



## A Time for Change: Implementation of a Community of Learners Model

### Abstract

Although the concept of learning communities is not new, many colleges and universities use learning communities differently. This study examines how using a community of learners at the end of undergraduate education programs, rather than at the onset, is an effective way to organize undergraduate education. A comparison of students who did not experience a community of learners model with students who did is provided. The data reveal that students in the community of learner's configuration fared better in several areas, including feeling a sense of belonging, feeling comfortable sharing perspectives, and having a broader understanding of different pedagogies. Also discussed is the process utilized by our university in implementing the community of learners model.

Many colleges and universities are turning to the concept of "learning communities" or "communities of learners" with the hope that they can help improve the educational climate of their schools. The implementation of a community of learners model at our university was the result of a combination of factors: required state licensure changes, options for new pedagogical models, and a faculty ready to explore a variety of real world teaching experiences for early childhood education majors. Together, these factors suggested that the ground was fertile for change. Like many other institutions across the country, our university embarked upon a challenge to create a program that would address state mandated changes by altering program content. However, the challenge would be to do so under a different teaching approach. A Community of Learners (COL) model, one that suggests a more interaction- oriented, stimulating environment, was chosen as an important learning vehicle for implementing these new program ideas. Through the collaboration of university faculty and educators in the community, a program was developed to meet the needs of all stakeholders involved and test one of the latest pedagogical trends in higher education. The terms community of learners and learning community are used interchangeably in the education world. To remain consistent, we will use the term community of learners (COL) throughout the paper.

### What is a Community of Learners?

Despite numerous articles written about COLs and their current resurgence on many college and university campuses, standard definition for a COL does not appear to exist. Baker (1999) defined a COL as a small group that includes teachers, administrators, and students who share a common goal and have opportunity for face-to-face interaction. Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) defined it as something that changes "the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students" (p. 5). Matthews (1986) provided a more specific description for a learning community, but unlike Baker, did not see it as being necessarily a small group: "Learning communities characteristically involve from twenty-five to one hundred students working with three or four faculty members. Built around common themes, they provide participants with an integrated learning experience in what quickly becomes a family like environment" (p. 44).

Although definitions of COLs involve several distinctions, they also include similarities. All definitions include an involvement of students with faculty and close interactions on a regular basis. Some other key characteristics include encouraging integration of the curriculum, helping students establish social support networks, providing settings where students can be socialized to the expectations of college, and bringing faculty together in more meaningful ways by encouraging teachers to interact with each other as not only teachers, but also as learners (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

The literature on COLs focuses on traditional college freshman who participate in such communities in order to ease their transition into college life by making classrooms feel more manageable (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Hill, 1982; Smith & Hunter, 1988). This has limited the way that universities implement COLs with undergraduate students. We believe that this study will broaden the way COLs are viewed.

This innovative way of using COLs is unique to the literature in that it utilizes a COL approach during the final three semesters of students' college experiences. Additionally, this use of a COL has the potential to carry over to post-college experiences as students begin their teaching careers. The possibility exists that students who have been involved in the type of COL presented here will be more likely to collaborate with each other after they graduate. It is also likely that they will be better prepared to collaborate with other professionals, because they will have had ample opportunities to work with the same students over time.

### Benefits of a Community of Learners

Students who have had an opportunity to participate in a COL have remarked on the strong sense of belonging and friendship that develops during their participation, the collaborative learning that takes place, and the opportunity that occurs to share multiple perspectives (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). All three of these variables are important in any effective college preparation program, including teacher education (Gabelnick et al.; Shapiro & Levine).

### Sense of Belonging

Being a member of a COL allows students to form strong bonds, friendships, group identities, and cohesion with others (Matthews, 1986) because students are not spending just a quarter or semester with the same people, but rather three or four quarters or semesters. This extra time spent with a cohort provides the individual with a chance to work with people closely over time, allowing them to get to know individuals better and form meaningful, long lasting friendships that may be otherwise difficult to achieve in a one-time-only class.

One COL, for example, met weekly and had a ritual of beginning with every person sharing some great success experienced that week (Calderon, 1999). Through such rituals, members get a better sense of the people who are a part of their COL and get to know them on a more personal level.

A student's sense of belonging is important to learning. Students need to feel comfortable with their peers in order to share their ideas and perspectives openly. Students often have questions and comments, but are not open to sharing them because they are shy or not comfortable with their peers. Participation in a COL allows students to build rapport and comfort over time in order to become more open about their beliefs and perspectives.

