory to map the various social and academic networks constructed by freshmen college students at a small, four year liberal arts college in the Western United States. Thomas utilised Tinto’s (1994) Student Integration Model as a framework to develop a model to track a large number of variables and how they related to each other. In particular, Thomas was interested in discovering the effects of structural integration on student commitment, persistence, and intention. While the study lacked an explicit research question, Thomas did state that his was an exploratory study using quantitative measures to determine subgroup membership, types of relationships within those subgroups and how those relationships impacted student persistence. In carrying out this study, Thomas hoped to begin the process of addressing the difficulties of measuring something as complex as peer culture and its effect on student persistence.

To this end, Thomas (2000) used the 1992-1993 academic year to collect longitudinal data from all first-time freshmen at the target institution. All students completed the initial survey, which was administered during mandatory orientation activities in August, 1992. This survey had questions relating to student commitment to educational goals, first year expectations, and confidence in their choice of college. A second questionnaire was mailed to all the same students who were still enrolled in April, 1993 which elicited information on students’ social networks, and their level of academic and social integration in the target institution. This survey received an 85% useable response rate from 322 students (original enrollment was 379). Finally, enrollment data was collected from the registrar in the fall of 1993 to determine which students had returned for another year (Thomas, 2000).
Thomas (2000) had previously constructed a model using seven endogenous variables taken from Tinto’s Student Integration Model (academic and social integration, year-end GPA, goal and institutional commitment, persistence intention, and persistence), five exogenous variables (centrality, percent of ties within group, out-degree, in-degree, and percent of ties within class), and five background characteristics that were used to analyze membership of cliques (gender, race, aptitude, goal and institutional commitment). Thomas hypothesized that the data he collected would fit into this model and would demonstrate the effects of social networks on student persistence as discussed in Tinto’s Student Integration Model.

Many of Thomas’ (2000) results did align with Tinto’s model. For example, academic integration had a direct impact on intentions (of returning to school for another year) and persistence (actually returning for another year of school). According to Thomas’ model, this meant that academic integration had a net larger effect on persistence than social integration. Academic integration also had a nontrivial impact on GPA which also positively affected persistence. However, there were some results that differed from Tinto’s model. There was no link found between academic integration and institutional commitment. Goal commitment appeared to have no impact on intentions (Thomas, 2000).

When analyzing actual social network effects on persistence, Thomas (2000) used a program called LISREL 8 to eliminate non-significant social paths from his model, thus rendering it somewhat different from Tinto’s model. Thomas’ analysis suggested that students who were tightly bound to small peer groups (ten or less) were more reliant on these groups for social and academic support which in turn resulted in lower levels of academic and social satisfaction, leading to lessened persistence. On the other hand, students who had a higher degree of centrality (greater degrees of connectedness to peers who were also highly connected outside their peer groups) were able to move in and out of other peer groups with ease, ensuring access to both social and academic resources. Thomas’ results also suggested that peer groups
functioned best at a mid-level of social connectedness. If the group was too small, there was a paucity of social and academic resources. However, too much social connectedness was found to have a negative effect, with the social activities of college distracting too much from the academic responsibilities (Thomas, 2000).

Thomas’ (2000) study had a large sample with an excellent response rate (in fact it was almost an entire population) which I thought gave strength to the study’s findings. The data that Thomas’ model generated was extremely thorough and clearly showed how the variables affected persistence. I thought this was an important study because it used quantitative methods to measure student integration and persistence, which was a very difficult and complex phenomenon to quantify. The surveys that were used for this study were not published although all of the resulting data were. One reason for this omission could have been that the second survey asked students to list the names of people in their peer groups and publication of this information would have violated confidentiality. This study was useful to me because of the long list of variables used to measure student persistence, some of which I used to construct survey and interview questions for my research. Also, Thomas’ study was inspiring to me because of the enormous amount of information he was able to extrapolate from two surveys.

Tinto (1997) once again addressed student integration and its effects on academic persistence and attrition by conducting a study of classroom communities in a Seattle community college. Tinto stated that although institutions had not ignored the classroom as an arena for improving student integration, the bulk of integration activities were organized by student affairs and conducted on the campus at large. Tinto suggested students are at highest risk of dropout in their first year of higher education and therefore efforts to promote student integration were best focused on academic classroom activities that promoted a feeling of inclusion.

Tinto (1997) used a quantitative longitudinal panel survey and a qualitative case study to examine the impact of a Coordinated Studies Program (CSP) on student persistence. This
program enrolled a cohort of students in several courses with an overarching theme rather than stand-alone courses. CSP students shared curriculum, and also shared learning experiences by participating in cooperative learning activities which required active involvement with their peers. CSP faculty worked together to develop course curriculums. Tinto also included a comparison group of students enrolled in stand-alone courses with similar subject matter to the CSP courses. The study asked two questions: Did the program make a difference, and if so, how was this accomplished (Tinto, 1997)?

Surveys were distributed to newly enrolled students at the beginning and end of the fall quarter (Tinto, 1997). The first survey asked questions about prior education, student attributes, current life situations, educational intentions, perceptions of ability, learning preferences, and attitudes regarding education. The second survey asked students about their activities in and out of class, how much they felt they had learned, how they regarded the institution, and whether they intended to return for the next semester. The following fall, institutional records were accessed to discover students’ grade point averages, earned credits, and quarter to quarter enrollments (Tinto, 1997).

Tinto (1997) conducted his case study by interviewing a purposeful sampling of CSP students who were diverse in age, gender, race, and program attitude. Three one-week visits were conducted: in the early fall, late fall, and the following spring. Other methods used to collect data included participant observation, faculty and staff interviews, and document review (Tinto, 1997).

Results from the surveys included much higher rates of CSP student involvement in academic activities and activities with other students than the comparison group (Tinto, 1997). CSP students also had a significantly more positive view of their college, classes, faculty, peers, and their own involvement in the institution, than the comparison group. Their rate of persistence to the following spring and fall quarters was also substantially higher than the
comparison group. This rate of persistence increased when transfer to four-year institutions was taken into account (Tinto, 1997).

Tinto (1997) had three main findings from his case study. First, participation in a learning community during their first year enabled students to build a network of supportive peers that helped students successfully make the transition into college. Tinto also noted that CSP students made friends with students who fell outside their usual social networks, thus gaining an appreciation for diverse experiences and views (Tinto, 1997).

Secondly, CSP students managed to bridge the academic-social divide that so often undermines the academic lives of new students (Tinto, 1997). The fact that these friendships developed in a classroom setting meant friends were also study partners and learning took place in a social context. Learning communities helped to draw together the social and academic worlds, both in and out of the classroom, without having to sacrifice either (Tinto, 1997).

Finally, CSP students gained a voice in how they learned (Tinto, 1997). Students were active participants in how classroom knowledge was constructed. They were required to take personal ownership of their learning process. CSP students met in one large class and concepts were taught using a multi-disciplinary approach. Students reported that they learned better because of the many perspectives that were used to view concepts. Students also learned from watching the faculty adapt material for this multi-disciplinary approach (Tinto, 1997).

The other major outcome of this study was an expansion of Tinto’s (1975) original Model of Student Persistence which had separated social and academic integration into two separate entities. For this newer model, Tinto (1997) hypothesized that social and academic integration could work in tandem with each other if classroom methods similar to CSP were implemented.

I thought Tinto’s (1997) study had huge implications for my research. His findings on rates of persistence for CSP students are very encouraging for trades programs at VIU using the cohort model of enrollment. But the really significant findings for me were the case study results
that reported the establishment of supportive peer networks that formed as a result of classroom activities, and then overlapped into real friendships. This is encouraging for all students and particularly for at-risk student groups. Tinto’s research shows that cohort enrollment combined with pedagogical strategies designed to enrich student connections, provides an opportunity for social and academic bonds to be forged between diverse groups including at-risk students. In turn, this could improve the educational experience for these students and encourage them to persist in their education. I hoped to discover evidence of similar experiences taking place with trades students enrolled in cohorts at VIU.

**Learning Communities and the Student Experience**

Although research on learning communities often focuses on its effectiveness in remediating student attrition rates, there is another aspect that was of interest to me. I wondered how students felt about being part of a learning community, and whether they perceived their educational experiences to be relevant, and applicable to other venues, or simply more information to be memorized and forgotten after the final exam.

Engstrom (2008) published a study that examined learning communities in three different California community colleges over a period of four years. One hundred and eighty-two students were interviewed during this time, some several times. Most did not speak English as their first language, and many were immigrants from outside the United States. Many were first generation, working-class students coming from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. They were all enrolled in learning communities that included one or more non-credit courses in math, reading, writing, or English, that were in turn linked to other general education courses (Engstrom, 2008).

Engstrom (2008) used qualitative analysis to extract four themes from these interviews: active learning pedagogies, development of college learning strategies, collaboration of faculty and an integrative curriculum, and student validation (2008). Students perceived the use of
active learning pedagogies as a vehicle for creating trust and respect amongst the students, which in turn led to students’ increased comfort in taking part in their learning community (Engstrom, 2008).

Faculty collaboration led to development of curricular links between courses (Engstrom, 2008). Students reported deeper learning, higher levels of engagement, and more efficient use of time. Faculty also took advantage of the introductory aspect of the learning community to introduce structured opportunities for learning crucial skills, habits, and competencies, necessary for navigating college and achieving academic success. For example, one learning community instructor wrote study group assignments on the board, discussed how groups should use them to prepare for the exam, then made sure that all students were in a group and had a scheduled time to meet outside of class, before they could leave the class. Other instructors offered extra credit for participation in a study group. Students reported that this participation resulted in learning material more thoroughly, and staying more focused and engaged in their work. Study groups also provided a fun, productive, stimulating environment to learn, away from the other responsibilities of their busy lives (Engstrom 2008).

Students also perceived the enthusiasm, passion, and energy of their instructors as a key component to their success (Engstrom, 2008). Students felt encouraged, and supported by their instructors even when things were not going well for them. The message was always “you can do it. Hang in there. Don’t give up” (Engstrom, 2008, p. 17). Students reported sticking with their studies as a result of words like these, and that without their instructors’ support, they might have given up (Engstrom, 2008).

Tennant (2003) conducted a study of two learning community programs held at a suburban community college in California. The first program occurred in Fall, 2001 and the second in Spring, 2002. Both programs had two courses, which were thematically linked and were team taught. Both instructors were present in the classrooms at all times. Student-led
seminars were part of most classes, and interactive group activities and projects were presented in most class sessions. Tennant used an unstructured approach to individually interview a total of 16 students from both programs. A phenomenographical research approach was used to analyze the interviews (Tennant, 2003). This qualitative method is used to explore differences in perceptions of a situation. The range of these perceptions is then mapped into interrelated categories (Entwistle, 1997).

Tennant (2003) noted that her pool of interviewees was small but she stated that interviewing a larger number of students would not necessarily have produced a larger number of variations. In fact, Tennant noticed that after 16 interviews, there was enough repetition to satisfy her that her range of categories was sufficiently complete. The community college that Tennant conducted her study at had a predominantly Caucasian student population, with most students stating that their goal was to transfer to a four year institution. Tennant felt that this population was not necessarily representative of other community colleges in the United States. Tennant (2003) also noted that there was no study conducted of a traditional class to use as a control group.

Tennant (2003) developed five different categories of hierarchical perception: alternative structure-negative, alternative structure-positive, social learning, community, and expanded learning. The first category, alternative structure-negative, summed up the differences that students noticed between their learning community class, and a more traditional class. Students remarked on having more interactions with students, two teachers present at all times, a variety of learning activities, and a central theme in subject content. However, in this category, students did not like their learning community and wished they were in a traditional class. Specifically, they disliked the excessive group discussions, the fact that some group members did not “pull their weight” in projects, or they did not understand the attempts to thematically link the two courses that comprised the learning community. They wanted to be taught “the right answer” so
that they could do well on their tests and they were very concerned with their grades in the course. They also disliked the instructors’ emphases on student discussion and expression and did not see the value of hearing differing points of view. Tennant noted that students in this category were very emphatic in their responses about their experiences. Two of the students identified as having learning disabilities and Tennant wondered if their dislike of the learning community was based on their inability to deal with the lack of structure in the course. Tennant noted that learning communities are often seen as appropriate for students with developmental needs and learning disabilities, and that perhaps more research is needed within this specific population (Tennant 2003).

Tennant’s (2003) second category, alternative structure-positive, again included students who noticed differences between traditional classes and their learning community but they tended to regard these differences as providing an entertaining, convenient, and easy way to take their college courses. They enjoyed group discussions because they provided interesting and differing points of view but they did not reflect on whether or not this was an essential part of learning (Tennant, 2003).

The third category, social learning, built upon themes defined in alternative structure-positive. These students appreciated the built-in mechanisms in their learning community that allowed them to meet others and make friends. These students were interested in class activities and learning, because it involved having fun with their friends. These students tended to interact more with students who were like themselves, and sometimes made remarks about other groups in the class that were different (Tennant, 2003).

Community was the fourth category and also included previous categories, but with a greater emphasis on bonding with students and with instructors. The instructors were primarily responsible for creating a warm and safe place where students could learn from others in a variety of ways, and where even conflict could provide an opportunity for increased closeness.
Students felt they were a respected member of a community, which was a novel experience for many of them (Tennant, 2003).

