Module 1

Building a Culture of Inquiry Through Communities of Learning, Inquiry, and Practice (CLIPs)

For three years Bakersfield College served as the pilot test site for the development of Communities of Learning, Inquiry, and Practice (CLIPs)[1]. Bakersfield College now uses CLIPs as a regular feature of its emphasis on student learning. CLIPs are a vehicle by which community college faculty, staff, and others develop inquiry skills, knowledge, attitudes, and relationships that build a long-term culture of inquiry and evidence-based teaching and learning. This work is a complement to the college's existing emphasis on student outcomes assessment.

The action research study at Bakersfield College was conducted by InSites (a non-profit research firm) under a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF). Bakersfield College has an enrollment of about 14,000 students (44% Hispanic). This paper summarizes key points from the study.

What CLIPs Are

CLIPs are informal, dynamic groups of faculty and staff (and sometimes others) at a community college whose members learn together about their professional practice by conducting an inquiry about a topic of importance to them. The inquiry steps are (1) design the inquiry; (2) collect data; and (3) make meaning and shape practice. Through participation in the CLIP, members simultaneously answer important questions and build their capacity to collaboratively conduct such inquiries. CLIPs are neither student learning communities nor a series of workshops or training sessions. They are communities of faculty and others who inquire and learn together about their professional practice. Within each CLIP one or two members serve as its Facilitator. An overall CLIP Guide supports the work at the college. An external CLIP Coach also may be involved.

CLIPs at Bakersfield College

About 80 people participated as CLIP members at Bakersfield College during the three-year study from 2004 to 2007. The three CLIPs in the first round of CLIPs (the 2004-05 school year) focused on (a) computer studies (investigating various assessment methods for a course on Microsoft Office); (b) math (identifying student learning outcomes for elementary algebra); and (c) physics (investigating the operation and effectiveness of discussion sessions for the physics classes).

The CLIPs during 2005-06 were in the areas of communication, developmental writing, general education outcomes, math, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), and transitions (of community college students to four-year institutions). Two of these CLIPs

1 For information on activities at Bakersfield College, contact Dr. Bonnie Suderman, assessment coordinator, at bsuderma@bakersfieldcollege.edu. For information on the study as a whole, contact Dr. Beverly Parsons, Executive Director, InSites at bevandpar@aol.com or go to www.insites.org/clip. This work is supported by NSF grant #0335581.

evolved from the previous year's CLIPs. The six CLIPs addressed topics including the value of peer study groups in STEM courses; the development and pilot testing of student assessment rubrics, instruments, and processes in critical thinking and oral communication; determining student learning outcomes and objectives; testing the use of new instructional techniques to improve student success and retention including students writing letters to their instructor and student-faculty conferencing; and providing web-based information to students about moving from a two- to four-year postsecondary institution. Download the *2005-06 CLIP Newsletter* from Bakersfield College at www.insites.org/clip for more information on each CLIP and its work. Four CLIPs operated during the 2006-07 school year. They focused on academic development courses in math, reading, and writing; links to adult education offered through the K-12 school district; oral communication; and transitions from high school to community college.

CLIPs frequently collect data through questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews involving students, faculty, and others. They learn which methods are most appropriate for their inquiry question and how to make meaning from the data to shape professional practice.

Resources

A major resource for the CLIP work is the knowledge that exists among the CLIP members within their individual CLIPs and across CLIPs. The CLIP Facilitators and CLIP Guide draw upon the interests and needs of the CLIP to determine the agenda and content of three multi-CLIP meetings. The first multi-CLIP meeting (August) provides an orientation to the work and each CLIP refines its inquiry plan for the year. By the second meeting (January) the CLIPs have gathered some data. They focus on making meaning from the data and completing their full inquiry by the end of the second semester. The third meeting (April) is a time for sharing preliminary results, receiving feedback, and celebrating the work together prior to completing their final products by the end of July.

Concurrently, the CLIP Guide encourages CLIP members to access new outside resources and provides resources to CLIP members to build their general inquiry capacity. The resources include a website; skill-building sessions provided upon request (e.g., refining questionnaires, conducting focus groups, analyzing data); funding for conferences; and visits to other colleges.

Impact of CLIPs

According to CLIP members, participation primarily affected them in the following ways:

1. It **enhanced the quality of their collegial relationships and relationships with students** including improving their communication practices with students and colleagues. CLIP involvement helped them build closer bonds which enabled groups to communicate, learn from one another, and work together better. They gained greater respect for colleagues and the value of diverse feedback. They gained skills in engaging in more productive discussions about teaching and learning; establishing shared goals; making shared decisions with colleagues to enhance the quality of their instruction;

increasing their awareness of group dynamics and challenges in small group situations; and improving communication with colleagues across disciplines and departments.

2. It **increased their knowledge and skills related to inquiry practices** and evidence-based decision making regarding student learning and success. These gains included how to conduct focus groups and interviews; develop surveys, develop student assessments especially using rubrics; analyze qualitative and quantitative data; pilot test assessment processes; sharpen their focus in conducting a study; and develop evidence-based rationale statements for decision-making. They also developed a greater awareness of the importance of data in enhancing student learning and success.

3. It helped them **diversify their strategies to influence student learning** as a result of what they learned through their particular inquiry. Across the CLIPs, the learnings included a greater focus on personalized attention and encouragement of students, for example, through letter writing, student sharing, and ongoing student input and feedback. They expanded their knowledge and use of effective instructional and support strategies for working with diverse students. These strategies included creating a sense of belonging and community; developing a shared student culture; encouraging study groups and peer assistance; using more interactive instructional practices; and using rubrics as assessment tools to build shared student goals/expectations.