### Collaborative Learning

Gabelnick et al. (1990) helps illustrate the importance that collaboration played in the lives of those who participated in a COL: "Perhaps the most important thing I am learning about learning was that it is easier, and more logical, not to suffer through it by myself. Asking teachers and other students for their ideas or criticisms is so beneficial" (p. 68).

After experiencing a COL, another student from LaGuardia Community College had this to say about collaboration:

When we began writing on the computer I would sit in my chair. Then I began looking at the screen next to me, checking out what Cathy was writing and discussing it with her. Pretty soon, the whole row was comparing notes, and by the end of the quarter, I would get up and walk around to see what my friends were writing, offer them suggestions and get ideas from them. (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 68)

Research has shown that when students and teachers work and learn together on focused tasks, their learning and production is greatly enhanced (Joyce, Wolf, & Calhoun, 1993). In situations where a student or teacher is working with a more competent individual, the learner can advance even more because the individual is extending his or her zone of proximal development and coming closer to attaining maximum potential in a particular domain (Vygotsky, 1978). A collaborative environment allows students to achieve their potential, while also establishing friendships and relationships with fellow community members. This type of collaboration is particularly important for future teachers to understand in order to best teach the students in their own classes and to begin to acknowledge the important role peers can have in the learning process.

Another key element of collaborative learning is the opportunity for academic discussion to take place around classroom and school-related activities. These discussions may not emerge if students are encouraged to compete with one another for grades instead of collaborating or sharing their ideas with others. Below is a remark from a State University of New York at Stony Brook student regarding the issue of academic discussion:

I have come to appreciate the importance of academic discussion with my fellow students. I spend much more time discussing what I learn in school with my friends, instead of just discussing school. This interaction has given me a new perspective on my education. I have also realized how much I miss out in school by not being involved and dedicated to my work. I have also been inspired to contemplate more on the work I do. I don't just take the easy way out in an assignment. (Gabelnick et al., 1990, pp. 68-69)

Thus, a COL is more than a place to form friendships and complete work together; it is also a place for members to come together and construct a collective commitment to what they are pursuing or studying. Seeing others dedicated to their learning inspires students to the same commitment. As the student above suggests, a COL is a place to contemplate work and discuss it with fellow members in order to achieve a new perspective on what is being learned. As Shapiro & Levine (1999) suggested, "Students in learning communities begin to see peers as partners in the learning process" (p. 175).

### Multiple Perspectives

The friendship and teamwork that develops in a COL also provides students the opportunity to discover what their fellow community members have to say about various aspects of the course and curriculum. This is further enhanced as students discover that they hold differing points of view, particularly regarding the learning process (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Below, a student from LaGuardia Community College who was enrolled in an American Social History course shares how other students' perspectives helped the student see things more clearly while

participating in a COL:

We were seventeen to seventy years old, all different races and religions, and had lived in this country all our lives or for only a few months. We shared what we knew. For example, Bernard, our seventy-year-old, hadn't been around in 1877, but he lived through the great Depression in the 1930's, and he told us about that. It helped us understand what happened to the Grand Army of Starvation. (Gabelnick et al., p. 69)

Hearing the perspectives of others can help students understand that they are not alone in the learning process and that others with varying experiences can help them to understand the realities more clearly. It allows students to see things from the perspectives of other people and understand how those views may vary from their own, as one North Seattle Community College student said:

. . . in this class I've heard some brilliant things from other students. I've come to most of my insights through other people. I've really had to look at the way I've been listening to people, and my prejudices in shutting other people's ideas down, and of thinking that I know where the answers spring from. (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 70)

This student and many others discovered that listening to all people was important and that shutting down when certain people were speaking was limiting in what they could learn. Participation in the COL helped them respect other people's voices and what others had to say about things. The COL served two benefits in this instance: first, it allowed the student to gain access to voices of people that would normally have been blocked out and ignored; and second, it provided a context for becoming an active listener, respecting the voices and experiences of others. This type of respect for others develops as students grow and learn together in their COL.

#### From Past to Future: A Framework for Proposed Changes

When the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) announced its intention to change the teacher certification process, teacher education programs across the state found that they needed to examine existing programs and make changes in order to meet the new state requirements. The options for obtaining a certificate to teach young children in the state before this announcement were complicated. One could (a) get a basic 1-8 certificate to work with children in Grades 1-8, (b) add a Kindergarten validation to a 1-8 certificate, (c) get a basic PreK certificate to work with children aged birth through 3, or (d) add a PreK validation to an existing 1- 8 certificate. Each of these options required a different program of study and different field experiences. The structure of these certification programs influenced the structure of the Early Childhood Department at our university. During this time, the certification in early childhood (either a kindergarten or a preschool validation) was an appendage to the elementary teaching certificate (Grades 1-8).