The final and most complex category was expanded learning, where learning itself was the most significant element. Students in this category often expressed similar ideas and thoughts found in previous categories but the underlying reason for these was always the importance of learning. These students were more reflective about the learning community process, noting that students were learning and also teaching each other. They understood that the interdisciplinary approach between their two courses was also representative of bonds between themselves and other students, and instructors. They could also sometimes develop a new understanding of a concept, different from that of the instructor. These students were deeply moved by this powerful experience (Tennant, 2003).

These two studies, both conducted in California, with two quite different populations in terms of ethnicity, and socioeconomic background, using two different research methods, combine to provide a wide range of student experiences inside learning communities. From my reading, I concluded that most students find this style of learning to be interesting and engaging, while at the same time providing an opportunity to gain academic confidence and competence in a supportive environment, as compared to attending a traditional post-secondary program.

Post-Secondary Experiences of At-Risk Student Groups

The study of post-secondary student persistence and attrition will naturally gravitate to those groups at greatest risk of school dropout and how their unique college experiences may influence their decision to stay or to leave. I was particularly interested in three groups of at-risk students: students with disabilities (both physical and learning), students with neurological deficits (specifically autism spectrum disorder), and international students. These groups were most highly represented in VIU trades populations.
While more adults with learning disabilities are attending post-secondary education, their socialization and integration into the college campus is well below the level of neuro-typical adults (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Dillon, 2007). For example, although many ASD adults are lonely and may want to have social relationships, their lack of social skills interferes with their efforts to fit in (Howlin, 2003). Their attempts to socialize may appear awkward, naïve or even rude to their contemporaries and dating is fraught with problems. ASD students are aware of their isolation and rejection, which can contribute to anxiety and depression. This, in turn, can lead to poor academic performance and often to withdrawal from programs and ultimately from the institution itself (Howlin, 2003). Of course, the irony in all this is that in terms of academic competence, many high-functioning ASD students are more than capable of handling a university level curriculum (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). Their challenges are in the realms of successful social interaction both in and out of the classroom, difficulties with planning and organizing their course workload, and adjusting to the new routines and environments they will encounter at school (Baron-Cohen, 2008; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014).

DaDeppo (2009) noted that most research on factors contributing to successful college experience for students with disabilities tended to focus on isolated individual characteristics. Affective, cognitive, and academic abilities of these students tended to be viewed and researched as separate domains in an effort to understand the effect of these domains on college GPA and intent to persist (DaDeppo, 2009). DaDeppo designed her research using Tinto’s Student Integration Model to study a group of college students with learning disabilities. Up to this time, researchers had not considered using integration theory as a framework for studying academic success and persistence in students with learning disabilities (DaDeppo, 2009). DaDeppo concluded that integration variables consistently predicted intent to persist, with social integration being significant beyond both academic integration, and background characteristics (race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) (2009). In her conclusions, DaDeppo suggested
that institutions should consider implementing policies that would increase social integration for students with learning disabilities, including faculty/student mentoring, enrollment in cohorts, and establishment of learning communities.

It is important to note that DaDeppo (2009) looked at academic and social integration as two separate spheres, with the former occurring inside the classroom and the latter occurring outside the classroom. Again, this is why I think Tinto’s (1997) study of the CPD program at a community college in Seattle is so important. The CPD program was able to forge social bonds based on academic activities that had the effect of creating friendships and academic support at the same time, inside the classroom.

International students often have a similar academic and social experience to that of students with learning disabilities, but for different reasons. Sumer, Poyrazli, and Grahame (2008) stated that “social support was a significant predictor of depression and anxiety among international students” (p. 429). Their study assessed social integration, reassurance of worth, attachment, reliable alliance, opportunity for nurturance, and guidance as components contributing to social support. The study also found a significant correlation between English proficiency and student levels of anxiety and depression. Students with lower English proficiency reported more difficulty with academic studies and social interaction, resulting in higher levels of frustration and isolation (Sumer et al., 2008).

A study examining the international student experience in Australia looked specifically at the types of loneliness that an international student might undergo (Sawir et al., 2008). For example, students experienced personal loneliness because of limited family contact. They experienced social loneliness because they had left behind their social networks, and they also experienced cultural loneliness caused by immersion in a foreign culture, which might also have been exacerbated by limited English skills (Sawir et al., 2008).
This study acknowledged the important work done by international student organizations and international education faculties but noted these groups tended to strengthen bonds between international students rather than bonds between international and local students (Sawir et al., 2008). The study also pointed out those international students who were from minority nations tended to feel excluded from activities organized for the dominant foreign national groups. The study found a strong correlation between the incidence of loneliness and difficulties in forming cross-cultural relationships, and suggested one of the most important strategies universities could implement would be to provide better opportunities for international students to develop relationships with local students (Sawir et al., 2008).

Conclusion

After researching the literature on the use of learning communities in post-secondary education, and the effects of these communities on traditional and non-traditional groups of students, I decided to conduct my own research to discover how the use of learning communities was being carried out in the Faculty of Trades at VIU. In particular, I hoped to discover if social bonds were being forged between students as a result of participation in curricular activities in their learning communities, and if so, whether students felt these bonds contributed to program commitment and academic success.
Chapter 3: Procedures and Methods

Research Design

This mixed methods study used action research to examine the nature of student experiences in post-secondary trades programs that were utilizing learning communities at a mid-sized teaching university in British Columbia. The goal of the study was to examine the impact of learning communities on non-traditional and traditional students. Action research is teacher conducted research which is carried out to gain insight into an educational environment that is related to that teacher’s practice (Mills, 2014). While I recognized that understanding student demographics and rates of attrition, as well as types of pedagogies being used, were all important information, I also wanted to understand what the actual personal experiences were for those students enrolled in learning communities.

As an instructor in a trades program, I had noticed an increase in enrollment of non-traditional groups of students; particularly international students, and students with neurological or mental health disabilities. I personally observed the academic and social struggles that these students encountered in their programs and also witnessed their successes and their ability to persist in the face of adversity. Engstrom (2008) defines a learning community as any program that delivers two or more thematically linked courses to the same group of students. Since the cohort style of enrollment fits the definition of a learning community, and is used in most foundation trades programs offered at our institution, I wondered what influence these communities were having on the educational experiences of our student population.

In an attempt to capture both quantitative and qualitative data, the research design used two different instruments. The first was a cross-sectional paper survey (Appendix A) containing both open and close-ended questions. The second instrument was a series of semi-structured one-on-one interviews (Appendix B) conducted with a small number of willing students who were asked to discuss their educational goals, their experiences with their instructors, and their
classroom experiences with their fellow students. The survey was designed to gather information about student age and gender, reasons for choosing the institution, choosing their particular program, their educational goals, the characteristics of the learning communities they were members of, and whether they were international students, or students with mental health or neurological disabilities. The interviews were designed to collect the stories of these students: what journeys they had taken to get into their programs, how they felt about their experiences in their programs, how they perceived their roles in their learning communities, and whether they perceived these communities as important to their academic success.

Sample

The available population for this study were male and female students, aged 18 to plus 40 years, who were enrolled in the Professional Cook, Professional Baking and Pastry Arts, Electrical, and Hairdressing foundation programs, and the Culinary Diploma program at Vancouver Island University (VIU) in Nanaimo, British Columbia. Students who were younger than 18 years were not included in the study because they would have needed parental consent. These programs were chosen because they all used cohort style enrollment to deliver their courses. Also, I am a trades instructor and as an action researcher, I was interested in conducting a study in my field.

The potential academic goals of the surveyed students were varied. Possibilities in foundation programs included graduating with a certificate, or going on to get a Red Seal designation. In the case of the Culinary Diploma program, options included graduating with a diploma, then continuing on to obtaining a Red Seal designation, or laddering into a Bachelor of Hospitality degree. The participants were at different stages of their programs because some programs have several intakes per year, while others have only one intake. For example, Professional Baking has one intake in August of each year, while the Professional Cook program has three intakes in August, January, and February.
These participants were a sample of convenience because they were located on the same campus where I was teaching. I was able to access a large number of trades students to potentially survey and interview and felt that these numbers would be sufficient to ensure external validity of the study. I felt it was important to obtain the perspectives of both traditional and non-traditional student groups in the survey, and post-survey interviews, to establish internal validity of the study with regard to academic integration, educational goal commitment and student success.

A total of 163 surveys were distributed to 37 Baking students, 44 Cooking students, 11 Culinary Diploma students, 35 Hairdressing students, and 36 Electrical students. Of that number, 35 surveys were returned. Part of the survey was an invitation to participate in a follow-up semi-structured interview. Nine students agreed to be interviewed, and four students were purposefully chosen from that number in an attempt to represent both traditional and non-traditional student groups. Time constraints did not allow for all of the volunteers to be interviewed. Of the four students selected, three were female and one was male. One student identified as having multiple learning and mental health disabilities. All of the selected students participated in the interview process.

**Instruments Used**

This study utilized a mixed methods approach to explore the experiences of students who were enrolled in cohort-style trades programs at VIU. The two instruments used were a researcher designed cross-sectional survey (Appendix A), and a series of semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) that were conducted after the surveys had been completed and collected. Both instruments were reviewed and tested by colleagues and friends for accuracy, clarity, and completion time.

The survey took 10 to 15 minutes to complete, and consisted of 20 close-ended, and three open-ended questions. The first page of the survey examined student institutional and goal
commitment using a series of eight list style and yes/no questions. Both Tinto (1987) and Kelly (2008) emphasized the importance of students developing strong ties to their institution, as well as firm commitment to their own educational goals, in order to successfully complete their programs.

Questions nine and 10 looked at student centred experiences in their programs using Likert scale questions. Students were asked to rate their sense of competence, their academic and practical progress, and program organization. Students were also asked how they felt about their abilities to interact with culturally and ethnically diverse groups of people, the use of typical learning community pedagogies such as study groups and group work, and the level of commitment they felt about attending VIU. These statements were adapted from the Learning Community Survey tool developed by Iowa State University (2012) for their various faculties to use in assessing their own learning communities.

Question 11 assessed student levels of integration in their programs. Question 12 was an open-ended question asking the participant to describe one or two things they felt were going well for them in their program. The research underpinning this section of the survey came from the work of DaDeppo (2009) who stated that although learning communities were developed to strengthen academic integration, the very nature of the tools used to do this led to social integration as well.

Question 13 used a Likert scale question to examine potential student stressors. A series of statements assessed student feelings concerning personal absenteeism, their level of success in their programs, support levels from faculty and other students, anxiety levels, completion of assignments, and organizational abilities. Research repeatedly demonstrates that while most students will feel some level of anxiety and stress when attending post-secondary education, these feelings are much more pervasive for non-traditional groups of students, to the point where their academic success is negatively affected (Cosden & McNamara, 1997; Gobbo & Shmulsky,
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2014; Ryan, Nolan, Keim, & Madsen, 1999; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). Consequently, I felt it was essential to gather data about these issues.

Questions 14 used a yes/no question to ask students about participation in campus and program orientations, their study methods, and whether they felt they had come into their program with the skills they needed to succeed. Question 15 was a list question asking about student living arrangements while attending school. Question 16 asked students to choose the number of friends they felt they had in their program. Question 17 was an open-ended question asking students to describe one or two things they liked or didn’t like about studying in a learning community. Questions 18 to 21 of the survey asked for demographic information from participants. Students were asked their gender and their age range. Students were also asked if they had a mental health or neurological disability, using a list question whose choices included attention deficit disorder, autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, none, prefer not to answer, and other. A yes/no question was used to ask students if they were international students. Question 22 was an invitation to write down any further comments the participants wished to make.

The final part of the survey was an invitation to turn to the last page and fill in contact details indicating interest in participating in a follow-up interview. Participants who said “yes” to a follow-up interview were asked to indicate if they had a mental health or neurological disability, were an international student, had no designation, or chose not to answer. In addition, students who provided contact details were informed they would be entered in a draw to win a $50 iTunes gift card.

The second instrument was a series of semi-structured follow up interviews (Appendix B). These interviews took between 45 and 60 minutes to conduct. The questions were designed to build upon the different sections of the survey. Prior to beginning the interview, participants were given contact information for VIU counselling services in case of any emotional upset as a result of answering any of the interview questions. A short series of warm-up questions were
asked to help the student relax and establish rapport. This was followed by the first set of questions which were designed to find out a little about the student’s background, what led to their choice of VIU as an institution, and what led to their program choice. Next, a set of open-ended questions asked about the student’s best and worst days to date in their program, what they liked best and what they’d like to change about their program, how they got along with their instructors, and what types of pedagogies they were using in the classroom. The third set of questions concerned stressors and anxiety levels. I asked the student to rate their anxiety level on most days, and whether they thought anxiety interfered with their work. I also asked about organization of course load, course difficulty level, who they asked for help when they had problems with the course, their attendance and what the reasons were for unusual levels of absences. The last set of questions addressed student integration and asked what orientation activities had been participated in, alignment of program expectations, ability to communicate with faculty and other students, whether they had made friends with other students, and whether they preferred working on their own or with others. Finally, I asked whether they would recommend their program and VIU to a friend and why or why not. I also asked if they had any final comments they would like to share.