Overall the process made CLIP members more receptive to new and diverse ideas.

In addition to the benefits to individual CLIP members, the work benefited the college by providing results of inquiries that can be used by others on campus. For example, there was strong interest among faculty at the fall opening-day presentation for faculty and staff about the STEM CLIP's work on study groups and the oral communication rubric being developed by the Communication CLIP. Overall, it builds a culture of inquiry within the college.

Key Features of CLIPs

CLIP members identified features of a CLIP's structure and operation that most support the effectiveness of CLIPs. These features can be grouped into those that relate to the nature of (a) the relationship emphasis, (b) the inquiry process, and (c) supporting structures.

Relationship Emphasis

The relationship aspect of the CLIP design included attention to communication skills and spending time together in meaningful tasks. The communication/relationship features that CLIP members most often mentioned were the value of listening to one another, appreciating different perceptions, using brainstorming techniques (rather than debating points of view), negotiating with one other, giving respect to other members, creating a safe, trusting environment, discussing common problems, paying attention to group dynamics, taking time to meet and talk on a regular basis, and working collaboratively. The value of the appreciative inquiry approach (that builds on strengths and looks at situations from the perspective of what is desired and how to move toward it) was also considered important. As one CLIP member

said: "*Strong and healthy relationships improve student learning, communication with students, and overall feelings of success.*"

Inquiry Process

The inquiry process was valued because it encouraged CLIPs to (a) develop their own processes (individually and collectively) to gather and use data, (b) focus on seeking and using student opinion, (c) choose issues to investigate that were important to them (rather than issues selected by someone else), and (d) be creative, flexible, and open-minded. The CLIPs found it helpful to have the requirement that a CLIP establish well defined, important questions to be addressed. Once they had established their guiding questions, the CLIP as a group established their own tasks and timelines presented in a plan that provides clear expectations among the CLIP members of their work. The CLIP process also focuses on working toward a final product, which gives a sense of completion and an opportunity to reach out to others. Each person has tasks/responsibilities that match the strengths of the CLIP members to get the work done.

Supporting Structures

The CLIP approach has certain supporting structures that CLIP members identified as important. Providing a stipend and/or other financial resources was a key feature that kept them engaged and motivated in the CLIP work. The three multi-CLIP meetings with the opportunity to share progress and learnings maintained a timeframe that motivated attention to the work. The diversity of the activities—meetings, independent work, sub-projects, email listserv, and travel to conferences—was helpful. The work of skilled Facilitators and Guides to provide focus and processes when needed was another important support structure.

Guiding Principles

The basic idea of CLIPs is grounded in a large body of research on how people learn, communities of practice, change process, inquiry processes, and system dynamics. The three years of action research at Bakersfield College resulted in eight guiding principles for CLIPs:

1. Conduct inquiry that enhances student learning and success.

   Conduct inquiry in ways that focus on and build what is valuable and meaningful for student learning and success.

2. Ask questions that matter.

   Ask questions about issues related to student learning and success that you, students, and others truly care about. Use questions throughout the inquiry that lead to deep levels of understanding about valued and meaningful issues.

3. Create a safe, hospitable, engaging environment.

   Create an environment where people with differing perspectives feel physically and emotionally safe and where they can trust, care about, and welcome one another. Familiar, regular events that are paced to avoid overload help people feel comfortable. New ideas stimulate interest. Combining the familiar with the new and pacing the inquiry to avoid overload keep people engaged.

4. Encourage and appreciate each person's unique contribution.

   Encourage everyone to contribute in ways that express each person's uniqueness and specific circumstances. Bring life to the community by appreciating the special talents each brings to the community.

5. Build relationships that rejuvenate professional practice.

   Build relationships within the CLIP and with others around inquiry generates and spreads creative ideas. It is the basis for renewal and innovation in professional practice to keep pace with changing social conditions, knowledge, and student populations.

6. Create authentic, open-minded dialogue that brings out diverse perspectives.

   Suspend your assumptions. Be open to the unexpected. Involve people who come from different cultural backgrounds and roles (e.g., students, community members, faculty, administrators). Provide opportunities for people to genuinely express their points of view and be heard by those with other perspectives.

7. Engage in individual and collective reflection.

   Reflection evokes deeper insights. By engaging in individual and collective reflective listening, observing, and thinking, you can see emerging patterns and connections.

8. Generate sustained, inquiry-based practice.

   Meaningful, ongoing inquiry-based practices that benefit students. Most issues addressed through a CLIP inquiry require continued attention over a fairly long period of time.

CLIPs in the Larger College Context

During the 2006-07 school year, the college is incorporating the use of CLIPs into its expanding culture of inquiry. The Assessment Committee and Assessment Coordinator at Bakersfield College have made a commitment to continue the CLIP process and the college has allocated resources to continue for the 2007-08 school year. The Institutional Effectiveness Committee is building practices generated through the CLIPs into the program review process and links are being made to other college change processes. The sustainability of the work is enhanced by the positive experiences of CLIP members, several of whom are active in college leadership.

Opportunities to Get Involved

Contact Dr. Beverly Parsons, Executive Director of InSites (BeverlyAParsons@aol.com) to learn more about establishing and operating CLIPs, or visit InSites' website at www.InSites.org. Online learning modules are available for other colleges to use.