During this time, the elementary education students at our university were no different from other undergraduates across the state. They were working toward teaching certificates by taking a series of courses that were divided into teaching blocks. Language arts, mathematics, science and social studies methods courses were each accompanied by field experiences in which students had opportunities to practice their teaching techniques. This program culminated with a student teaching experience; however, students were allowed to take each of the methods courses leading up to student teaching in whatever order they chose. For the present study, students enrolled in this program will be referred to as "Old Program" students.

The proposed changes would make an impact in preparing teachers in several ways. First, prospective teachers would work toward a license to teach instead of a certificate to teach. This license would be valid for no more than 5 years and would need to be renewed after each 5-year period. This requirement to renew licenses every 5 years, regardless of years of experience or degrees held, would serve as a way to encourage teachers to commit themselves to lifelong learning and to continually seeking new and better ways to educate children.

Second, licensure for elementary teachers would be divided into two categories: pre-kindergarten through third grade and fourth grade through eighth grade. This change had multiple rationales. To begin with, the proposal included a license to work with preschool children. Prior to this time, the credentials needed to be a preschool teacher were far less stringent. One could obtain a validation to teach preschool by taking only a few courses at the undergraduate level. The new license, however, included curriculum and instruction for teaching preschool children within the bachelor degree program. This would mean that anyone with a license to teach pre-kindergarten through third grade had received rigorous training in meeting the needs of all children, including children in preschool.

The decision to divide the licenses between the third- and fourth- grade year was carefully considered. The ODE recommended that this division be made, as it served to promote the developmental and curricular needs of students. Developmentally speaking, as students move through stages of learning, a natural divergence occurs between the third and fourth grades. When students get to fourth grade, they are typically more able to engage in abstract thought and therefore begin to be ready for a more demanding curriculum (Piaget, 1983). Proponents of middle school curricula advocate for teachers of children in these grades having content expertise. By providing a license specifically for fourth through eighth grades, undergraduate training is able to focus on building content expertise, as well as specific teaching strategies for specific content areas.

On the other hand, students in PreK through Grade 3 are working at developmental stages that are more similar than different. Many educators believe that teachers of children of these ages need to be developmental experts (Hyson, 2003) not necessarily content experts. This means that these teachers need to have multiple opportunities

to learn about the diverse needs of children across content areas in all domains (physical, cognitive, social, and emotional). Providing a license specifically for teachers of children in PreK through Grade 3 ensures that these teachers have focused training on these domains of development.

A third change involved preparing PreK through Grade 3 teachers to work with children with mild to moderate special needs and children who are gifted. Children with mild to moderate special needs are not often identified in the early years, and educators need to be skilled at meeting the needs of these diverse learners even if there is no documentation of a special need. For this reason, the proposed change included specific training in working with these types of children.

Senior faculty at the university level recognized this unique opportunity to shape a new program that would meet the needs of the state department of education, of elementary and early childhood students, of potential teachers, of faculty members, and of the community. Understanding the magnitude of this task, these faculty members recruited the assistance of classroom teachers, administrators, and early childhood professionals from the community. The Advocates for Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Teaching (ADAPT), a group of over 50 committed professionals, began to meet regularly and continued to meet for 2 years during the development of this program. The challenges ADAPT faced were enormous. Its jobs included, but were not limited to the following: (a) designing an undergraduate program for PreK through Grade 3 licensure, (b) writing standards and course descriptions for new courses in the program, (c) aligning curriculum with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1996) guidelines, (d) aligning curriculum with the Ohio Department of Education guidelines, and (e) organizing field placement and student teaching requirements.

Due in part to this committee's hard work and dedication, a new program in early childhood education emerged. The program met the new licensure standards and incorporated three new program ideas that would enhance the educational experience for students working toward a degree in early childhood education. The three new program ideas follow:

1. Students would work as a community of learners and would move through the program as cohorts of students who remain together over a three-semester period. This would encourage collaboration and facilitate a sense of belonging among students.
2. Students would receive specific instruction that would give them skills and dispositions for working with children who are at-risk, who have mild to moderate disabilities, and who are gifted.
3. Students would receive specific instruction that would give them skills and dispositions for working collaboratively with families in the educational process.