Internal validity in the survey instrument was achieved by triangulation. Questions on similar topics and issues were asked in different ways. Open-ended questions were included in the survey to check if developing themes in the close-ended questions were correlating with responses to the open-ended questions. In addition, the interviews were another aid to triangulation since the questions gave students opportunities to elaborate on survey questions. Member checking was undertaken to eliminate researcher bias in the interviews. Participants were given the transcripts of their interviews to read, comment on, and edit if they chose to.
Procedures Followed

Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Review Ethics Board at Vancouver Island University in September, 2015. Consequently, approval to conduct the study was sought from and granted by the Dean of Trades and Applied Technology at VIU and the chairs of the Professional Cook, Professional Baking and Pastry Arts, Culinary Diploma, Hairdressing and Electrical programs. Sixteen instructors were contacted by email to seek their cooperation in reading the recruitment script (Appendix C) and handing out surveys to potential student participants.

The surveys and a recruitment script (Appendices A and C) were delivered to the instructors of the various programs involved, from October 6-10, 2015, with the intent that the surveys would be distributed by instructors to all students at the end of a class during the week of October 13-16, 2015. At the time of delivering the surveys, recruitment posters (Appendix D) were put up in the various trades program locations explaining the purpose of the study, and how it would be conducted (survey and follow-up interviews). The actual survey distribution time was chosen because that particular week followed a long weekend (Thanksgiving) and I thought that students might feel more rested, and therefore more willing, to take on an extra task. The actual day or time (within the chosen week) of distributing the surveys was left to the instructors’ discretion so that it would be of minimum inconvenience to them.

Prior to distributing the surveys, instructors were asked to read aloud the recruitment script (Appendix C) explaining the intent of the study, the date surveys would be collected from the drop boxes, and instructions for completing and returning the surveys. A drop box for the completed surveys was placed in a central location in each program space. The completed surveys were collected three weeks after distribution, in early November, 2015. The drop boxes were emptied by a research assistant and the surveys were shuffled so that it was impossible to identify which program they had come from. Completed interview invitations were torn off the
surveys by the research assistant to prevent any identification of surveyed students. The semi-structured interviews were conducted over a three week period from mid-November to early December, 2015, in an effort to avoid the end of the semester, and the lead-up to Christmas.

In the recruitment script and the survey consent form (Appendix E), participants were informed that their responses would be kept completely anonymous, participation was completely voluntary, they were not required to complete the survey, and they could stop participating at any time. However, once the surveys were submitted, participants were informed their survey could no longer be removed from the data set as it could not be distinguished from the others. Also, in the recruitment script and the survey consent form, contact information for VIU counselling services was provided for students who might have experienced emotional distress as a result of answering survey questions. Students were notified in the recruitment scripts and the survey consent form that they needed to be at least 18 years of age to complete the study. Students were informed that submitting their surveys implied consent to the study, since preserving anonymity prevented individual consent from being obtained. Each program received slightly different recruitment scripts with regard to instructions for returning completed surveys since appropriate collection spaces differed from one program to the next. However, all surveys specified that completed surveys and interview invitations were to be returned to the drop box, while page one was to be torn off and kept for the participant’s records.

The final page of the survey provided an option for students to choose “Yes” or “No” to take part in a follow-up interview. Students choosing “Yes” were asked to provide their name and contact information on the last page of the survey. On that same page, a list question asked students to check any of the following designations that applied: mental health or neurological disability, international student, no designation, or prefer not to answer. Incentive details were also provided on the final page. Any student that provided contact details regarding participation in an interview was entered into a draw for a $50 iTunes gift card.
I contacted the students via email or telephone and discussed the interview process and consent procedures. At that time, I asked which program they were enrolled in. If they were Professional Cook or Professional Baking and Pastry Art students, I did not proceed with the interview request. I was an instructor in these programs and was interacting with these students on a daily basis. During the telephone conversation, interview dates and times were arranged at our mutual convenience. The participant was emailed a copy of the Interview Participant Consent Form (Appendix F) with instructions to print out two copies, sign and bring to the interview, or to sign just prior to commencing the interview. One consent form was kept by me and the other was given to the participant for his or her records. All interview participants were over the age of 18; therefore, no parent/guardian consent was required.

All interviews were conducted in a classroom in Building 300 at Vancouver Island University. The interviews were conducted mid to late afternoon, depending on the participant’s schedule. Prior to commencing the interview, I reviewed the purpose of the research again, and discussed the interview process and types of questions I would be asking using the pre-scripted portion of the Interview Questions Protocol (Appendix G). I answered any questions the participant had and reviewed the interview consent form details with him or her. The student was assured that they could stop the interview at any time, and that participation was completely voluntary. The participant was told they could also choose not to answer any question, and was reminded that contact information was provided on the consent form for VIU’s counselling services if they were needed. I asked each interviewee for permission to record the interview with an iPhone using a recording application. Again, the participant was assured that the recording could be stopped at any time. All participants agreed to be recorded. All participants were asked for permission to have their statements quoted in the study and all agreed. Participants chose pseudonyms to preserve their confidentiality and were advised not to give names or other identifying information during the interview. Interviews ranged in length from
45 to 60 minutes. Participants were informed that transcribed interviews would be emailed to them to read and comment on, clarify or correct. Both survey and interview participants received scripted information stating that paper data would be locked in the researcher’s home safe and destroyed after three years, while computer data would be kept on the researcher’s password protected computer. In the same script, interview participants were assured that they could withdraw from the interview portion of the study at any time up to the date of publication.

**Validity**

The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of post-secondary students enrolled in cohorts of trades programs, and in particular, whether this style of learning helped students who were at high risk of attrition. For the first part of the study, I intentionally distributed surveys to as many trades students as possible in an attempt to increase generalizability of results to VIU trades programs. I chose the Culinary Arts and Culinary Diploma programs because they were experiencing high enrollment of international students and students with disabilities. I chose Professional Baking and Pastry Arts because they were also experiencing high enrollment of students with disabilities. Hairdressing has two intakes per year, in February and September, so I was able to survey students who were newly enrolled and just forming their learning communities as well as students who had been learning together for several months. I chose the Electrical program because it is only six months long compared to the other programs which are ten months. Also, electrician graduates have higher earning potential than other program graduates and I wondered if this would lead to increased program satisfaction. In another attempt to increase the external validity of my results, I did not ask students to identify the specific trade program that they were in. If shortcomings in program delivery became apparent, I did not want the specific program to be identified.

I reduced researcher bias by not directly contacting any of the potential survey participants, relying instead on department chairs and instructors to provide information and
distribute the surveys. I also had three teaching colleagues read and provide feedback on the survey prior to distribution, as a method of ensuring that survey questions and directions were clear, and would elicit the information that was needed. To further strengthen external validity, I used previous research to construct some of the survey questions. Thomas (2000) used several variables to research the level of student integration and persistence at a small college campus and I used these to construct some of my questions.

Internal validity was ensured by asking survey questions about the same issues in different parts of the survey. Themes were re-visited in both the close-ended and open-ended questions in an attempt to strengthen the data through triangulation. Making sure that survey participation was both voluntary and anonymous also increased internal validity.

For the post-survey interviews, external validity was strengthened by turning to previous research for help with constructing interview questions. Charles Kelly (2008) used interviews and focus groups to explore the experiences of a group of “at risk” students at a small American college and I adapted some of his interview questions to use in my interviews. I also followed the advice of Mills (2014) to “persevere with silence” (p. 90) to avoid answering my own interview questions. Internal validity in the interviews was accomplished by member checking. A copy of the interview transcript was emailed to participants for review, giving them an opportunity to make comments, and clarify points if necessary. I also employed triangulation by asking similar questions in different contexts to see if answers were consistent.

There are many reasons why students might decide to drop out of a program of study that might be unrelated to the program itself. Examples include family and work commitments, or lack of necessary funds. One of the challenges of this study was to ask questions that related specifically to student program experiences and how these experiences in turn related to student feelings of academic integration and goal commitment. A possible limitation to the study may
have been the existence of external variables such as poverty, dysfunctional living arrangements, or addiction that may have influenced the answers chosen by some survey participants.

Data Analysis

At the conclusion of the research period, the process of analyzing the data began. The surveys contained close-ended, quantitative style questions and statements, and some open-ended qualitative questions. Close-ended responses were entered into Microsoft Excel 2010 tables and I used descriptive statistics to examine and summarize the results. From these tables, I generated a number of different charts to present my findings. For example, I used frequency tables to display the results from list style questions. Likert scale responses and yes/no answers were displayed on bar graphs. Survey responses were grouped in themes for analysis purposes and did not necessarily follow the actual survey outline. The open-ended questions were coded for emerging themes and displayed in lists. Some verbatim comments that seemed to express a common point of view, or an outlier point of view, were included to add richness to the data.

The interviews were recorded using a recording application on an iPhone. These recordings were then transcribed by me. The interview participants were contacted by email and each of them read their transcript and had an opportunity to comment or clarify before I proceeded with analysis. Once the participants had agreed on the final transcripts, I used the summarized or verbatim responses that I thought expressed the scope and depth of responses for each theme that had been explored in the surveys.
Chapter 4: Findings and Results

This study investigated the experiences of traditional and non-traditional students in post-secondary trades programs in an attempt to discover if the use of learning communities in these programs was contributing to student engagement and persistence. Another goal of the study was to examine in what way learning community teaching strategies were being used and whether there was any relation between these strategies and student satisfaction.

The study used a mixed-methods research design that contained two phases. Phase one was a paper survey which was delivered to 163 students in five trades programs at VIU. Of that number, 35 surveys were returned. Part of the survey was an invitation to participate in a follow-up semi-structured interview and these interviews comprised phase two of the study. Nine students agreed to be interviewed, and four students were purposefully chosen from that number in an attempt to represent both traditional and non-traditional student groups.

Characteristics of Survey Participants

The majority of students were female, and either near the beginning, or, near the end of their programs. As seen in Table 1, age was also somewhat skewed, with the majority of students falling into the youngest age category and the remainder being older students.
Table 1

*Participants by Gender, Age, and Length of Time in Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>66</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than three months</td>
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<td>Less than 12 months</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Agender: A person who does not feel they identify with a specific gender (University of California, Berkeley, 2014).

Many participants had some previous post-secondary education as shown in Figure 1. However, of the 22 people who had enrolled in previous programs, 45% dropped out or did not complete their course requirements. Thirteen students (37%) indicated that their current program was their first program at the post-secondary level.
Educational goals of participants were varied with 14 students (40%) hoping to earn a certificate, nine students (26%) enrolled in a diploma program, five students (14%) aiming for a bachelor degree, and one student (3%) working towards a teaching certificate (secondary level).

Long-term career plans are displayed in Figure 2. Nine students (one who intended to work at something not related to their program, and eight who indicated they would be going back to school to take something else) indicated that they did not want to pursue careers that were related to their current programs.
Figure 2. Question five: What is your current long-term career plan? Choose all that apply (n=35).

Participants’ living situations were surveyed. Five students (14%) lived in the residences at VIU, nine students (26%) lived with their families in Nanaimo, eight students (23%) lived with their families and commuted to Nanaimo, seven students (20%) lived alone, one student (3%) lived with another family member, one student (3%) lived with a homestay family, and four students (11%) lived with roommates.

Participants were asked if they were international students. One student (3%) responded affirmatively. Participants were also asked to self-identify with any mental health or neurological disabilities. The answers to this question are displayed in Table 2.
Table 2

*Participants Self-Identifying With a Disability*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Attention deficit disorder</td>
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<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bi-polar personality disorder</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
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<td>Borderline personality disorder</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injury</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Some students selected multiple answers to this question. A more accurate picture of the percentage of the sample with disabilities is seen by observing the number of participants who chose “none” or “prefer not to answer” as their response.

**Characteristics of Interview Participants**

There were four interview participants, purposefully chosen from a group of nine students, who agreed to be interviewed. None of the interview subjects could be selected from the programs that I taught which limited the potential pool of suitable candidates. However, the four subjects who were chosen were as representative of the sample as possible with regard to age, sex, length of time in their programs, and whether they belonged to traditional or non-traditional student groups. All interviewed students chose a pseudonym which was used throughout this study when describing their experiences.

“Jane” was at the three month point in her program. She came to VIU from another city in Canada after a lengthy career as an educator. She chose VIU because another family member was taking a program here. Jane owned her own home in Nanaimo and lived there with her husband. Jane had attained significant levels of post-secondary education and brought a wealth of life experience and educational experience to her VIU program. Choosing a trades program was an abrupt change from Jane’s previous career and she was not exactly sure what she might
do with her learning upon completion of her program. However, she was contemplating combining her experience as an educator with her interest in her trade and possibly offering community classes. Jane described herself as doing very well in her program at VIU, and expressed high levels of satisfaction with the course content and her instructors. Her one disappointment with the program was the lack of social connection between herself and her other classmates. She felt she worked well with the other students but also felt that she had very little in common with them. She ascribed this to the age difference between herself and the other students and described her role in the classroom dynamic as more of a mentor than a peer.

