

Program Transformation to Enhance Student Success

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ABSTRACT

Transforming developmental education to promote and enhance student success is an ongoing process. This paper discusses how the Cross Curricular Career Community (C4) was developed and how frequent faculty discussion guides program evolution. Through the lens of business management theory, program changes grounded in personal and professional accountability have led to positive impacts on interactions among faculty, students, and the program in support of student agency, responsibility, and perseverance.

Keywords: developmental education, course acceleration, academic advising, learning community, discourse analysis, student mentoring

The Cross Curricular Career Community (C4) at Ferris State University is a multi-disciplinary, multi-semester learning community for students with three developmental placements in English, math, and reading. The University's Retention and Student Success unit, in collaboration with the College of Arts, Sciences, and Education, started the program to close the retention gap between the University's developmental and non-developmental population.

The original structure of the C4 program was inspired by the findings of the Learning Communities Demonstration (LCD) project, which revealed that after the one-semester interventions ended, the modest academic gains generally dissipated (Visher et al., 2008; Visher et al., 2012; Scrivener et al., 2008). A group of faculty and administrators concerned about retention of students with developmental placements met to discuss possible interventions, and from those initial discussions, the C4 program was developed

(Table 1). In an effort to push beyond the limited one-semester gains, courses extended past one semester and the C4 faculty formed a faculty learning community to provide ongoing student support and assessment. This frequent assessment led to revision of program elements to support student success.

Since its start in 2016, C4 faculty have met twice monthly. The faculty group consists of cohort instructors, the program advisor, and the program coordinator. Our conversations have centered around the following questions: How is each student progressing? What issues appeared to arise from the cohort as a whole? What structures, interventions, and supports are necessary for student success? This paper details changes arising from those faculty meetings. Specific changes to the program to enhance students' learning can be seen in the comparison between Table 1, which shows the initial program layout, to Table 2, which shows the current status.

Table 1: C4 Program Elements: Program Inception

Original Placements: Developmental English, Math, Reading	
Cohort:	
Size: 20- 24	
Selection by Retention and Student Success staff	
Cohort Courses:	
<p>First Year Fall</p> <p>Beginning Algebra with Structured Learning Assistance (student-led help sessions) English 1 with lab (accelerated from initial placement) Freshman Seminar</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading 1 	<p>First Year Spring</p> <p>Intermediate Algebra with SLA</p> <p>English 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading 2
Supports:	
Academic Advising (provided by reading instructor, principally in first year or until program entry)	
Required study sessions (twice per week, both semesters of first year)	

Table 2: C4 Program Elements: Current'

Original Placements: Developmental English, Math, Reading		
Cohort:		
Size: 20- 24		
Opt-in		
Cohort Courses:		
First Year Fall	First Year Spring	Second Year Spring
<i>Intermediate Algebra with lab</i> <i>(accelerated ji'om in ilia' placement)</i>		
English 1 with lab (accelerated from initial placement)		<i>English 2</i>
Freshman Seminar <i>(with program framework)</i>	Reading 1	
Supports:	Reading 2	
Academic Advising <i>(provided by coordinator, continued throughout duration of university enrollment)</i>		
Required and <i>optional</i> study sessions (both semesters of first year)		
<i>Program Framework</i>		
<i>Enhanced Learning Points (applied to all cohort courses)</i> Student Mentoring		

¹ Program changes indicated in italics.

The Pilot (2016-17)

The information in Table 1 applies to the Pilot (C4P). Cohort courses included English (English 1 and English 2), math (Beginning Algebra and Intermediate Algebra), reading (Reading 1 and Reading 2), and freshman seminar (orientation course required by all incoming freshman). We moved participants from remedial English to the first English composition course and added a lab session to provide extra support. Our decision to accelerate aligned with prior results that showed promise with that practice (Jaggers et al., 2015; Asmussen & Horn, 2014; Bettinger et al., 2013; Parker, 2012). Structured Learning Assistance (SLA) accompanied both math courses. This was a typical Math Department practice for Beginning Algebra but an added feature for the C4 section of Intermediate

Algebra. We included two required study sessions to encourage students to set aside regular study time, and students were required to meet regularly with their advisor.

Upon completion of the academic year, when compared with non-C4 students, C4P participants did better in math, reading, and English 1. English 2 was a different matter. The English, Literature, and World Languages Department recommends that students take English 2 in their second year or later. It was believed that the extra support structure afforded by the C4 program would mitigate that recommendation; it did not. The C4P students were unable to handle the expected independence of a second-year course during their first year at the University.