As the new program emerged, these new ideas began to take shape. Each component of the program was researched and developed separately to resolve any problems that surfaced. Once each component was created, faculty combined the sections so the program was integrated and could be viewed holistically. The newly designed program met both the new state requirements and the philosophical orientation of the faculty. It included approximately three semesters of core coursework, approximately two semesters of pre-professional coursework, and entrance into professional education and a community of learners. COL Semester 1 covered the socio-cultural contexts of education, COL Semester 2 included preschool and primary methods, and COL Semester 3 incorporated student teaching internship.

Students spent the first three to four semesters taking core curriculum courses that included English, math, social science, natural science, and multicultural studies. In their fourth or fifth semester, students began enrolling in their first education courses. These include the following:

- \* Early Child Linking Seminar I & II-orientation courses that focused on how the arts and science courses connect to early childhood education
- \* Technology
- \* Philosophy and Practice of Early Childhood
- \* Early Childhood Development: Typical
- \* Early Childhood Development: Atypical
- \* Music for Early Childhood
- \* Art for the Preprimary Child
- \* Physical Education for Early Childhood
- \* Health Education for Early Childhood

Once students completed all of these courses, they applied for admission to professional standing/education. To attain professional standing/education, students needed to successfully complete an interview and have a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 2.75. Faculty and graduate students from the College of Education, along

with practicing teachers, interviewed students in groups of three.

Once accepted into the professional education program, each student was placed in a COL. Each COL had approximately 25 students and one faculty member who remained with the students for all three COL semesters. Each of the COL semesters consisted of several courses that included clinical experiences and teaching methods in early childhood (see Table 1). These courses were taught by a variety of faculty members, depending on areas of expertise. However, one seminar course each semester was taught by the faculty member assigned to each COL.

Table 1

### Learning Community Courses by Semester

In summary, students from each COL remained together for all of their course work during the last three semesters of their undergraduate programs. Furthermore, each COL met with a faculty member assigned to that community for seminars each week throughout the three-semester period. For the present study, students enrolled in this new program will be referred to as COL students.

Following college, university, and ODE approval, the program changes were implemented in January 2000. Matthews (1986) suggested that in order for a COL to be functional, a goal or theme must be developed. This goal or theme is what gives the COL its life and allows the family like environment to develop (Matthews, 1986). The goal of our COL is to enhance students' experiences as preservice early childhood educators. By placing students with similar goals and interests together (all students wanted to become teachers and were interested in early childhood education) for a long period, we are hoping that they will support each other and create lasting relationships which they can build upon well into their first few years of teaching. Additionally, we hope that the COL helps us model collaboration so students are equipped with this skill once they begin teaching.

### Working From a Sociocultural Perspective

A sociocultural perspective encourages the development of COLs in which students collaborate with faculty and peers to transform themselves academically and socially (Hall, 2001). The research described here is framed in a sociocultural perspective, which assumes that individuals in social groups or settings construct a unique culture around everyday living (Kantor, Green, Bradley, & Lin, 1992; Zaharlick & Green, 1991). Furthermore, these social groups over time develop norms and expectations, rights and obligations, and roles and relationships among its members. Each group develops its own ways of engaging in life, interpreting life, and making sense of the world surrounding it (Zaharlick & Green).

### Methodology

#### Participants

Data were collected from students enrolled in our Old Program (prior to the implementation of the COL model) and those who were enrolled in the COL model (semesters one through three). The Old Program students and COL Semester 3 students were in their last semester of college. The sample consisted of 95 students (97% of whom were female). Thirty-eight were at the COL Semester 1 level, 9 at the COL Semester 2 level, 27 at the COL Semester 3 level, and 21 at the Old Program level. The average age of the participants was 23. The racial breakdown of students was as follows: 85% White, 6% African American, 9% other (Hispanic, Native American, Asian, and other). Of the students, 81% were single and worked part time.

#### Data Collection

To assess the impact of the COL model as compared to the Old Program, students were asked to complete questionnaires. Students in both programs completed the same questionnaire forms.

The questionnaire was completed midway through each COL semester. It was administered during class periods and was turned in immediately after completion. For some questions (How prepared do you feel to teach "typically" developing children? How prepared do you feel to teach children with special needs? How prepared do you feel to work with families? How prepared do you feel to work with other professionals?), a 4-point Likert-type scale was used to record responses. Possible responses to these questions were 1 = not at all prepared, 2 = somewhat prepared, 3 = prepared, and 4 = very prepared. Other items on the questionnaire were open ended and focused on issues such as sense of belonging, collaboration, multiple perspectives, achievement, and preparation to teach.