“Regina” was within a week of finishing her program. She was excited about finishing and feeling proud of her accomplishments. Regina lived in a community outside of Nanaimo with her husband and child and commuted daily to VIU. Regina had enrolled in a bachelor program at VIU right out of high school but withdrew in the first semester because she didn’t feel it was a good fit. She then worked as an office assistant for some years. Regina had lived in two other communities in British Columbia before returning to Vancouver Island to start her family. She chose VIU for her program because she did not want to leave Vancouver Island, she was familiar with the campus from her previous time there, and having grown up in Nanaimo, she perceived VIU as part of her community. Regina expressed high levels of satisfaction with her program and with her instructors. She described her program as “challenging” but all the more enjoyable because she had to work at it. Regina described herself as highly social and loved the group dynamic that the instructors created in her program. Regina had a full-time job lined up which she was starting upon program completion. She hoped to gain some experience there and then open her own business.

“George” was also at the three month mark in his program. George had moved to Nanaimo specifically to attend VIU because his program was a requirement for his future educational and career goals. George had already obtained a Red Seal in his trade and had
worked for several years in his industry. He had rented a basement suite for the duration of his time in Nanaimo and lived there by himself. George described himself as an “easy-going, kind of happy-go-lucky” person who felt that his life experience had prepared him well for program success. George was extremely satisfied with the program and his instructors. In particular, he was happy that he was allowed to put his personal touch on products that he was producing. George had been concerned that the program might not allow space for personal creativity, which would have been boring and frustrating for him, given his previous work experience. George reported that he did have a couple of “buddies” in his program that he tended to do course work with. He said he did not socialize much with students outside of class because he wanted to focus on program success. In fact, one of the things he liked most about Nanaimo was the lack of things to do after 8 PM. George’s plans upon program completion were complex and included continuing with his post-secondary education, and shifting from working within his trade to teaching his trade.

“Alex” was nearly finished her program and was happy that she was going to obtain her certificate. Alex had not had an easy time during her program. She came to VIU from another island community and was living by herself in an apartment for the duration of the program. Alex chose VIU for her program because one of her parents had attended VIU, she did not want to leave the island, and the tuition was affordable. Although Alex was the youngest person I interviewed (18-25 years), she had completed some previous post-secondary education at another institution on Vancouver Island. She also had some work experience as an office assistant. Alex thought that her program did a good job of preparing her to successfully work in her trade, and she was relatively happy with her instructors. However, Alex did bring a number of personal issues with her into the program including diagnoses of dyslexia and ADD. Alex also suffered from an anxiety disorder leading to panic attacks which sent her to the local hospital emergency department on several occasions during her program. These hospital visits always happened at
night and Alex would not get home until the early hours of the morning and would then be too exhausted to go to school. As a result, Alex found herself in contravention of her program’s strict attendance policies. Alex had missed the maximum number of days she was allowed to (in fact she had missed more) and these absences impacted her grades. Alex also reported difficulties in getting along with classmates. She did say that she had two or three friends in her program but she also felt that people didn’t appreciate her contributions to group discussions, and she reported that she found group work “annoying”. Upon program completion, Alex planned to return home and look for a full-time job in her trade. She also hoped to complete her Red Seal.

Why VIU?

I wanted to understand why participants chose VIU to pursue their post-secondary goals. Given the land-locked geographical location of VIU, I expected location to be a major factor in institutional choice. But, as shown in Figure 3, this was not the case. Instead, VIU appeared to be providing programs that were in demand, and students were relying on recommendations from family and friends. In addition, VIU was working with other agencies to ensure funding for economically disadvantaged students.

Figure 3. Question 1: Why did you choose VIU as your post-secondary institution? Choose all that apply (n=35).
Program Satisfaction

To assess student satisfaction with their programs, I asked a series of Likert scale questions as well as an open-ended question. Figures 4 and 5 display overall student responses to these questions. Students were mainly positive about overall program satisfaction, and their progress in academic, practical, and study skills. Likewise, most students enjoyed their time at school enough to recommend their program to family and friends. However, 23% of students felt their program curriculums were unorganized some or all of the time, and 60% of respondents found their programs sometimes differed from their expectations.

Program expectations are often formed by various orientation events held by the institution or by a specific program. Only 31% of students attended a campus orientation and two percent attended a program information session or shadowed a class prior to enrolling at VIU. These low numbers may explain why 69% of respondents found their programs differed from their expectations sometimes, often, or always, as shown in Figure 4.

![Program Satisfaction Diagram]

Figure 4. Overall student responses to Likert scale questions assessing program satisfaction (n=35).
Regina had this to say when asked if she would recommend her program to friends and family:

It’s a really welcoming atmosphere and having the smaller class sizes, I think it’s a benefit. You get to learn different teaching styles. We’ve had all three of the teachers. They all bring something different to the table. So, I think I would just say that you’re going to learn so much.

Figure 6 displays answers of “always” or “often” to the same set of Likert scale questions displayed in Figure 4 but the answers have been sorted according to participants’ length of time in their programs.
Figure 6. Participant responses of “always” or “often” to Likert scale questions assessing program satisfaction, sorted by length of time in program (n=35).

Participants felt their academic abilities improved over time, while improvement in practical skills remained static, and study skills slightly improved, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Participant responses of “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” to Likert scale questions assessing program satisfaction, sorted by length of time in program (n=35).
Question 12 was an open-ended question that asked students to describe one or two things that were going well for them in their programs. Seven students were impressed with the amount of new knowledge they were acquiring. Four students felt their communication and people skills were improving. Three students commented on how much they liked their instructors. Three students reported increased comfort in asking questions of instructors and classmates. Other comments on things that were going well included making new friends, bringing prior skills to their programs, good test results, good attendance, increased competence, keeping up with course material, receiving positive feedback, enjoying real-life situations in class, participating in class discussions and labs, and getting involved in campus initiatives and events.

**Student Satisfaction with Instructors**

Student satisfaction with their instructors was assessed by asking a series of Likert scale questions. In general, students expressed high levels of satisfaction with their instructors as shown in Figure 8. George commented that the best thing about his program was “the instructors, 100 percent. I find that they’re, I guess the word would be younger, than other schools, and more relevant.” Regina was also enthusiastic about her instructors.

The instructors are great. They’re really down to earth, it’s not like you walk in and they are the teacher and you’re the student. I mean, there is that line. But, it’s really comfortable because they are in the industry themselves too.

Some students expressed dissatisfaction with instructors when answering the open-ended questions on the survey. Comments included “instructors are extremely controlling”, “teachers don’t always show you how to do something”, and “I don’t enjoy vague responses and lack of help.” Another student stated “I do enjoy my program. The instructors are all very knowledgeable. I think a little more organization is required and the politics needs to be less apparent to the students.”
Question 9d, which asked about the frequency of instructor feedback, revealed that 16 students (46%) received feedback sometimes, or not at all.

Figure 8. Likert scale of questions assessing student satisfaction with instructors (n=35).

Regina had the following comments when asked about frequency of instructor feedback.

Yeah, they’re really hands on. At the beginning of every week we get a book, so from the previous week, she’ll make notes, so like “good job on your clients this week”.

“You’re getting really comfortable” or “just work on this”. And we read it and initial it and hand it back. And then we also every day, whenever we have a client, they walk around the room the whole time, and say “oh, why don’t you do it like this?” Or, “that’s really nice; you’re doing a really good job”.

Another student stated that he would like “more one on one sit downs with instructors to talk about class”. Jane commented

It seemed like after Week…I don’t know what it was supposed to be, they would tell you how your mark was going, and then it seemed like as time went on that sort of didn’t
always happen, depending what section you were in, especially if there was more than one instructor.

In question 11d, 18 students (51%) reported having difficulty understanding their instructors sometimes or often. Twenty-nine students (83%) reported feeling comfortable asking questions of their instructors, but 12 students (34%) reported that they talked “sometimes” or “never” to their instructors when stressed.

**Student Experiences: All Participants**

Student experiences were examined through a number of different lenses. Figure 9 lists student responses to a Likert scale series of questions describing program related experiences. Most students reported feeling comfortable in their programs, confident in their ability to succeed, and at ease with their instructors, but there was a persistent trend of four to eight students (11 to 23%) who reported differently.

![Figure 9](image-url)  
*Figure 9. Student responses to a Likert scale series of questions describing program experiences (n=35).*
Another lens I used to assess student experiences was their perception of relationships with their classmates. Question 16 asked students how many friends they felt they had in their program. Five students (14%) reported having zero to one friend in their program, eight students (23%) said they had two to three friends, ten students (29%) thought they had four to five friends, and 12 students (34%) thought they had more than five friends in their program.

To complete my investigation of overall student experiences, I assessed the levels of stress or anxiety that students might be experiencing. Question 14e asked students if they felt they had arrived in their programs with the skills they needed to succeed. Thirty-one students (89%) felt they did have the skills needed, while four students (11%) felt they were lacking the necessary skills.

Figure 10 displays a series of Likert scale questions that assessed components and levels of stress or anxiety experienced by students.

![Figure 10. Likert scale series of questions ascertaining components and levels of stress and anxiety experienced by students (n=35).](image-url)
Non-Traditional Student Experiences

One of the goals of this study was to examine the experience of non-traditional student groups in trades programs. In this study, nine students (26%) self-identified as belonging to one of these groups. One respondent was an international student and the remainder had one or more learning or mental health disabilities. One participant identified as “injured”. For the purposes of this comparison, I eliminated the survey results of the international student since she reported high program success and satisfaction, positive student and instructor relationships, and low anxiety and stress.

Figure 11 shows non-traditional student responses to a Likert scale series of questions assessing program satisfaction.

**Figure 11.** Likert scale series of questions assessing program satisfaction for non-traditional students (n=8).
Non-traditional student satisfaction with instructors is displayed in Figure 12. The group was evenly split on whether or not they sought out their instructors for support when feeling stressed or anxious.

Figure 12. Likert scale series of questions assessing non-traditional student satisfaction with instructors (n=8).

Figure 13. Likert scale series of questions assessing program experiences for non-traditional students (n=8).
Question 16 asked students to identify how many friends they felt they had in their program. Two students reported they had two to three friends, three students said they had four to five friends, and three students had more than five friends. Students who reported having none or one friend were not found among the non-traditional student group.

Figure 14 shows non-traditional student responses to a Likert scale series of questions designed to explore student relationships with each other.

![Likert scale series of questions exploring non-traditional student relationships with other students (n=8).](image)

*Figure 14.* Likert scale series of questions exploring non-traditional student relationships with other students (n=8).

Finally, I examined the levels of stress and anxiety experienced by non-traditional students. These results are displayed in Figure 15. Two students did not answer Question 13b asking about levels of absenteeism.
Figure 15. Likert scale series of questions assessing non-traditional student levels of anxiety and stress (n=8).

**Examination of Learning Communities**

**Institutional, academic, and social bonds**

I investigated the types of relationships that students were developing within their programs. I examined more formal bonds, including cultural and institutional, as well as social bonds. Figure 16 shows student responses to a Likert scale series of questions that were preceded by the statement “My participation in my program at VIU has improved my…”.
Figure 16. Likert scale series of questions examining qualities of learning communities in VIU trades programs (n=35).

Figure 17 examines the same set of questions as Figure 16 but sorts student responses by length of time in their programs. Most responses remained relatively stable with two exceptions. The number of students feeling a sense of belonging at VIU dropped by 19%, and students’ understanding of different cultural values improved by 37%.

Figure 17. Participant responses of “strongly agree” and “somewhat agree” to a Likert scale series of questions examining qualities of learning communities at VIU, sorted by length of time in program (n=35).
Question 11e assessed the level of agreement with the statement “I understand what other students are saying in my classes”. This question was asked to assess how well international students were able to communicate. Only one survey respondent identified as being an international student. However, 23 students (66%) answered “sometimes” or “often” to question 11e which may suggest that students who speak English as their first language may have some difficulty understanding students who are English language learners. I also examined the types of social bonds that students were developing with each other by using a Likert scale series of questions as shown in Figure 18.

Figure 18. Likert scale series of questions assessing social bonds between students in Trades Programs at VIU (n=35).

Figure 19 examines the same set of questions shown in Figure 18, but responses are sorted by student length of time in the program.
Figure 19. Participant responses of “always” and “often” to a Likert scale series of questions assessing social bonds between students in trades programs at VIU, sorted by length of time in program (n=35).

Use of learning community teaching strategies

Figure 20 displays participant answers to yes/no questions about learning community teaching strategies being used in trades programs at VIU.

Figure 20. Results of yes/no questions asking students about use of learning community teaching strategies in their programs (n=35).
Summary

The quantitative and qualitative data collected from the surveys and interviews presented in this chapter reveal a snapshot of learning communities as they are being practiced in trades programs at VIU. These results also make it possible to envision academic and social experiences for both traditional and non-traditional students in these communities. A discussion of the findings from this data is presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion and Implications

Research Summary

This study investigated the following research question: How does the use of learning communities affect the educational experiences of traditional and non-traditional trades students at Vancouver Island University (VIU)? Most trades programs at VIU are enrolled as cohorts and I was interested to see to what degree trades programs were taking advantage of this method of enrollment. Research suggests that using teaching strategies to build learning communities within cohorts is a powerful way to enhance the educational experiences and program successes for all students. VIU as a whole has been experiencing an upswing in enrollment of non-traditional students including international students, and students with mental health and learning disabilities. The challenges of providing effective student instruction rise in direct proportion to the percentage of non-traditional students present in a program. Therefore, I felt that
investigating how learning communities were currently being used in trades programs, and
discovering what types of experiences students were having in these communities, would
contribute useful information to my faculty as we move forward in this increasingly challenging
educational environment.

