

Building a Culture of Inquiry Through Communities of Learning, Inquiry, and Practice (CLIPs)¹

Bakersfield College is in its third year of testing the use of Communities of Learning, Inquiry, and Practice (CLIPs). 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.

Bakersfield College is serving as the pilot site for a study of CLIPs being conducted by InSites (a non-profit research firm) under a three-year grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF). Bakersfield College has an enrollment of about 14,000 students (44% Hispanic).

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 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

Nearly 100 people have been CLIP members at Bakersfield College since they started in 2004. 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 the 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 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

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 661-343-5052 or bevandpar@aol.com or go to www.insites.org/clip. This work is supported by NSF grant #0335581.

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. Five CLIPs are underway during the 2006-07 school year.

CLIPs frequently use surveys of students, faculty and others; focus groups; and interviews to collect data. 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 members to determine the agenda and content of the three multi-CLIP meetings and other assistance to provide each CLIP. 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 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. They **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. They **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 and student assessments 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. They **diversified 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 strategies for working with diverse students. These 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 also benefited the college by providing results of inquiries that can be used more broadly. 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.

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 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 who now are active in college leadership.

Opportunities to Get Involved

InSites is preparing online resource kits with written and video materials to make the CLIP process readily available to other community colleges. A series of seven resource kits will be available for other colleges to try out during the 2007-08 school year. The topics are: (1) What are CLIPs?; (2) Eight Guiding Principles for CLIPs; (3) Designing the CLIP Inquiry; (4) Gathering Data for the CLIP Inquiry; (5) Making Meaning and Shaping Practice; (6) Being a CLIP Facilitator; and (7) Being a CLIP Guide.

InSites is seeking colleges that would like to use the pilot test version of the online resource kits to establish and operate CLIPs during the 2007-08 school year. In exchange, we request that you provide us with feedback on how to improve the materials as well as examples and pictures that can be included in the new version of the resource kits to be produced at the end of the 2007-08 school year. Your participation will be acknowledged in the materials. InSites and experienced CLIP members at Bakersfield College will provide assistance to such colleges as they get underway. We expect to build a network among CLIP Guides at the colleges to enhance peer to peer support. To participate, contact Beverly Parsons at bevandpar@aol.com or 661-343-5052.