

Place-Based Learning Communities: A Qualitative Evaluation

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Introduction

Placed-Based Learning Communities (PBLC) foster student success, particularly in student populations living away from their families for the first time. By co-enrolling a cohort of students in two or more classes and providing additional programming, learning communities foster a connection among students and faculty. Sustained peer and faculty relationships support social and academic belonging and related retention and academic success outcomes.

In 2015, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) major programs at Humboldt State University (HSU) launched their first PBLC: Klamath Connection. By fall 2019, HSU offered four STEM PBLCs: Klamath Connection (Environmental Resources Engineering, Environmental Science & Management, Fisheries Biology, Forestry, and Wildlife majors); Stars to Rocks (Chemistry, Geology, and Physics and Astronomy majors); Rising Tides (Biology - Marine Biology concentration, and Oceanography majors); and Among Giants (Biology, Botany, and Zoology majors). Plans for a fifth PBLC for Math and Computer Science majors, Representing Realities, will extend by fall 2020 the opportunity to every HSU incoming first-year STEM student.

This evaluation is based on spring 2019 qualitative data from six small group interviews with a total of 14 PBLC students. The data included broadly a story of building diverse inclusive communities. Within the community building theme, students discussed accounts of making their way with academic friends, building trusted relationships with faculty and peer mentors, and a range of experiences of racial and ethnic identity in relationship to the program organization and communities. On the latter, students emphasized the importance of learning

about area Indigenous communities. At the same time, students of color -- none of whom identified as Indigenous -- did not recognize a valuing of their own ethnic and racial identities in the program structure. Their accounts point to the PBLC outsourcing of ethnic and racial connections to clubs and cultural centers. Finally, as building foundations for student initiative and self-advocacy are important to the PBLC program, we discuss in the last analysis section accounts related to this theme. While there were few accounts of agency, their inclusion in this report may provide insights for future exploration and consideration.

Methods

This evaluation is based on semistructured interviews with six small groups of students who participated in PBLCs during the 2018-19 academic year (Institutional Review Board # 18-076). In Spring 2019, flyers were hung across the campus and the PBLC staff and faculty invited via email all students (n=219) enrolled in the three PBLCs operating at the time to participate in group interviews related to their PBLC experience and incentivized participation by providing pizza. A semistructured interview guide (Appendix A) was developed in collaboration with the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (ODEI), the Office of Institutional Research, and PBLC staff. In addition to the questions, the guide included an opening script describing the interview purpose, and confirmation of participant anonymity. The program recruited and hired graduate students from the Departments of Sociology and Psychology and a staff person from ODEI to facilitate the discussions. The students were paid with HSI STEM grant funds. The week prior to interviews, facilitators met with program staff to review the interview guide and processes.

A total of 14 students (6% PBLC enrollment) participated in small groups of two to three students (Table 1). Five groups exclusively included students from the PBLC Klamath Connection. One group included students from the PBLC Stars to Rocks. No students participated from Rising Tides. Three groups exclusively consisted of students of color. Two groups exclusively included White students. One group included one Latino and one White student.

Table 1: Small Group Interview Demographics

	n	PBLC	Race/Ethnicity
Group 1	3	Klamath	Black (1) / Latino (1) / Asian & White (1)
Group 2	2	Stars to Rocks	Latino (1) / African-American & White (1)
Group 3	3	Klamath	White (3)
Group 4	2	Klamath	Latino (1) / White (1)
Group 5	2	Klamath	Latino (1) / African-American & White (1)
Group 6	2	Klamath	White (2)

Facilitators captured digital recordings of the interviews that ranged in duration from 60 to 90 minutes. Facilitators provided participants with a packet that included the interview guide and a survey. After describing the process and confidentiality, the facilitators asked participants to take “a few minutes to gather your thoughts and write responses” to the interview questions. These were collected at the end of the interviews, along with an additional survey instrument. Most participants (12) submitted their packet. After the interviews, facilitators debriefed with program staff discussing common themes across interviews. The interviews explored questions related to PBLC facilitation of peer connections and friendships, student attitudes about the program valuing their ethnic/racial identity, challenges that students faced before and during the

program, as well as identification of resources provided by PBLCs that helped mitigate challenges.

Program staff hired two research assistants from the HSU graduate program in Sociology to analyze interview transcriptions prepared by a professional service. Researchers imported the transcriptions into Atlas.ti Cloud to support analysis. Researchers drew on facilitator debriefing notes to support development of initial codes. They expanded on those codes through close reading of interview transcripts. They each initially coded three transcripts and then reviewed and validated coding of each other's analysis. Graduate researchers met with a sociology faculty member to discuss initial coding and strategies for "coding" up to broader themes. The graduate students and the faculty member collaborated on the drafting and editing of this report.

To provide a sense of the "thickness" of narrative themes, the findings below report counts of narrative "blocks." A block represents a section of interview text ranging from one line to several paragraphs. Because of the typical limits of group interviewing (narrative is attributed to a group – not to distinct individuals), the analysis should not be interpreted to represent the extent to which a theme represents the accounts of any portion of total participants. Instead, the analysis identifies only that a theme was discussed within a group – and typically because it was prompted by the interview guide (e.g. How do your friendships compare with the people who are in the PBLCs to those outside the PBLCs? How do you feel that the PBLC experience has prepared you for connecting, working, and living in a diverse community.... culturally, ethnically, economically...). Particularly because the groups were small, facilitators directed/prompted each participant to respond to a given question. Within groups, there was consistency in experience signaled by responses such as "I agree" or by

additional accounts or explanations by other group members that confirmed and expanded on the experience of another participant in the group. The facilitators also synthesized the ideas that they had heard across group members and asked for clarification and confirmation. Therefore, we have confidence that a pattern or process identified within a given group can be attributed to the overall experience of group members. If there was variation within a group or across groups, we identified that variation in our analysis. After initial analysis of audio recording transcripts, graduate research assistants compared packet notes made by individual students from a given group to the overall themes the facilitator confirmed as common to the group. In all cases, the themes attributed to the group were consistent with the notes made by individual participants within a group.