A mixed methods design was used to explore the experiences of these student groups
during their participation in cohorts or learning communities in five different trades programs at
VIU. Part one of the study was a cross-sectional paper survey (Appendix A) that utilized Likert
scale questions, yes/no questions, and list questions to obtain demographic information, self-
identification of students with disabilities, and international students, and student program
experiences. Three open-ended questions were asked to enlarge upon these experiences.

One hundred and sixty-three surveys were distributed to students in five programs.
Thirty-five completed surveys (21%) were returned. Close-ended survey responses were
summarized and displayed in bar charts or described in written form. Open-ended responses
were summarized and coded for themes and either displayed in list form or included verbatim to
enrich the data.

Part two of the study consisted of semi-structured follow-up interviews (Appendix B)
with four of the surveyed participants that asked about student perspectives on academic
integration and educational experiences. Interview questions expanded on themes covered in the
surveys. Interview responses were examined, and summarized to provide a richer description of
life as a trades student in a cohort. Some verbatim responses were used to enrich the data and to
express outlier opinions.

Characteristics of Participants

Demographic data collected showed that the majority of students surveyed were female,
aged 18-25 years, and had been enrolled in their programs for less than three months. The next
largest age bracket was the 31-40 group, followed by the plus 40 group. Most students had some
previous post-secondary education although 45% had not completed this education. Most students had some previous work experience. The majority of students had further program-related education plans or planned to work in their field after completing their current programs. However, 25% said they would not work in a related field or they would return to school to take something else. Nine students (26%) identified as members of a non-traditional group, one of whom was an international student, another who identified as “injured”, and the remainder having one or more learning or mental health disabilities.

I asked about participants’ living arrangements while attending VIU. Tinto (1997) suggests that establishing learning communities in institutions with large numbers of commuting students is vital to program success for these students. Students who commute tend not to participate in campus organized social activities. Instead, their classrooms are their social hubs. Living situations of participants were varied with only 14% living on campus. The remainder lived in or near Nanaimo, and commuted to school.

I also asked participants why they chose VIU for their post-secondary education. Students were asked to check every option that applied to them. Early research by Tinto (1975) and Spady (1970, 1971) suggests that one of the factors determining student persistence or attrition in a program is the strength of their bond with the learning institution. One factor in assessing this bond is the student’s reason for choosing an institution. Twenty-two (63%) participants chose VIU because it had the program they wanted or needed. Twelve (34%) students chose VIU based on the recommendation of family or friends, and another six (17%) chose VIU based on its good reputation. These reasons are considered to be indicators of strong institutional attachment (Tinto, 1975). The remainder of participants’ responses to this question included available funding, affordable tuition, geographical proximity, parental insistence, and needing a change. According to Tinto (1975), reasons like these indicate a weaker bond with the
institutions. Therefore, according to Tinto (1975), in this study, the majority of participants should have formed a strong institutional bond.

The four interview participants were selected from a group of nine survey participants who agreed to be interviewed. Because many of these participants were from programs that I was teaching, my available pool of interviewees was reduced. However, I was able to choose a fairly representative sample based on age, sex, length of time in their program, and membership in traditional and non-traditional student groups. Three interview participants were female, and one was male. Three of the participants were more than thirty years old, and one was in the 18-25 year age group. One participant self-identified with multiple learning and mental health disabilities. The participants’ stories are presented in Chapter 4.

**Discussion**

The survey elicited information based on several themes examined through a variety of lenses. These included looking at the experiences of all students first, then re-examining some of the same themes and how experiences changed for students who were in the program for a longer length of time. I also separated the responses of non-traditional student groups and looked at their program experiences. Finally, learning communities were examined, looking at teaching strategies used, how international students functioned in learning communities, and participant comments on what they liked and did not like about being part of learning communities.

**Program satisfaction**

Assessing participants’ satisfaction with their programs was a natural first focus in determining reasons for student successes or struggles. One of the strongest influences on personal satisfaction of any kind is how well reality aligns with expectation. In an attempt to discover how realistic participant program expectations were, students were asked if they had attended a campus or program orientation, or shadowed a program, prior to enrollment at VIU. Thirty-one percent attended a campus orientation and 2% participated in a program information
session or shadowed a program. Not surprisingly, 68% of participants said that their program often, sometimes, or always, differed from their expectations. When students in programs for 12 months or less were asked how often program expectations were being met, the number of students answering always or often fell from 71% to 64%.

Participants were very satisfied with their improvement in practical skills, and somewhat satisfied with their progress in academic studies. However, 29% of participants responded that they somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that their study skills were improving. These results stayed fairly static over time in the program.

Most students strongly or somewhat agreed that they were satisfied with their program overall. This number fell from 88% to 82% when responses were sorted by length of time in the program. Most students responded that they would recommend their program to family or friends but again when sorted for length of time in the program, this number fell from 92% to 82%.

Most students said they enjoyed their time at school always or often. However, 20% of respondents said they sometimes or never, enjoyed their time at school. Students who had been in the program for less than 12 months, reported higher rates of enjoying school with responses of often, or always, rising from 71% to 91%. This suggests that while two thirds of students experience enjoyment during school right away, or very quickly, it takes some time (longer than three months) before most students are enjoying their learning experience. Even then, one in ten may never enjoy their time at school.

Twenty-three percent of participants felt that their program curriculums were organized sometimes or never. Only 34% felt their program curriculum was organized all the time. When responses were sorted according to length of time in the program, this figure improved. At less than three months in the program, 75% felt the curriculum was organized. At less than 12 months in the program, 82% felt the curriculum was organized. It is certainly possible that
newer students will find a program more confusing and that this will improve as they spend more time in the program. Still, for one in five students to continue finding the curriculum disorganized when they are nearly finished their programs is somewhat surprising. All of the programs surveyed had multiple instructors teaching different courses, as well as team teaching within the same courses. It’s possible that not enough attention was being paid to overall curriculum alignment, or that communication between instructors was insufficient, resulting in student perceptions of disorganized curriculum.

The open-ended question that asked participants to comment on something that was going well for them in their programs elicited completely favorable responses with the most frequently mentioned being acquisition of new knowledge, better people skills, increased comfort with instructors and classmates, and liking instructors.

**Student satisfaction with instructors**

I assessed student satisfaction with instructors by asking a series of Likert scale questions. Additional qualitative data was collected from open-ended survey questions and from comments made by interview participants. In general, students were happy with their instructors. Ninety-four percent of participants said they understood what their instructors were saying. Eighty-three percent felt comfortable asking their instructors for course-related help. Interview participants remarked on the competence, industry-related relevance, and thoroughness of their instructors.

Approximately one third of participants stated that they did not talk to their instructors when they were feeling stressed. This may have meant that students did feel comfortable talking about program-related issues but not necessarily discussing other more personal issues even though these issues might have been impacting the students’ educational experiences.

Finally, 46% of participants stated they received regular instructor feedback sometimes, or never. Some participant comments relating to instructor feedback follow.
• I don't like D2L. I know it’s meant to be convenient but it’s frustrating. I wish we had monthly meetings individually to discuss our current grades.

• I don't enjoy vague responses, lack of help.

• More one on one sit-downs with instructors to talk about class.

• It seemed like after Week… they would tell you how your mark was going, and then it seemed like as time went on that sort of didn’t always happen, depending what section you were in, especially if there was more than one instructor.

Recent research has shown that providing timely, specific, and regular feedback is one of the most important parts of student learning (Hattie, 2000; Wiliam and Leahy, 2015). In this day and age, there is no excuse for doing anything else.

Student experiences: All participants

In this part of the survey, I examined students’ experiences within their programs. These themes were not sorted by time in the program because the majority of participants who were having difficulties had been in their programs for less than three months.

My first focus was to look at academic success and struggle. Most students were doing well in their programs. They felt confident about their ability to succeed in the program, they found the level of academic difficulty manageable, they were able to complete assignments, and they could organize their workload. But there was a part of the sample that was having a different experience. For example, 14 students (40%) often or always worried about their ability to succeed in their program. Eight students (23%) found their program difficult. Four students (11%) often or always had trouble organizing their workload. Eight of these students belonged to non-traditional groups and might be expected to encounter greater than average academic challenges. However, there were another six students who often or always worried about their
ability to succeed in their programs. Feeling challenged by a program is one thing but doubting one’s ability to succeed in overcoming these challenges is another.

I examined student social relationships with each other by asking about numbers of friends they felt they had within their programs, and the nature of these relationships. Most students had at least two to three friends in their programs. However, five students reported that they had zero to one friend in their programs. None of these students identified themselves as non-traditional students. But two of these students were in the plus 40 age group, revealing a type of social divide that I had not thought of when designing this study.

One of the interview participants, who was plus 40, described her experience with social relationships in her program, stating that she tended to be more of a mentor to students, rather than a friend. She also felt that a lack of commonalities contributed to the absence of social relationships. Another student who had zero to one friend identified themselves as agender, which is another non-traditional group that VIU is starting to see more of. It was interesting that mental health and learning disabilities did not seem to inhibit social bonding but age and gender differences did.

My final theme that was examined as part of students’ overall program experiences was the types and levels of stress and anxiety that participants were experiencing. Entering a program with the skills needed to succeed can help to reduce stress and anxiety. Thirty-one students (89%) felt they did have the skills needed to succeed while four students (11%) felt they did not. Other questions were asked about rates of attendance, how stressful school was, levels of anxiety, and how often VIU counselling services were used. Most students reported low levels of absenteeism. Many students reported finding school stressful sometimes, often, or always. Forty-nine percent of participants reported anxiety levels severe enough to impact program success sometimes, often, or always. However, only 11% of participants reported using VIU
counselling services sometimes, or always. What was the other 38% doing to cope with their anxiety?

Some coping strategies were offered by the interview participants. Alex (who had significant mental health issues) said she journaled to relieve stress and anxiety. Regina said she played with her daughter and talked to her husband when she was upset. Jane also talked to her husband when she was feeling stressed. Regina and Jane had support systems outside of school to fall back on. Alex did not, but had come up with one way to cope with anxiety although she was still severely impacted by it. Alex also had friends to talk to within the program.

**Non-traditional student experiences**

Non-traditional groups for the purpose of this study included students who self-identified as having learning or mental health disabilities, or were international students. Eight participants identified themselves as belonging to one of these groups. One other participant identified as “injured”. One participant was an international student who reported high program satisfaction and success, high integration, and low anxiety and stress. I did not include this participant in this exploration of non-traditional student experiences.

Three-quarters of non-traditional participants reported high program satisfaction. These students felt that their programs were meeting their expectations, and the curriculum was organized. All students reported strong improvement in practical and academic skills. Nearly all students said they would recommend their program to family and friends. This group mirrored the larger group in feeling less positive about progress with study skills. Half the participants enjoyed school always or often and the other half enjoyed school sometimes, or never.

When asked about their instructors, seven members of this group reported they had little difficulty understanding their instructors. The entire group felt comfortable asking their instructors for help although only half said they would talk to their instructors if they were
feeling stressed. Five participants said they received regular instructor feedback always or often, and three said they received feedback sometimes, or never.

Turning to program experiences for these participants, academic struggles were evident at a higher rate than in the general sample. Seven participants reported that the program was difficult sometimes, or often. Likewise, seven students reported worrying about program success sometimes, often, or always. Half the group had trouble completing assignments and organizing school work sometimes, often, or always.

When examining numbers of friends in this group, all participants reported having at least two to three friends, with several having four, or five friends. Looking further at social bonds with students other than friends, most participants felt a sense of belonging and enjoyed having the same students in all their classes. Only half talked to other classmates when they were having problems and two students did not feel comfortable talking to other students at all. Three students felt like outsiders, and did not like having the same students in all their classes.

Interestingly, non-traditional students reported having more friends than traditional students. As a percentage, more non-traditional students felt comfortable talking to other students and fewer of them felt like outsiders, compared to their traditional peers. Also, as a percentage, more non-traditional students liked having the same students in all their classes than traditional students. Finally, non-traditional students had a higher rate of talking to their fellow students when upset or stressed.

Turning to non-traditional participants’ responses to questions about anxiety and stress, most students felt their programs were difficult sometimes or often, and all students reported finding school stressful, sometimes, often, or always. Three students accessed VIU counselling services sometimes, or always. Of the seven students who answered the question about anxiety severe enough to impede program success, six reported they experienced significant anxiety levels sometimes, often, or always.
Comparing these results to the traditional group, the one student who reported always finding the program difficult was not a non-traditional student. The rate of school stress was also high among traditional students; an additional 14 students, in addition to the non-traditional group, reported feeling stressed about school some of the time. Another three students, in addition to the non-traditional group, reported feeling stressed often. Anxiety levels were also high in traditional groups. Another ten students, in addition to the non-traditional group, reported feeling sufficient anxiety to impede program success some of the time.