The discussion that arose during our twice monthly meetings about the students' lack of independence necessary for courses like English 2 uncovered a more pervasive issue:

although the C4P students had strong social camaraderie, those connections failed to carry over to the academic realm. We also noted persistent difficulties with perseverance and follow-through across all cohort courses. Despite our attempts to build a culture of support and accountability, the C4P students were mired in behavior that likely contributed to their being developmental in the first place: a tendency to do what was minimally required, to point a finger of blame when things didn't go well, and to attribute poor performance to a lack of ability. At the same time, we noted strong career interests and a desire to make a good living. This contradictory dichotomy - "I want a good job," but "I give up when things get hard" - led us to the business management literature to find a solution.

C4 Year One (2017-18)

The first change resulting from Pilot year faculty conversations was to seek an evidence-based framework based on personal accountability. The Oz Principle, a book published by Connors et al. (2004) for the business/corporate world, emphasized employee and organizational accountability to increase profitability. We found their principles applicable and compelling. In their work, Connors et al. (2004) discovered that a key to increased productivity lay in changing employee mindset from 'below the line' thinking (doing what's minimally necessary and issuing blame when things don't work out) to 'above the line' thinking (how can I be proactive to make things better even when it may involve risk). The authors were inspired by the Wizard of Oz story: a "journey towards awareness" in which the Oz characters, as they traveled the yellow brick road, moved from "ignorance to knowledge, from fear to courage, from paralysis to powerfulness, from victimization to accountability" (Connors et al., 2004, p. 4). In that context, Connors et al. (2004) devised four action steps, which they referred to as the Oz Principle: See it: acknowledgement of the reality of a situation; Own It: acceptance of full ownership of

behaviors contributing to current circumstances; Solve It: establishment of a plan to tackle challenges; Do It: implementation of productive change and accepting responsibility for that change. We felt integration of the Oz Principle into the C4 program might help our students transcend past and present challenges through personal accountability and perseverance, the essence of above the line thinking. As an operational step, we added Enhanced Learning Points (ELP) to each cohort course. The goal of ELP, in alignment with the Solve It, Do It steps of the Oz Principle, is to help students develop habits of mind exhibited by traditionally successful students. In each cohort course, ELP accounts for about 10% of the course grade. Students earn ELP by attending office hours, submitting assignments early, seeking help at the Academic Tutoring and/or Literacies Centers, revising tests and quizzes, working well on collaborative classroom activities, and demonstrating effort well beyond minimal expectations.

The second change involved English. Our faculty conversations during the Pilot phase led us to see Reading 2 as a necessary bridge between English 1 and English 2. Shifting English 2 to the spring semester of the second year sandwiched a semester of non-cohort course work in the fall semester of the second year. This change would maintain students' connection with the C4 program and improve the quality of personal connections within the cohort.

Year 1 faculty conversations uncovered two additional issues to consider. First, instructors reported some students' tendency to see ELP as extra credit or as being unnecessary. A second problem involved participation. Most of the participants contributed to a positive working culture. A handful did not; they had a disruptive effect on the group. Examination of the procedures to determine what could be changed in the program to alleviate such disruptions revealed that part of the problem was that the Pilot and Year 1 cohort students were placed into the C4

program by Retention and Student Success staff rather than opting in.

C4 Year 2 (2018-19)

Faculty observations of the Year 1 group led to several program changes. First, to strengthen cohort culture, we moved from staff selection of students to opt-in admission. This involved sending invitations to eligible students and placing decision-making in their hands in alignment with the See it, Own It steps of the Oz Principle Framework. This change also reflects related literature on the importance of student choice and student engagement (Adams et al., 2017; Riggs & Gholar, 2009).

The second change involved further course acceleration. Assessment of student progress during the Pilot and Year 1 revealed that students could be accelerated in math and that such a move, together with acceleration in English, would help reduce time-to-degree, limit student debt, and serve as an incentive for the newly developed opt-in feature (Boatman, 2021; Jaggars et al., 2015; Venezia & Hughes, 2013).

The third and fourth changes were related to the Oz Framework. For the freshman seminar, the focus of the course shifted from simple identification of resources to strategic utilization and leverage of those resources. Also, one of the two weekly study sessions became optional, and attendance became tied to ELP. By choosing to attend the optional study session, students showed more evidence of "above the line" behavior and took ownership of academic progress.

While these changes appeared to show promise, Year 2 faculty conversations uncovered several patterns. First, students were not considering their short-term and long-term academic goals and their own role in achieving them. Second, students were still not internalizing the rationale for ELP nor realizing the role that Oz Framework could play in their academic success. Thus, we considered the possibility of incorporating discussion of the framework more intentionally into advising

conversations. We thought we should move the advisor role to a non-cohort instructor as a means of disconnecting the advisor/student relationship from instruction and as a means of engaging an additional faculty member.

