Background

Underserved students’ pathways to college tend to be more challenging, partly because they often have less access to resources, less college knowledge and preparation in the home, and often have to negotiate their identity once attending an institution of higher education (Park, 2007; Penn, 2006). Some of the factors that are correlated with not continuing to post-secondary education include students’ low socio-economic status being a first-generation student, and also being a student of color (Alamin, 2005; Blugold Beginnings Learning Community (BBLC) strives to make the transition from high school to college easier by enrolling underserved students through high school and building their transition into college. The Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse was established to help students overcome some of these hurdles. Students who participate in the Learning Communities have the opportunity to participate in numerous enrollment experiences, such as Jumpstart Camp and the Civil Rights Pilgrimage, and they are able to attend the University sponsored events as a group. Additionally, Learning Community members are paired with two mentors: a primary BBLC mentor at the University, and a faculty/staff mentor at the University setting, a job with the Blugold Beginnings mentoring program, a staff member who is available to advocate for students, and a peer member of the same or similar cultural background of students.

The purpose of the current research is to investigate whether students in the Learning Community perceive a significantly higher level of comfort in their campus environment when compared to a non-Learning Community student population. Researchers also investigate self-reported levels of comfort and extent of on-campus experiences by cohort to determine if the Learning Community students engage significantly more in on-campus activities or have more positive views of the University.

Method

Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community:

• Be established support networks on campus through campus organizations and formal relationships with students and faculty who identify as multicultural, students of color are better able to experience a sense of community (Bonstein & Breis, 2006).
• Provide opportunities to learn about the cultural experiences of others and have the opportunity to experience cultural diversity (Hernandez & Heron, 2006).
• Provide academic support to the students in the form of personal tutoring, which a mentor can provide (Breis, 2005).
• Provide meaningful enrichment activities to the students (Bonstein & Breis, 2006).
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Participants

Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community: A Comparison of Campus Involvement and Persistence

Virgil Ward II, Abigail Nygaard, & Elizabeth Harris
Heather Harris, Jodi Thesing-Ritter, & Shelly Vogeli

Retention of Students by Cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Students in the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community (N = 25)</th>
<th>Students in the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community (N = 41)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BBLC</td>
<td>Students did not perform significantly higher (M = 3.20, SD = .50) than students in the control group (M = 2.83, SD = .37, p &gt; .05)</td>
<td>Students did not perform significantly higher (M = 4.50, SD = .50) than students in the control group (M = 3.20, SD = .50, p &gt; .05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
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Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of Comfort Using Campus Facilities by Cohort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BBLC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBLC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Credit Load by Cohort

| BBLC | Control Group |
|-----------------------------------------------------|
| BBLC | Control Group |

Discussion

The overall findings suggest that the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community students are more comfortable using campus facilities, report higher levels of involvement in campus organization, and also felt that their opinions were valued more than students in the control group.

One finding that was counter to previous expectations was that of the students who responded to the survey, only students in the Learning Community reported that they were more likely to participate in campus clubs than were students in the control. This finding was anticipated since Learning Community members were more likely to have higher levels of comfort in engaging in campus events and are active members in the Learning Community. While the retention rates of second year students in the Learning Community was not significantly higher than those of students in the control, the trend appears to be in the expected direction. A larger sample size over the next two years will allow for clearer interpretation.

It was not unexpected that BBLC students took a significantly greater number of classes per semester than those in the control group, and had a significantly higher GPA. While participation in campus events is not higher on average, the difference was not significant.

One interesting finding is the percentage of students who reported experiencing a language barrier on campus. In both the cohort, over 50% of those who responded to the survey reported having experienced a language barrier at some point on campus.

One limitation to this study is that members of the Learning Community self-selected into the program making it difficult to determine whether the trends in retention, interest in campus organizations, or reported comfort using campus facilities would generalize to other multicultural students on campus. Since participants were not randomly assigned, these would also differ in motivation and overall willingness to participate in campus activities because students in the Blugold Beginnings Learning Community and other multicultural students on campus. Another limitation is that a limited number of students responded to the online survey, despite offering an incentive.

Researchers plan to continue tracking the first two Learning Community cohorts as well as the control group over the next two years to determine whether students who participate in the BBLC graduate from the University at a significantly higher rate than those in the control group. Researchers also plan a survey both groups again in the future and offer a different incentive in an attempt to improve the response rates of multicultural students in the control group.

Multicultural Students’ Responses to Survey Items

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Acknowledgements

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