When looking at similarities and differences between traditional and non-traditional groups of students, it becomes clear that there are strengths that are common to both groups and there are educational, social, and mental health issues that are not limited to one group or the other. While it seems natural to focus helpful interventions and strategies on non-traditional student groups, in fact, it might be helpful to use these approaches in a holistic fashion without focusing on any particular group at all.

**Examination of learning communities**

In assessing the strength of learning communities in VIU trades programs, I looked at institutional, academic, cultural, and social bonds being developed by students’ participation in learning communities. Overall participant responses were examined, and then sorted by length of time in the program to discover any developing trends. Learning community teaching strategies were also examined over time. Finally, an open-ended question collected comments about what participants liked or did not like about being in learning communities.

To assess the strength of bond that students felt for the institution, participants were asked to rate how their program improved their sense of belonging at VIU. At less than three months in the program, 83% of students felt that program participation was improving their sense of belonging at VIU. However, at less than 12 months in the program, this number fell to 64%.
Academic bonds were assessed by asking about improvement in student interactions with other students sharing similar interests. The number of participants who strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement rose slightly over time from 88% to 91%. Student participation in study groups dropped slightly over time from 58% to 55%.

One of the non-traditional groups I was most interested in learning more about was international students and how they were functioning in learning communities. Unfortunately, only one international student participated in the survey. However, three questions on the survey helped to explore their experiences through the eyes of English speaking participants. Improvement of cultural and ethnic bonds between students was assessed by asking about student interactions with other cultural or ethnic groups. Over time, the number of students who strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that these bonds were improving rose from 67% to 73%. Improvement in understanding of different cultural values improved substantially over time, rising from 63% to 100%.

Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement, “I understand what other students are saying in my classes”. This question was an attempt to assess the level of English being used among students. A majority of students answered that they sometimes, or often, understood other students. Only 34% reported that they always understood other students.

Two of the interview participants who had high numbers of international students in their cohorts described their experiences with this group. George reported that it took some patience on the part of both groups to get to a place where everyone was being understood but that in the end, persistence paid off. Jane described her experiences working in groups with international students and feeling frustrated by their lack of effort and preparation for the tasks that needed to be accomplished. Jane felt that the students had given up trying to understand the instructors and curriculum. Instead, these students spent their class time on their cell phones and appeared to be only interested in coasting through their programs. These issues point to a lack of student
engagement and a warning sign that instructors need to check in more frequently with these students to find out what their needs are.

Likert scale questions were asked to assess the level of comfort students felt socially in their cohorts. The majority of students felt comfortable talking to other students and felt accepted by their peers. This became more pronounced over time as the number of students feeling comfortable with their classmates rose from 79% to 91%.

However, approximately 30% of respondents did not feel comfortable and did not feel like they belonged, sometimes, often, or always. Over time, the number of students feeling like outsiders declined slightly from 13% to 9%.

The number of students who liked having the same students in their cohorts all the time was evenly split. Half always liked having the same class members, 26% often liked this, and 26% sometimes, or never, liked this. The percentage of students who always or often liked having the same students in their classes rose from 71% to 82% when responses to this question were sorted by length of time in the program. Interview participants had mixed feelings about this issue. Jane stated,

I think it’s a positive. Say, last year, in our little merry band that we had…you do form some bonds with these people and you want everybody to succeed and you’re sort of cheering them along. Some of them failed and they are upstairs now so I get to see them again, so I always talk to them and see how it’s going. And you know, everybody comes to the table from a different place, right? And as a teacher, you want everybody to succeed. So, it was interesting to see how people matured too, through the year. Some people were obviously getting sick of other people, but we tried to make the best of it and get through it.
Alex also had mixed feelings. She said, “I find that the group that I’m in right now is really stressful but I really don’t like change so I’d rather stick with the one group that I’m in and know what I’m dealing with rather than having new people come every three months or so.”

When it came to using other students as a support system, only 29% of students always talked to other students about problems. Sixty-three percent did so sometimes, or never. However when these responses were sorted by length of time in the program, the number of students using other students always, or often as a support system rose dramatically from 17% to 82%.

In assessing the functionality and health of learning communities in trades programs, it seemed apparent that some facets were working well, and others needed work. The drop in the institutional bond with VIU was puzzling and I don’t know what the explanation is. Academic bonds seemed to be strong with regard to students sharing similar interests with each other. However, only half of participants were studying together which seemed like a wasted opportunity to share student knowledge and resources.

International students were having a mixed experience. Socially, they appeared to be integrating with their classmates and both English speakers and English learners reported a growing respect and knowledge of each other’s cultures and customs. Academically, international students appeared to be less engaged than English speaking learners, and it was also possible that their instructors were not noticing this to the extent that they should have been.

Socially, students seemed to form relationships with each other that strengthened over time. Students also increased their social support networks with other students over time. However, there were still students at the ends of their programs who felt like outsiders among their peers which is an issue that needs to be remediated. There needs to be a place for every learner in a program, both academically, and socially.
Participant approval of cohort enrollment did improve over time to 82% but that still left 18% of students unhappy with having the same students in their classes. That is enough dissent to cause some serious fractures in the cohort fabric and is another issue that should be corrected.

**Use of teaching strategies in learning communities**

I asked students about teaching strategies being used in their programs that might be helping to strengthen their learning communities. Specifically I enquired about participation in formal study groups meeting outside of class, and whether students had been formally assigned a study, lab, or team partner for some or all of their classes. Most students did not participate in formal study groups, while approximately half did have a partner or group of some type for part of their program work.

The interview participants had a number of comments regarding group work. None of them found it to be particularly helpful. For example, Alex said:

> I found it really annoying. I like working by myself, I don’t like working in a team so I found that to be really hard. It’s just like everybody has their own opinions of everything and I just kind of like, I like to think on my own rather than sharing my thoughts with people so it’s just really stressful.

Jane talked about an incident that she felt was rather typical of group work in her program. She was working in a group with two international students who had not read the course material ahead of time and furthermore, had no idea what the discussion topic was. Jane was trying to get a conversation going about this topic but instead, had to explain all the terms in the reading that the other students didn’t understand. This took up the entire class and Jane felt the whole exercise was a waste of time for her.

George preferred to work on his own most of the time although he did have a partner for some of his class activities. George didn’t always feel confident about a partner’s commitment to doing the best job possible, and he did not want his marks impacted by that.
These sentiments are very common when it comes to how students feel about group work. Teams need to be very carefully managed by instructors with very clear parameters as to which student will do what task. Otherwise, group work is a breeding ground for resentment and dissension.

**In their own words: What is working and what is not**

Question 17 was an open-ended survey question asking students to describe something they liked or didn’t like about being in a learning community. The following is a sample of positive sentiments.

- I love that I can work at my own pace in more of a hands-on (less book learning) environment.
- I like the hands on learning and all the help I get from teachers/peers.
- I really like learning about things I’m interested in with people who feel the same. I think we feed off of each other.
- I like the fact you can ask another student a question if the instructor is busy.
- I like the team work aspect, the fun competiveness (the challenge we impose on each other) and support.
- Is easier to learn this way. Everybody else is in the same boat as me.
- I like hearing different perspectives; this helps me fully understand the information.

There were also a number of less positive answers to this question. The following responses represent the common themes expressed.

- Not understanding right away and keeping the students behind while I ask questions.
- How others make me feel for asking questions.
- It seems some of the international students aren't team players and don't take the program as seriously.
• I don't like the participation ratio, attitude at times.

• I have troubles focusing.

• I am not ok with how my learning experience is compromised by people who don't care, showing up late or being unprofessional in the class.

• Some of the younger students act immature and some other students show up late and don't do their jobs.

These participants have very succinctly summed up what is working in their learning communities, and what is not. In fact, it is almost a guidebook on what to do and what not to do when building a learning community. Positive learning community traits include access to a variety of perspectives, peer-to-peer teaching, and working with others who have common interests and goals. On the other hand, some students might find the busier and noisier environment of a learning community distracting, particularly if they have introvert tendencies.

The negative sentiments can be broken down into two main themes. The first is a student lack of respect demonstrated towards the contributions and learning styles of all students. The second is a very common characteristic of dysfunctional learning communities: poorly implemented program standards and rules. These participants spent hours together every day and had ample time to observe how their less motivated peers were behaving in class, and what the consequences were for that behaviour. They were also able to observe how these behaviours impacted their own learning and that of others.

Instructors need to initiate a standard of dignified and respectful interactions between all students and then make sure that standard is maintained. Likewise, there is no point in having rules and standards if they are going to be haphazardly enforced. The level of resentment expressed in the surveys and the interviews regarding this issue was quite striking. In my
opinion, this may have contributed to the drop in program satisfaction, program recommendation, and meeting of program expectations over time, as shown in Figure 6.

**Limitations**

The major limitation of this study was the small response rate (21%) that, in turn, limited generalizability to VIU’s trades programs. However, the proportion of non-traditional students to traditional students was consistent with what I was observing in my own teaching practice.

Another limitation of the study was the omission of more mature students as a category in the non-traditional group, particularly those who were more than thirty years old. Although these students seemed to have strong support systems in their private lives they did feel a sense of estrangement within their programs. In my own teaching practice, I have had several students in this age group over the years. Generally, they quickly become very competent in their learning, probably because of life and work skills learned from past experiences. It did not occur to me that they might feel excluded from their learning community because of their age. Their program success masks this.

One weakness in the study was the construction of Question 16 asking about numbers of friends participants felt they had in the program. The first choice was zero to one friend. This question would have garnered much more pertinent information if the first choice had been zero friends. After reading the completed surveys, I realized that even one friend can be enough to help a person feel part of a group. But being without friends is a very different situation with regard to social support and inclusion.

Another shortcoming in the survey was the lack of participants who identified as having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This group increases every year in all programs at VIU and is certainly well represented in the programs I teach (Vancouver Island University, 2014). Research shows that this group experiences as many struggles as international students to fit into a community-based setting (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). International students struggle with oral
and written communication, and cultural adaptation (Sawir et al., 2008). Students with ASD struggle with social communication which often results in ostracization within a group (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). Adding their experiences to the study would have been invaluable.

A teaching strategy that should have been explored in the survey was team teaching. All trades programs and many courses have multiple instructors and there were no specific questions in the survey asking about student perceptions of how seamless and effective this instruction was. However, some insights about the prevalence of team teaching and its effectiveness did become evident when looking at participant responses to questions about receiving feedback and curriculum organization.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

**Participant bonds with VIU and trades programs**

Institutional and program ties decreased (19% and 10% respectively) as participants progressed through their programs. It is not possible from this study to know what caused this with any certainty, but it is certainly important to find out. It is possible that shortcomings in the programs and in the learning communities became more apparent to students over time, leading to a decrease in satisfaction with VIU and with programs. In any event, if student satisfaction falls as more time is spent at VIU, this translates into fewer recommendations to family and friends, which in turn, means lower enrollments.

**Student expectations**

A significant number of students felt their programs frequently differed from their expectations when they enrolled. At the same time, a low number of students participated in any kind of orientation or program shadowing prior to enrollment in their programs. Perhaps these types of pre-enrollment activities should be mandatory. If student expectations are being met, they are more likely to have an overall positive educational experience at VIU, and in turn recommend their program to others.
Team teaching and student satisfaction

Students were generally happy with their instructors, reporting them as knowledgeable, caring, current, and dedicated. However, two main issues were identified by students as cause for concern: lack of instructor feedback and unorganized curriculum. Formative feedback is an essential part of student learning (William & Leahy, 2015) and nearly half of survey participants reported that they received this type of feedback sometimes, or never. One of the interview participants felt that feedback often fell through the cracks because multiple instructors were team teaching the same course.

William and Leahy (2015) suggest that formative feedback should be regular, consistent, specific, and kind. It must also be followed up. There is no point in suggesting areas that need improvement and then never checking to see how the student is progressing in these areas.

One of the interview participants described how formative feedback was delivered in her program. Each student had a book that was kept in the instructors’ area. At the beginning of each week, the instructor and student would go over the book in which the instructor had entered comments from the previous week on what went well, and what needed work. The student would initial the entries and then go away to work on the suggested areas. The following week, she would check in again to see the latest instructor entries and the instructor was able to comment on the student’s progress. There was a record of what the student needed to work on, and how that improvement was progressing. This is an excellent system for programs that do a lot of team teaching, where formative feedback is at risk of falling through the cracks.

Unorganized curriculum is something that I have witnessed first-hand. For example, an instructor will design a course that ends up being delivered by as many as four different instructors. Each of these instructors has their own interpretation of the materials provided and may emphasize a different part of the curriculum, or has a different opinion on an issue, or evaluates students to a different standard. To students, this appears chaotic and unorganized. It
may also undermine how students think of different instructors and it often causes arguments between students and instructors. Students try to do or make something the way they were shown, only to be told it is wrong. They receive an A from one instructor and a B- from another. It is essential that instructors sit down with each other in a group and decide what they are going to tell students, what methods they are going to demonstrate, and how students are going to be evaluated. Then they need to stick to that agreement.