#### Data Analysis

Data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using the SPSS program. In addition to examining the raw data, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to detect the differences between the means of the COL semester participants.

The open ended questions were coded using NUD\*IST (Non- numerical, Unstructured, Data \* Indexing, Searching, and Theorizing) Vivo. NUD\*IST Vivo is a qualitative data analysis software program which was used to help code, organize, and search for patterns in the large amount of data collected from the questionnaires. Although NUDTST is a very helpful tool for sorting and coding data, interpretation was still done by the researchers through reading and re-reading the data over the duration of the study and looking for themes and patterns into which data were

coded.

## Results

The goal of our research was to see whether COL students were better prepared to be teachers once they graduated from our program. We were already aware of the benefits of a COL experience for students just starting their college coursework (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Matthews, 1986; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The goal in this study was to see if similar benefits would surface when using the COL toward the end of students' college experiences.

One of the questions we were interested in answering was whether or not students in the COL model had more fellow students they could use as a resource. In order to answer this question, we asked students, How many other students in your class do you feel you can call to get help on an assignment? The coding for the students' responses to this open-ended question can be seen in Figure 1. The raw data show that as students moved through the COL semesters, they began to feel that there were more students with whom they could interact when help was needed. Many students in COL Semester 1 reported that they had 6-10 people that they felt they could contact. By COL Semester 3, the response was much different. The majority of COL Semester 3 students reported that there were 20 or more students they felt they could contact. The difference between these students and Old Program students (who were also student teaching at the time) is notable. To further examine these differences, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to detect differences between the means of the Old Program and three semesters of COL students in relation to the number of classmates with whom they felt comfortable talking about class assignments.

Figure 1

How many other students can you contact for help?

Significant differences were found between the means,  $F(3, 89) = 7.79, p < .01$ . The comparisons between many groups did not yield significant differences. However, a significant difference was shown between the students in COL Semester 3 ( $M = 4.04$ ) and those in the Old Program ( $M = 2.58$ ). Tukey posthoc analyses revealed that the COL Semester 3 students felt more comfortable than Old Program students in contacting classmates for assistance on school-related issues,  $p < .05$ . The significant difference here suggests that as students move through the program, they begin to feel more a part of a COL. This is evidenced by their comfort levels in contacting other students for help. If they were not feeling connected to many others in the program, this number would feasibly be much smaller.

As changes were made to our program, it was important for us to monitor the students in order to be sure that the pieces of our program that were already working before the COL model were not unintentionally harmed by implementation of the model. One of these pieces included learning to work with children who are developing at a rate typical for their age group. To address this aspect of the program, students were asked how prepared they felt to teach typically developing (average traditional student) children (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

How prepared do you feel to work with typical children?

An ANOVA was used to compare the means of the responses of the four groups on this question,  $F(3, 88) = 11.75, p < .01$  (see Figure 2). We found that regardless of which program they completed, students tended to feel fairly prepared to work with typically developing children by the end of it (Old Program,  $M = 2.14$ ; COL Semester 2,  $M = 2.11$ ; and COL Semester 3,  $M = 2.44$ ), as compared to the COL Semester 1 students ( $M = 1.54$ ),  $p < .05$ . (No significant differences in means between Old Program, COL Semester 2, and COL Semester 3 were noted.)

Students in COL Semester 3, however, did report feeling slightly more prepared than those in the Old Program. Although these means were not statistically different, the differences noted may indicate that the COL model encouraged greater learning of program content. These results also suggested to us that we had effectively maintained the program content that addressed learning to work with typically-developing children, while simultaneously altering the program to provide an environment that promoted shared learning.

One of the major differences between the Old Program and the COL Program was the addition of a component to train students to work with children who are at-risk, who have mild to moderate disabilities, and who are gifted. Figure 3 shows the results of the student responses to the following question: How prepared do you feel to teach students with special needs? Using a 4-point Likert-type scale, students could choose from the following responses: 1 = not at all prepared, 2 = somewhat prepared, 3 = prepared, and 4 = very prepared.

Figure 3

How prepared do you feel to work with special needs children?

