



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

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Background

Underrepresented 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; Perma, 2006). Some of the factors that are correlated with not continuing on to post-secondary education include students' low socio-economic status, being a first-generation student, and also being a student of color (Ishizumi, 2003). The Blugold Beginnings Learning Community (BBLC) strives to make the transition from high school to college easier by supporting underrepresented students through high school and facilitating their transitions into college.

The Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire was established to help students overcome some of these hurdles. Students who participate in the Learning Community have the opportunity to participate in numerous college enrichment experiences, such as Jumpstart Camp and the Civil Rights Pilgrimage, and they are able to attend these University sponsored events as a group. Additionally, Learning Community members are paired with two mentors: a veteran BBLC student as well as a University faculty/staff member. Incorporated into the program are goal setting exercises, a job with the Blugold Beginnings mentoring program, a staff member who is available to advocate for students, and a peer group composed of multicultural students.

The following research has been incorporated into the development of the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community:

- By establishing support networks on campus through campus organizations and forming relationships with students and faculty who identify as multicultural, students of color are better able to experience a sense of community (Herdson & Hirt, 2004).
- African American students and students of color are considerably more concerned about their ability to pay for secondary education and whether the long-term financial benefits outweigh the costs (Perma, 2006).
- Mapping out academic support plans and familiarizing students with academic support services before students arrive as freshmen on campus can improve levels of social integration for underrepresented students (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

The purpose of the current research is to investigate whether there are differences in personality traits and motivation for obtaining a post-secondary education when comparing students in the program to students in the control group. Researchers also investigate self-reported levels of comfort, academic outcomes, and past experiences on campus by cohort to determine if the Learning Community students report feeling significantly more confident and connected to campus when compared to their peers who are not a member of the Learning Community.

Method

Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community

Each year, 25 incoming freshmen students are recruited into the learning community through post participation in the Blugold Beginnings High School Program and also through referral from school counselors. Students in the Learning Community are not eligible to participate in other multicultural retention programs on campus, and begin the academic year by attending the Jumpstart Camp a week before the academic year begins. Students from this past three years of programming (three cohorts of up to 25 students per cohort) have been tracked using archival records on their persistence at the University, academic outcomes, credit completion, and their involvement in extracurricular activities on campus. Students who participate in this learning community are also invited to participate in a 20-minute survey via Qualtrics that assesses students on a multitude of factors.

Instruments

The Qualtrics survey consists of a combination of open-ended and close-ended questions that addressed participants' experiences as undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Students reported their experiences regarding their participation in student organizations, meetings with their advisor, as well as numerous other factors. Additionally, participants are asked to respond to several Likert scale questions that assess their feelings of acceptance on campus. One example item in this section included: "I feel like I belong on campus."

To assess personality differences between cohorts, researchers included the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). This measure consists of ten items, each with two items measuring each of the Big Five personality factors.

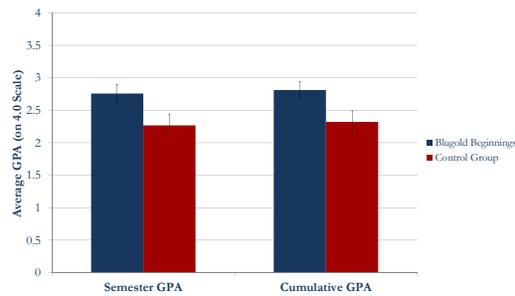
To assess differences in students' motivations for attending post-secondary education, researchers utilized several subscales from the Revised Motivations for Attending University Questionnaire (Phinney, Dentis, & Osoira, 2006). These measures assess students' motivation to reach their career plans, whether students felt encouraged to complete higher education, whether students continued their education to prove their worth, and also if they were motivated to provide for their families.

Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community Participants
Sixty-eight students currently enrolled in the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community were invited to participate in the current research. A total of 55 students completed the Qualtrics survey. Each member of the Learning Community is multicultural, with over 50% of the students also identifying as low-income, and over 50% identifying as first-generation.

Control Group Comparison
Sixty-eight other multicultural students at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire were matched with Learning Community participants based on ethnicity, socio-economic status, first generation status, ACT score, gender, and major. Of the invited participants, 22 completed the online Qualtrics survey.

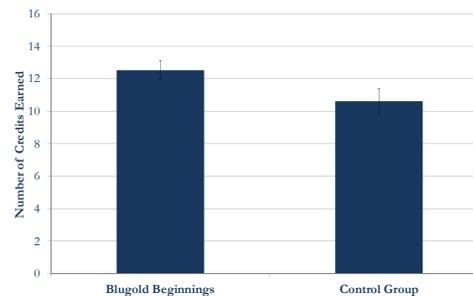
Results

Comparison of GPA by Cohort



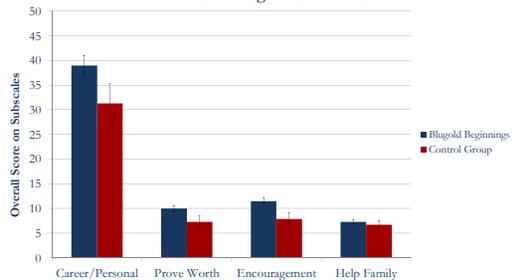
Students in the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community ($N=67$) earned significantly higher semester GPAs ($M=2.76$, $SD=1.13$) in comparison to the control group ($N=67$, $M=2.27$, $SD=1.42$, $t(132)=2.20$, $p=.029$). Additionally, members of the BBLC earned significantly higher cumulative GPAs ($M=2.81$, $SD=1.09$) than participants in the control group ($M=2.32$, $SD=1.38$, $t(132)=2.32$, $p=.022$).