**Constructing learning communities: Teaching strategies**

We have already discussed team teaching which is an integral strategy in a learning community where each course is connected to another course by a central theme (Engstrom, 2008). Two other essential strategies are the use of formal student study groups and the effective management of team or group work (DaDeppo, 2009; Tinto, 1997). According to Tennant (2003), learning communities can be unstructured, bustling, energetic environments where more formal studying is sometimes put on the back burner. For this reason, formal study groups that meet either in class or outside of class are helpful for students who may need a more structured approach in a quieter environment. Some of the programs that were surveyed in this study have a higher proportion of students who have significant challenges with completing assignments and learning theory. Their test scores reflect this and formal study groups may help to remedy this situation. Instructors should be responsible for assigning students to these groups using an asset based approach (a variety of strengths and abilities in each group). In the beginning, instructors may also want to provide time within the program for these groups to meet. Over time, as the advantages of studying together become apparent, students can be encouraged to start meeting outside of class.

Another popular learning strategy both in and out of learning communities is the use of teams or groups to accomplish tasks, labs, or projects. However, this strategy needs to be used carefully and perhaps sparingly because of how easily group work can become a negative force
in the learning community, as evidenced by participant comments in the surveys. From my own experience, I have learned that creating teams or assigning partners needs to take the following into consideration.

- Divide student strengths and abilities as equitably as possible when creating groups.
- Assign specific tasks and responsibilities to each team member.
- In addition to instructor based evaluation, have students evaluate each other as part of their grade.
- Watch group dynamics carefully and be prepared to mediate if interactions deteriorate.
- Rotate students occasionally. If one student needs a lot of support, his or her team partner will appreciate being moved elsewhere where they aren’t carrying as much team responsibility.
- Be prepared for the possibility that not all students may be suited to working in groups or teams.
- Provide opportunities for students to complete individual projects.

**Constructing learning communities: Traditional and non-traditional students**

One of the significant findings of this study was the blurring of the lines between social and educational experiences of traditional and non-traditional students. Non-traditional students had more friends in their programs than traditional students. Traditional students had anxiety levels nearly as high as non-traditional students. Both groups had students who felt like outsiders in their programs. Both groups had students who struggled with academic success and both groups had students who did well in their programs. In any case, given the diverse structure
of the typical trades class, it is a challenge to meet the needs of all learners. Here are two suggestions to address these concerns.

The first is to apply Universal Design of Instruction (UDI) principles when creating curriculum. UDI was developed in 1997 at the Center for Universal Design at the University of North Carolina in response to increasing diversity in classrooms (Shaw, 2011). A full description of these principles and their applications is beyond the scope of this study. However, I have applied some of these principles in my own teaching. Specifically, providing equitable use and flexibility in use can make learning easier for all students. I did this by putting all course materials online using an outline that followed the progression of the course. This gave students another opportunity to review power points and other material covered in class at their own pace at a time that suited them. Students were also provided with study guides to use during power point presentations. These presentations were paused at mid and end point and students were asked questions about the material that had just been covered. If they were having trouble keeping up, they could look at the study guide. A homework quiz was assigned with each lesson that could be completed using the study guide. The idea behind these strategies was to promote multiple engagements with the course material in a variety of formats that were available 24 hours a day. This level of equitable and flexible accessibility is something that will benefit all students regardless of ability.

The second suggestion concerns the social makeup of learning communities. Survey participants’ responses described feeling outcast, feeling uncomfortable asking questions, and feeling annoyed with fellow students’ poor behaviour and participation. These are symptoms of dysfunction within the social fabric of the learning community, which can create significant damage over time. Making a big effort around team building at the beginning of a program could make an enormous difference in the social environment of the learning community. Using
Indigenous talking circles may be an effective method to construct a healthy, and respectful social environment.

Talking circles have been used by North American Indigenous peoples for many centuries as a way of reaching consensus on community issues (Stevenson, 1999). Traditionally, these circles included people of all ages with each person having an equal voice (Stevenson, 1999). Wolf and Rickard (2003) suggest that talking circles are particularly appropriate for groups that have a variety of ethnicities, and abilities. The exercise requires an object that is used to indicate who has the right to speak. No one speaks unless they are holding the object. The instructor states the purpose of the talking circle and may have a number of structured questions for participants to respond to (Wolf & Rickard, 2003).

The talking circle can serve a number of purposes (Wolf & Rickard, 2003). In the beginning, it is an ice-breaker. Next, it gives everyone a voice. Participants who otherwise might not speak up have an opportunity to be heard. The circle is also a way for the group to establish what constitutes respectful and courteous interaction. At the same time, the instructor can provide questions and talking points that will help participants to understand what types of academic and social behaviour are expected during the program or course (Wolf & Rickard, 2003).

I used a talking circle recently during a three week Culinary Arts orientation course. The class was extremely diverse. There were several international students, four Indigenous students, two much older students, two teenagers, and four traditional students. Our talking object was a wooden spoon. Each morning, I projected questions onto a large screen; we put our chairs into a circle, and passed the spoon. The talking circle protocol and sample questions that I used appear in Appendix H. The group discussed issues associated with professional conduct, personal conduct, growth mindset, peer teaching, team work, and organization of learning. Our talking circle took 10 to 15 minutes each day. It was a very powerful experience for the participants and
for me and set the tone for the each day. At the end of the orientation period, these diverse individuals were working as a team. They helped each other, and they cared about each other. The topics that were discussed each day helped everyone to understand what the expectations were for academic and social success in the program.

**Importance of consistent consequences for program infractions**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, participants’ comments on inconsistent enforcement of program rules and standards indicated a considerable level of resentment in the programs. For example, trades programs at VIU have strict attendance and lateness policies that are meant to emulate the real-world workplace they are being trained for. Students can be expelled from their programs if they miss too much time or are often late. However, it is common for students to be absent and/or frequently late without consequence. This happens for a number of reasons. Team teaching is one reason. A student misses significant time in one class but the new instructor in the next class doesn’t know about these absences because there is no communication. Often the problem student is part of a team or group and when that person does not come to school, or is late, the other group members have to cover that work themselves.

Another common issue is students coming to school unprepared. Again, in a group or team situation, the other group members (or the instructor) have to take the time to explain what needs to be done. In a content-heavy course with production deadlines, this very quickly leads to resentment on the part of the rest of the group.

If a program is going to have standards and rules, with consequences for non-compliance with those rules, then the consequences must be imposed equitably and consistently. If they are not, the non-compliant students quickly learn that they don’t need to follow the rules. The students who are working hard and complying with the rules wonder why they are bothering to make the effort to be successful.
Faculty must sit down together and decide what standards and rules they are willing to enforce and then come up with a system where every instructor is following the same system of discipline. To do otherwise risks introducing chaos and dysfunction into the social and academic structure of the learning community.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

An interesting avenue for future research into the effectiveness of learning communities could be a case study of one or more programs within the trades faculty at VIU who have adopted the full range of teaching strategies associated with learning communities. These strategies could include team teaching, formal study groups, and group work, as well as the use of UDI when designing curriculum. At the same time, the use of talking circles to help build social community and establish acceptable standards of behaviour and academic performance could also be implemented. Finally, a plan to ensure consistent student compliance with program standards and rules could also be developed.

**Conclusion**

This study has provided a snapshot of the experiences of traditional and non-traditional students as they participated in trades program learning communities at VIU. Participant responses revealed that learning communities did exist in varying forms from program to program and that many students felt these communities were beneficial. At the same time, there was evidence of a lack of cohesive policy when it came to using teaching strategies to enhance learning communities. There were also indications that a minority of students (15%) did not always feel included in these communities. For those students who did feel included, some expressed dissatisfaction with how group work was handled, and how non-participation and poor attitudes of some students affected the community as a whole.

Since the Faculty of Trades and Applied Technology at VIU is likely to continue enrolling their students as cohorts, I strongly believe that the findings from the literature included
in this study as well as the findings from the study itself, provide substantial support for encouraging growth of learning communities in our programs.
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Appendix A: Student Survey

1. Why did you choose VIU as your post-secondary institution? Choose all that apply.
   - Family or friend recommended it
   - VIU is close to my home
   - A recruiter contacted me
   - VIU had the program I wanted/needed
   - I could get funding to attend here
   - Other (Please describe)

2. Why did you choose your current program? Choose all that apply.
   - I got government or band funding
   - This is what I want to do with my life
   - My parents told me I needed to go back to school
   - I needed/wanted to re-train
   - I want to live permanently in Canada
   - Other (Please describe)

3. What is your current educational goal? Choose all that apply.
   - Certificate
   - Diploma
   - Red Seal
   - Bachelor Degree
   - Other (Please describe)

4. How long have you been enrolled in your current program? Choose one.
   - Less than three months
   - Less than six months
   - Less than 12 months
   - Other (Please describe)

5. What is your current long-term career plan? Choose all that apply.
   - Complete my apprenticeship
   - Work in my trade but not complete my apprenticeship
   - Work at something not related to my program
   - Go back to school and take something else
   - Other (Please describe)

6. Is this your first post-secondary program? Circle one.
   - Yes
   - No

7. If your answer to question six was no, which other programs have you taken? Choose all that apply.
   - Another trades program
   - An undergraduate academic program
   - Other (Please describe)

8. Have you ever dropped out or not completed a post-secondary program? Circle one.
   - Yes
   - No
9. **Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall, I am satisfied with my program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find my program difficult</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel comfortable asking for help from my instructors during or after class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get regular feedback on how I am doing in my program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The program curriculum is organized</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend my program to family and friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10. Please indicate your level of agreement with the statement “My participation in my program at VIU has improved my…”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My participation in my program at VIU has improved my…</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging at VIU</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in taking more courses at VIU</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to succeed with academic challenges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to interact with students with similar interests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation with study groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to interact with people from other cultural or ethnic groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of cultural values that are different from mine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to practice the skills I am learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. **Please indicate your level of agreement with the statements below.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My program is what I expected it to be when I enrolled</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My program is different from what I expected when I enrolled</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I participate in group projects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have trouble understanding what instructors are saying in classes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand what other students are saying in my classes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel comfortable talking to other students in my classes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like an outsider when I am working with other students in my classes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like having the same students in all my classes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel comfortable asking my instructors for help</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12. Please describe one or two things you feel are going well for you in your program.

13. Please respond to the statements below by checking off the column that most closely represents your opinion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I talk to my instructors when I am feeling stressed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am absent from school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy my time at school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am organized about completing my assignments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I worry about how I am doing in my program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have trouble completing my assignments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel confident I am doing well in my program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I attend school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have trouble organizing my school work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find school stressful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I talk to my fellow students when I am anxious or upset</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I access VIU counselling services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My anxiety levels interfere with my ability to succeed in my program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. Please respond the following statements by circling Yes or No.

I attended a campus orientation prior to starting classes at VIU. Yes No

I attended an information session or I shadowed a class before I enrolled at VIU. Yes No

I have a study, lab, or team partner for some or all of my classes. Yes No

I belong to a study group that meets outside of class time. Yes No

I feel I came into my program with the skills I needed to succeed. Yes No
15. While attending my program I am living: (choose all that apply)
   - In residence at VIU
   - With my family in Nanaimo
   - With my family and commuting to Nanaimo
   - By myself
   - With another family member
   - With a homestay family
   - Other (Please describe)

16. How many friends do you feel you have in your program?  Circle one.
   - 0 – 1
   - 2-3
   - 4-5
   - +5

17. Please describe one or two things you like or don’t like about studying in a learning community.

18. How old are you?  Circle one.
   - 18 – 25
   - 26- 30
   - 31-40
   - +40

19. Please circle your gender.
   - Male
   - Female

20. Do you have a mental health or neurological disability?  (Choose all that apply)
   - Attention Deficit Disorder
   - Autism Spectrum Disorder
   - Dyslexia
   - None
   - Prefer not to answer
   - Other (Please specify)

   - Yes
   - No

22. Any other comments?  Please write them below. And then turn the page for a special invitation!!
23. WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN MEETING WITH THE RESEARCHER FOR A ONE-ON-ONE PRIVATE INTERVIEW TO SHARE MORE ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH YOUR LEARNING COMMUNITY?

I am looking for students who are willing to participate in a private and confidential one-on-one interview as part of my research project. Your participation and responses will be kept confidential. If you provide your contact details you will be entered in a draw for a $50 iTunes gift card.

Please indicate below whether or not you are interested.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO</th>
<th>YES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I AM NOT INTERESTED IN MEETING FOR AN INTERVIEW</td>
<td>I AM INTERESTED IN MEETING WITH THE RESEARCHER FOR AN INTERVIEW.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you so much for your time. Your participation is very much appreciated. Please see below for instructions on how to submit the survey.

If yes, thank you for considering an interview. Please fill in your contact details below and I will be in touch to discuss interview details and signing of a consent form. And thank you for completing the survey!

Please note: Giving your contact details does not mean you are consenting to an interview; only that you are interested in finding out more information.