C4 Year 3 (2019-20)

Student academic goal planning and helping students realize the role that ELP can play in their success became a strong element of advising. The program coordinator, who does not teach a cohort course, assumed the principal advising role. Because of his administrative experience, he was well-positioned to recruit, to advise, and to guide transition into academic programs. In that context, we expanded advising to include greater personal reflection on academic progress. This entailed identifying weaknesses and how to address them. For instance, when a student was doing poorly in a course, the advisor and student tried to determine the source of the student's performance issue and formulate a plan to remediate it. Sometimes, this involved adjusting the student's approach to studying; at other times, it meant seeking academic support (tutoring, Writing Center, etc.), both of which are inherent in ELP. On occasion, reflection on academic performance led to reconsideration of program choice. These advising conversations were meant to incorporate, more intentionally, the See It, Own It, Solve It, Do It steps of the Oz Principle, as the advisor and student collaboratively sought to seek solutions to support student success.

Academic Year (2020-21)

The pandemic shutdown occurred in March 2020. As a result, we decided not to recruit a new cohort for the 2020-21 academic year, although we continued to support students from the previous cohorts. During the 2020-21 academic year, faculty met via Zoom to discuss how to support students during the pandemic and to work through additional program revision arising from our ongoing

conversations. During this time, we realized that our faculty discussions were somewhat inefficient as we would often fixate on individual student issues over which we had limited control. Moving to Zoom enabled us to record our faculty conversations. This provided a means to start a formal and methodical analysis of our conversations through discourse analysis, a qualitative method used to draw meaning from language, in our case, vocal language (Duffy & O'Rourke, 2015; Dudley, 2013; Mullet, 2018).

C4 Year Four (2021-22) and Year Five (2022-23)

Since its inception, C4 faculty have met regularly to discuss individual student progress, to consider interventions, to provide student assistance, and to generate ideas for program revision. During Year 4 and 5, we continued the formal analysis of our conversations to help us better understand our how our conversations did or did not assist students' growth as autonomous and successful learners, as well as increase the effectiveness and efficacy of our interactions in our faculty group.

Preliminary results of our discourse analysis showed that we spent a disproportionate amount of time on non-academic topics connected to individual students who struggled the most. In response, we created a process to systematically assess each students' academic performance, noting areas of success and areas of concern, along with action steps for follow-through. As we transformed our conversations, our meetings became more balanced in terms of attention paid to each student, with a greater focus on academic performance. We continued to encourage students to seek counseling and other support mechanisms not related to academics. These changes have helped us better identify and remediate student academic

issues, facilitate more effective planning, support reflection on instructional practice and program impact, and provide students with professional help when needed.

While we incorporated the Oz Framework in each course through use of ELP, made it a focal point of the freshman seminar, and connected it to the weekly study session program, we still had difficulty with student buy-in. One of the members of the faculty group proposed student mentoring as a means of better supporting the Oz Framework. Seeing and working with a more senior, successful C4 student who had overcome similar academic challenges would help the steps of the Oz Principle become more tangible. Research on student mentoring supported this idea (Andreanoff, 2016; Hagler et al., 2021; Shaughnessy, 2013). As a result, in Year 5, we started a formal mentoring program to support the development of leadership capabilities of returning students and provide incoming students with academic and social peer support in alignment with the Oz Framework. Our incoming students have told us they appreciate the sense of connection they received through the regularly scheduled meetings with older students. And mentors reported that mentoring younger students had a positive effect on their confidence and that becoming a role model to others had a positive impact on their own personal accountability.

Program Summary

At the end of the first year of study, C4 students from the first four cohorts had a higher average cumulative GPA, fewer D, F, and withdrawal (W) grades, more credits completed per student, and a higher probability of returning to the university for the second year when compared with non-participants with three developmental placements.

Table 3²: Comparative First Year Performance, C4 Versus Non-C4 (2012-21)

Group	<i>n</i>	Cumulative Average GPA	Number of DFW Credits Per Student	Cumulative Credits Earned Per Student	Percentage Returning for Year 2
C4	90	3.10	3.4	20.2	74%
Non-C4	260	2.61	6.2	18.3	59%

² Data for C4 did not include the Pilot year, as we were just getting started, and did not include the fifth and most recent cohort because end-of-year data from that group had not processed at the time this paper was written.

The data presented in Table 3 shows the promise of the C4 program in promoting student success. Since its inception, cohort faculty have engaged in ongoing conversations about individual student progress and the efficacy of program elements. The C4 program has continued to evolve. We started with a collection of cohort courses and have since transformed into a comprehensive program that features course acceleration, relational advising, student mentoring, and required and

optional study sessions. The program is informed and guided by a personal accountability framework taken from business management literature, the Oz Principle. The process of ongoing improvement is driven by regular, intentional conversations among program faculty. In that sense, C4 is a dual learning community that consists of students on one hand and faculty on the other, with student success as its principal goal and a spirit of transformation as its guiding principle.

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