Credits Earned by Cohort



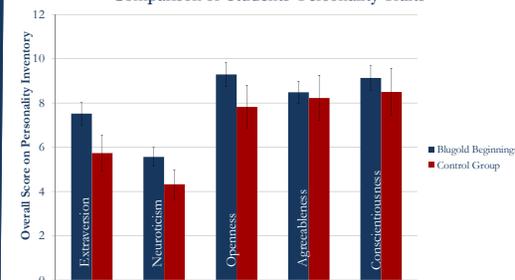
Students in the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community ($N=67$, $M=12.52$, $SD=4.85$) did not take significantly more credits per semester than participants in the control group ($N=67$, $M=10.61$, $SD=6.33$, $t(132)=1.96$, $p=.05$).

Motivation for Higher Education



In regards to their level of motivation to succeed in higher education programs, students in the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community ($N=55$) reported proving their worth to others ($M=9.06$, $SD=4.72$) as significantly more important to them in comparison to the control group ($N=22$, $M=7.27$, $SD=5.46$, $t(72)=2.14$, $p=.036$). BBLC students also reported having received encouragement ($M=11.48$, $SD=4.53$) as significantly contributing to their motivation at a higher rate than did students in the control group ($M=7.86$, $SD=5.48$, $t(72)=2.95$, $p=.004$). However, students in the BBLC did not report career and personal goals ($M=38.94$, $SD=14.87$) as significantly contributing to their motivation when compared to students in the control group ($M=31.27$, $SD=19.01$, $t(72)=1.86$, $p>.05$). Additionally, BBLC students did not report helping family ($M=7.29$, $SD=3.37$) as being significantly more important to their motivation when compared to the control group ($M=6.68$, $SD=4.16$, $t(72)=.66$, $p>.05$).

Comparison of Students' Personality Traits



Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community students' ($N=55$) reported level of extraversion ($M=7.52$, $SD=3.69$) was not significantly different from control group students ($M=5.73$, $SD=3.86$). Also, BBLC students' level of neuroticism ($M=5.56$, $SD=3.06$) did not differ significantly from students in the control group ($M=4.32$, $SD=3.05$). Similarly, levels of openness for students in the BBLC ($M=5.87$, $SD=4.64$) were not significantly different from those of the control group ($M=5.29$, $SD=4.64$). Students in BBLC also did not differ in their level of agreeableness ($M=8.48$, $SD=3.61$) from students in the control group ($M=8.23$, $SD=4.80$). Finally, BBLC students' reported level of conscientiousness ($M=9.13$, $SD=4.04$) was also not significantly different from those of the control group students ($M=8.50$, $SD=5.08$), all $p>.05$.

Comparison of Students' Feelings Towards Higher Education

Question/Item	Mean	SD	p
I feel like I belong on campus. (on a 1-7 scale)	5.28	1.41	.24
I am comfortable using campus facilities. (on a 1-7 scale)	5.65	.93	
On average, how many hours do you study per week?	12.54	7.67	.66
I am interested in being a member of a University organization. (on a 1-7 scale)	6.02	.38	.55
There are people I can go to on campus if I need help. (on a 1-7 scale)	6.17	.77	.21
I am respected and valued by my peers on campus. (on a 1-7 scale)	5.03	1.08	.52
Events on campus reflect my interests. (on a 1-7 scale)	4.93	1.22	.89
I have worked at a job that will help build my resume. (on a 1-7 scale)	5.80	1.03	.04
I feel comfortable with my current financial situation. (on a 1-7 scale)	4.20	1.88	.69
The University cares about multicultural students. (on a 1-7 scale)	5.22	1.47	.003

BBLC (N=55)
Control Group (N=22)
 $p<.05$ $p>.05$

Discussion

The overall findings suggest that the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community students tend to maintain higher semester and cumulative GPAs than the students they were matched to in the control group despite investigators not finding a significant difference between groups in the number of credits completed by students.

On measures of students' motivation for attending post-secondary education, students in the Blugold Beginnings Multicultural Learning Community reported proving their worth and having received encouragement from others as having motivated them significantly more than the students who responded from the control group. Students in the BBLC did not show any significant differences on measures of their personality traits from students in the control cohort, however the measure of extraversion appears to be approaching significance.

One finding that was counter to researchers' expectations was that students in the learning community reported that they were significantly less likely to feel like the University cares about multicultural students than their counterparts who responded from the control cohort. This finding was unexpected since Learning Community members are encouraged to participate in University events and campus organizations.

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 cumulative and semester GPA or whether they have work experience they felt would improve their future resume would generalize to other multicultural students on campus. Since participants were not randomly assigned, there could also be differences in students' overall willingness to engage in campus activities between 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 control group survey, despite investigators offering an incentive.

Researchers plan to continue tracking the three cohorts of Learning Community students as well as the control groups over the next few years to determine whether students who participate in the BBLC tend to graduate from the University at a significantly higher rate than the students in the control group. Researchers also plan to survey both groups again in the future and potentially seek additional funding in an effort to offer a different incentive to participants in an attempt to improve the response rate from multicultural students in the control group.

The results of this study will also be used in an effort to provide feedback to Blugold Beginnings to further develop the Multicultural Learning Community and program outcomes.

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