Please indicate if any of the following designations apply to you:
- Mental health or neurological disability
- International student
- No designation
- Prefer not to answer

Name: ______________________
Phone #: ____________________
Email: ______________________

*I will contact you to set up a meeting time.*

To Submit Your Survey:
- Please tear off the cover page (p. 1) and keep for your records
- Please put your survey (pages 2-5) in the DROPBOX at ________________

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!
## Appendix B: Student Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Warmup</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you been a student at VIU?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you enjoy doing for fun in Nanaimo?</td>
<td>Hikes, walks, go for coffee, shopping, gardening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are you feeling today on a scale of one to 10?</td>
<td>Happy, sad, tired, good mood, bad mood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual Student Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about yourself</td>
<td>Where you are from, family members, something you are good at.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were you doing before you started at VIU?</td>
<td>Work? Other school? Travel? Caregiver?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about how you chose VIU.</td>
<td>Friend? Family member? Proximity? Recruiter? The right program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What point are you at in your program?</td>
<td>Half way? Almost done? Etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are you hoping to do when you finish your program? Why?</td>
<td>Apprenticeship? Something else not related? More school? Related or not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you attended any other post-secondary programs?</td>
<td>If yes, did you finish that program? If no, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about how it’s going in school right now.</td>
<td>Easy? Hard? Like it? Don’t like it? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about your best day at school so far.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about your worst day (but only if you feel like it).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your course easy or difficult?</td>
<td>Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the thing you like best about your program?</td>
<td>Other students? Instructors? Course content? Relation to real world?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you get along with your instructors?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel comfortable asking your instructors questions?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of things do you do in class?</td>
<td>Labs? Teamwork? Group work? Study groups?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which of these methods do you do well with?</td>
<td>Tell me how.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stressors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a scale of one to 10, how anxious do you feel at school most days?</td>
<td>Ten is high anxiety, one is low anxiety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If levels are high, do you think being anxious makes it harder to do your work?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everybody gets a little stressed sometimes at school. What is your biggest stressor?</td>
<td>Asking questions in class? Exams? Big assignments? Working in groups?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of things are easy for you at school?</td>
<td>Answering questions in class? Tests? Theory? Practical work? Talking to other students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel you are good at organizing your</td>
<td>Assignments get done on time? You are prepared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
<td>Prompts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stressors Cont’d.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you miss school, how often would you say you are absent?</td>
<td>Once a week? Once a month? Hardly ever.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you are missing a lot of school, what would you say causes you to miss school?</td>
<td>Illness? Mental health issues like anxiety? Trouble getting up in the morning? Staying out too late? Family issues? Worried about school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who do you talk to at school when you are worried about your program?</td>
<td>Friends? Family? Instructors? Other students? Counsellor?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are some other ways that you cope with stress?</td>
<td>Exercise? Hobbies?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Integration</th>
<th><strong>Required reading done?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did you attend a campus orientation?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you attend a program orientation or were you a class shadow before you started your program?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your program turning out to be what you thought it would be when you enrolled?</td>
<td>Why or why not? In what ways?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you spend more class time working alone or with other people?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which would you prefer to do?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you usually understand your instructors’ lectures and directions?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If no, what makes it hard to understand them?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How about the students in your program? Do you usually understand what they are saying?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If no, what do you think would help you to understand more?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If no, how do you feel about not understanding students?</td>
<td>Sad? Frustrated? Alone?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel like you have a friend or a few friends in your class?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes, how did you become friends?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If no, what do you think would help you to make a friend?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you like having the same students in all your courses?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you like about it?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think being in a group like that makes you a better student?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you recommend your program to somebody else?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why or why not?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you recommend VIU to somebody else?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why or why not?</td>
<td><strong>Required reading done?</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Any other comments you would like to share?** Thank you for your time!
Appendix C: Student Survey Recruitment Script

Together We Stand: Examining Learning Communities in Trades Programs

I am reading this to you today on behalf of Rita Gower. She is an instructor in the Culinary Arts program and a student in the Master of Educational Leadership Program right here at VIU. As part of her degree requirements, she is conducting a study of learning communities in trades programs at VIU. A learning community is a group of students enrolled as a cohort who move through two or more courses together. All of you are enrolled in a learning community. However, you must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

Rita is inviting you to take part in her study by completing a 30 minute long voluntary, anonymous paper survey about your experiences in your learning community. Rita is also inviting you to take part in a one-on-one interview with her to follow up on the questions asked in the survey. The potential risk of completing the survey is that you may feel upset as a result of answering some of the survey questions. Should this happen, counselling information is provided on the cover page of the survey.

If you decide to participate, you will fill out the survey anonymously. No identifying information is required from you and Rita asks that you do not provide any details identifying yourself or your program. Again, participation is voluntary and you have the right to refuse participation and/or to withdraw at any point during the study for any reason without consequence to you. If you don’t wish to respond to a particular question, please leave it blank and carry on. There are no right or wrong answers. Rita is looking for your experiences in your program.

The completed study will be published at VIU and may be made available to faculty members teaching in trades programs.

If you would like to participate in the survey, please read the survey letter of consent on the front of the survey. If you decide to continue, please complete the survey and the interview invitation on the last page. Anyone who submits the completed interview invitation will be entered in a draw to win a $50 iTunes gift card. Please put your completed surveys in the Drop Box located at___________. Please tear off the survey letter of consent and keep for your own
records. Please note, by completing and submitting your survey, you are consenting to use of the information you provide.

The drop boxes will be picked up on November 6, 2015 so please get your surveys and interview invitations in by that date. Thank you very much for your time and effort!
GET YOUR NAME INTO A DRAW TO WIN A $50 ITUNES GIFT CARD!

HOW?
If you are 18 years or older and enrolled in a foundation or diploma trades program, complete a survey about your program, and submit it, and an interview invitation form with your contact details. Your name will be entered into the draw.

WHEN?
The survey/invitation will be made available to you during the week following Thanksgiving. Surveys and interview invitations must be submitted by November 6, 2015. Winning name will be drawn November 13, 2015.

WHY?
Your feedback will help a VIU researcher to understand your experiences in your program.
Appendix E: Survey Letter of Consent

Together We Stand: Examining Learning Communities in Trades Programs

**Researcher:** Rita Gower  
Educational Leadership Student  
Vancouver Island University  
250-591-1903, rita.gower@viu.ca

**Supervisor:** Rachel Moll, Ph.D.  
Faculty of Education  
250-753-3245 ext. 2161, rachel.moll@viu.ca

I am a student in the Master of Educational Leadership Program at Vancouver Island University. As part of my degree requirements, I have designed a research project examining the use of learning communities in trades programs at VIU. A *learning community* is a type of program that uses cohort style enrollment to move the same groups of students together through two or more programs. The program you are taking is using this type of enrollment. I hope to learn about the experiences of students like you, who are members of these communities, to find out what is working well for you and what isn’t.

If you are at least 18 years of age, you are being invited to complete the attached anonymous survey. This should not take more than 30 minutes of your time. You will be asked questions about how you heard about your program and VIU, your educational goals, your experiences with program material and faculty, and your experiences with other students in your program. You are also being invited to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. Please see the last page of the survey for more details. If you are interested, fill out your contact details and I will contact you to tell you more about the interview and obtain your consent. When you are finished the survey, please tear off the completed interview invitation (last page of survey) and put it in the secure drop box B at your program’s office. Please put the completed survey in the secure drop box A at your program’s office.

Some of the questions about experiences in your program may cause feelings of distress for you. If at any time, during or after completing the survey, you require assistance in handling this distress, please contact VIU Counselling Services reception between 8 AM and 4 PM by telephone at 250-740-6416 or in person at Building 200, 3rd floor. This counselling is free of charge.

The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. Please do not put your name anywhere on this survey or provide other identifying information. Paper data will be kept in the researcher’s locked home safe and shredded in June 2019. Computer data will be stored on the researcher’s password protected home computer and deleted on the same date.
Participation in this survey is voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question for any reason and you may stop completing the survey at any time without any negative consequences to you. However, once the survey is submitted, responses cannot be excluded since they cannot be distinguished from other survey results.

If you have any concerns about your treatment as a participant in this research, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer at reb@viu.ca or by telephone at 250-753-3245 ext. 2665.

The results of this study will be published at VIU in June, 2016 and may also be made available to my colleagues in the Faculty of Trades.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. The return of your completed survey indicates your consent to participate in this research and for information you provide to be included in study results.

Please keep a copy of this Survey Letter of Consent for your records. Thank you for your time!
Appendix F: Student Interview Consent Form

Together We Stand: Examining Learning Communities in Trades Programs

Researcher: Rita Gower
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Vancouver Island University
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Supervisor: Dr. Rachel Moll
Faculty of Education
Vancouver Island University
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250-753-3245 ext. 2161

I am an instructor in the Culinary Arts, and Professional Baking and Pastry Arts Programs at VIU, and I am also a student in the Master Program in Educational Leadership at VIU. As such I have designed a study to learn more about the use of learning communities in the VIU trades programs and how students feel they help or hinder their academic progress. As a student who is enrolled in a trades program and a learning community at VIU, I want to hear your perspective on how this style of learning is working for you. I expect the interview to last for approximately 60 minutes.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose to stop at any time without explanation or consequence to you. You may also choose not to answer specific interview questions. You may choose to withdraw from the study right up to the time of publishing in June, 2016. Should you choose to withdraw, please email me at the address listed above, and I will ensure any data relating to you is destroyed immediately.

The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential and your identity will remain anonymous. You will choose a pseudonym at the beginning of the interview and this is how you will be referred to in my study. With your permission, the interview will be recorded using speech-recognition software on an IPad. You will be provided with a typed transcript of the interview a few days after we speak and at that time, you may comment, clarify, or make changes to the transcript. With your permission, I may choose to include in this study, statements that you make during the course of this interview. The results of this study will be published at VIU. The study may also be shared with my colleagues in the Faculty of Trades at VIU. The interview transcripts will be deleted from my password protected home computer approximately three years after publication of the study in June, 2019. Paper transcripts will be kept in my locked home safe and will be shredded on the same date.
There is a possibility that some of my questions may bring up uncomfortable or distressing experiences for you. If at any time during or after the interview you want to stop and seek out support from a counsellor, please contact VIU Counselling Services reception between 8 AM and 4 PM by telephone at 250-740-6416 or in person in Building 200, 3rd floor. There is also a possibility that you could be identified by statements that you may make. However, I will make every effort to choose statements that do not reveal your identify. By participating in this study, you may be able to help faculty to better understand which parts of learning communities are the most effective for students. In this way, your contributions could help other students to be more successful in their academic efforts.

If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer, by telephone at 250-753-3245 ext. 2665, or by email at reb@viu.ca.

Please indicate your consent (or not) to the following aspects of the study:

I consent to having my interview audio recorded.                Yes           No

I consent to the researcher using statements I have made in the study.  Yes           No

I have read the above form, understand the information read, and understand that I can ask questions or withdraw at any time. I consent to participate in today’s research study.

________________________________________________________________________
Your name (Please print)

________________________________________________________________________
Your signature            Date
Appendix G: Interview Questions Protocol

Together We Stand: Examining Learning Communities in Trades Programs

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Counsellor: Vancouver Island University Counselling Services Reception
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The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of trades students enrolled in learning communities. Learning communities are thought to enhance the social and academic bonds forged between students, their teachers, and their institution. By strengthening these bonds, all students, regardless of external circumstances or risk factors, may experience higher rates of academic success and goal completion.

Scripted Introduction
Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I expect our conversation to last about one hour. This is a completely voluntary interview. If at any point, you are feeling uncomfortable with answering a question, you may choose not to answer it without any consequences. All information you share with me will be kept completely confidential. Your real name will not be used in the study. Right now, I would like you to choose a pseudonym which is how I will refer to your answers in my study. To make the information you share as confidential as possible, please do not name other people, or provide any other kind of identifying information about yourself or your family.
Your participation will help me to better understand the experiences of trades students who are enrolled in learning communities. I would like to hear how you feel about being in this type of learning environment and whether you feel you are a more successful student because of this. I’m also interested in hearing about how you work together with other students and whether you think this has helped or hindered you in your learning. Some of my questions may bring up uncomfortable emotions for you. If at any time you feel the need to stop or you need to talk to someone, I do have counselling information available. I will also provide you with this information after the interview.
Appendix H: Talking Circle Protocol and Sample Questions

Talking Circle Protocol

Whoever has the wooden spoon gets to talk. No cross-talk. Listen carefully, and respectfully.

We will go around a second time in case people have comments, questions, or something else to say.

Sample Questions

Day One:

- Where are you from?
- What made you choose VIU Culinary Arts for your program?
- What are you hoping to achieve here?

Day Two:

- What was a highlight for you from yesterday’s class?
- What do you think it takes to become a good cook?
- What do you think you need to work on to become a good cook?

Day Three: Show a short video clip on growth mindset.

- Do you think you have a fixed mindset, a growth mindset, or something in-between? Why?
- What do you think having a growth mindset would look like in this course? Give some examples.

Day Four:

- It’s the end of Week One! How’s it going?
- What learning really stood out for you?
• What are you going to focus on next week?

Day Seven: Back in the lab after a day in the big kitchen.

• What do you think the purpose of Orientation is?
• How was your first “in the big kitchen” day? Describe something you liked and/or a challenge.

Day Nine:

• Peer-to-peer teaching…What is it?
• Tell us one or two things that you think would make you an effective peer teacher.
• Can you think of any examples where you have done some peer-to-peer teaching?

Day 13: The day before a “black box” cooking competition.

• How are you feeling about tomorrow?
• What do you think you need to focus on to be successful tomorrow?
• Any tips or strategies you would like to share?

Final Day:

• Did you like participating in the talking circle? Why or why not?
• What do you think the biggest benefit of participating in the talking circle was for you, AND the class as a whole?