An ANOVA revealed differences between the means,  $F(3, 89) = 7.76, p < .01$ . These results verified our belief that we had added appropriate coursework to meet this goal. Particularly, students in the Old Program ( $M = .95$ ) reported that they did not feel very comfortable teaching special-needs students, even at the end of the program. In contrast, however, were the responses from students in COL Semester 3 ( $M = 1.65$ ), who were also student teaching. These students responded that they felt significantly more comfortable than Old Program students did in

teaching children with special needs. The means for COL Semester 3 students were significantly higher than those for COL Semester 1 students ( $M = .89$ ), though no differences were found between COL Semester 2 ( $M = 1.44$ ) and COL Semester 3 students for this variable. This suggested a gradual progression of learning within this model (Tukey posthoc analyses significant at the .05 level). Overall, these data suggested that students were feeling prepared to work with children with special needs, illustrating the COL model as a reliable vehicle for acquiring this knowledge.

Another important addition to the COL Program was the inclusion of a series of courses focused on helping students work with families. Figure 4 shows the results of the responses to the following question: How prepared do you feel to work with families?  $F(3, 88) = 12.35, p < .01$ . Again, students responded with a 4-point Likert-type scale with the following options: 1 = not at all prepared, 2 = somewhat prepared, 3 = prepared, and 4 = very prepared.

Tukey posthoc analyses revealed significant differences between the Old Program ( $M = 1.57$ ) and the COL Semester 3 students ( $M = 2.20$ ),  $p < .05$ . It appears that COL Semester 3 students felt much more prepared to work with families at the end of the program. This data validated our addition of the family component in the COL Program. Another interesting finding is that no significant differences were noted between COL Semester 1 students and Old Program students, and between COL Semester 2 students ( $M = 2.0$ ) and Old Program students. Significant differences were noted, however, between COL Semester 1 students ( $M = 1.22$ ) and COL Semester 2 students,  $p < .05$ . This complex mix of effects illustrates that the COL model allows for a gradual learning of family-focused course content.

Figure 4

How prepared do you feel to work with families?

The ability to work with other professionals is an important skill for early childhood educators (see Figure 5). Both programs contained coursework directed at this skill. Students were asked about preparation to work with other professionals, using the same Likert-type answer format as used for the previous three questions. Once again, a significant ANOVA was found,  $F(3, 90) = 9.64, p < .01$ . A significant difference was observed between Old Program students ( $M = 2.10$ ) and COL Semester 3 students ( $M = 2.54$ ),  $p < .05$ . This difference suggested to us that the additional instruction that students received in working collaboratively with other professionals made students more comfortable with this practice, although it is possible that the collaborative relationships within the COL groups added to this concept. In fact, students in both COL Semester 1 ( $M = 1.66$ ) and COL Semester 2 ( $M = 2.11$ )-before student teaching-felt as comfortable as students in the Old Program did during student teaching. These data told us that by adding the additional coursework designed to help students work with other professionals, we were increasing their comfort level in collaboration -and we were able to do it in a much more timely manner with this new pedagogical model.

Figure 5

How prepared do you feel to work with other professional

Discussion

Implications for Teacher Education

The data revealed that implementing the COL model toward the end of a student's college experience is a viable alternative in helping us prepare students to become teachers. Our students are utilizing peers as resources more often. This ability to collaborate is a powerful tool for our teacher candidates to have as they begin teaching in their own classrooms. We believe that the COL model is helping us to promote a sense of belonging in our students. Furthermore, the data presented above indicate that this model is helping our students become better prepared to teach in the real world. Unlike other universities that are using the COL model with incoming freshmen, we have found that using it with 3rd- and 4th- year education students may help to make the transition between college and the workplace more seamless for them. Students during their COL Semester 3 seminar often reported feeling prepared and confident about entering the teaching profession based on the type of collaborative experiences they experienced during the three semesters as a member of a COL.

Our teacher candidates are leaving our program feeling comfortable about working with typically and atypically developing children, as well as with families and other professionals. This is important to note, as the state requirements dictated that these skills be included in the new program. As we struggled to include new courses designed to help meet the needs of all students with mild to moderate special needs, it was important to find that the preservice teachers actually did feel more prepared to work with this population of kids. We believe that the design of the COL program strongly contributed to these feelings of efficacy. We further believe that the introduction of new coursework, as well as the new configuration of the program, contributed to the COL students feeling better prepared to work with special needs children.

The design of this program proved to be effective in developing a sense of belonging and collaborative skills, both of which are important components of any teacher education program. This type of COL provides students with the opportunity to work with the same colleagues over an extended period of time during the last few semesters of a teacher preparation program. The bond that develops during this time allows students to engage in authentic discussions in and out of class, providing meaningful opportunities to reflect on their own development as future



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