The analysis is limited by the small sample size of groups (6), as well as the group sizes (2-3). Nevertheless, as is often – though not always – the case, the goal of qualitative interviewing is to identify a range of experiences or processes and provide the reader with a portal into some level of nuance in the identified patterns. Ideally, the researcher(s) engage in an iterative process of data collection, analysis, and further theoretical sampling of additional participants until analytical saturation is accomplished. The practicalities of this evaluation research did not move through that process; still, the report below provides a sense of at least some of the patterned experiences of a small sample of PBLC participants and possible directions for further program planning and development.

Building Diverse Inclusive Communities

On a college campus, students engage in community building related to academic and social life. Both academic and social integration or belonging are positively related to college student success. Academic belonging relates to connections with faculty members, major content, and articulations of peers as an academic partners, resources, and collaborators. Social belonging relates to friendship connections to peers and campus community relationships, as well as experiences of symbolic and interactional connection within and across space. For example, on the latter, posters announcing a queer film festival are not just instrumental in advertising an event: poster images, narratives, and even placements across spaces produce strands of a larger symbolic canvas that makes (in)visible particular bodies, identities, and experiences.

In the HSU PBLCs, initiation of academic belonging begins during the Summer Immersion program. PBLC faculty and staff designed the Summer Immersion environment to deliver six program specific messages for cultivating academic belonging:

1. You are welcome in this exciting and diverse place and this academic community of learners;
2. You are a beginning scientist, and scientific content at HSU begins immediately;
3. The outdoors are part of your classroom;
4. As you work together to solve complex social and environmental problems, you will link knowledge from across disciplines;
5. Your peers can help you learn, and vice versa; and
6. You have a range of offices and people—faculty, staff, students—who are here to support you and help you succeed.

All groups of students discussed the importance of both peer and faculty relationships in their new academic home. While academic belonging becomes more critical as a student progresses in their undergraduate education, building first year foundations for academic belonging sets the stage for ongoing success.

The PBLC programming also introduces students to the Indigenous landscape of their new campus home, as well as tools for living and working in inclusive and diverse communities. In this analysis, we found most narratives related to diversity were woven into student experiences of academic and social life. Yet because of the importance of diversity and inclusion to the PBLC project, we present the creation of diversity as its own analytic category. This framework for analysis provides an analytic tool for highlighting positive experiences of diversity, as well as challenges related to this important program goal.

In the following sections, we present our analysis of interview data related to the production of communities, both academic and social, across represented PBLC programs. We highlight three processes that produce those experiences of community: making their way with academic friends, trusting faculty and peer mentors as expert guides, and talking about racial and ethnic identities.

Making their Way with Academic Friends

Most narratives related to belonging highlighted the significance of academic friends in academic and social community building. Narratives of academic belonging were more likely to reference academic peer relationships than those academic relationships with faculty, and academic advisors. In most cases, PBLC students used friend and (academic) peer interchangeably, suggesting the tight coupling of social and academic worlds. Two thirds of the

117 narrative blocks about peer (classmate) connections overlapped with narratives of friendship.

When prompted, “How did you make your closest friends,” students pointed to several structural components of the PBLC program that made it easier for them to forge those relationships. Summer Immersion, Themed Housing, Block Scheduling, and the First Year Seminar class (“Science 100”) all provided opportunities to make strong and lasting friendship connections with their cohort.

In Klamath Group 5 with one Latino student and one White student, one PBLC student emphasized the importance of the PBLC community to their ability to make friends:

Because I feel like without Klamath, I wouldn't have made any friends. I'm just not a very social person, in general. So I feel like sort of, not forcing, but just pushing us to hang out with the people in our group and sort of get to know each other made it really easy for us to be friends and hang out. Especially since we did have the same classes. We were kind of just like, "Oh hey, I remember you from Immersion. You want to sit next to me?" And kind of hung out like that.

In Group 6 with two White Klamath Connection students, one student said:

As far as my peers and friends, I feel like they are always super supportive.... We're all in the same classes, and somebody might be done with an assignment and I'll be like, "I really don't get this, can you help me?" They're just, it's more convenient to come to them first, because they're there in my dorm and we just go to each other's rooms be like, "Yeah, come on, I'll hook you up."

They also felt they were able to make friends easier because they knew they were also going to be in the same courses and found that due to their academic majors and other factors, they shared similar interests. As one student from Group 3 with White students shared:

I met my closest friends right now during summer immersion. 'Cause we were all in our ESM (Environmental Science Major) group together within Klamath Connection. So I think that (...) got us really close. Cause we were all looking to know people and have someone to work with during summer immersion. And then we also bonded over shared goals and interests in academics. And in life.

Just because we were all in the same major and we're all kind of striving for the same thing.

The importance of having common interests with their peers was an important theme for the students. The PBLC successfully provided students the opportunity to develop relationships with peers that had similar interests. At the same time, the PBLC structure made it challenging to make friends outside the program, even if a student sought out those relationships. Students in group 1, which was one of the two entirely students of color groups and consisted of one Black, one Latino, and one Multiracial student, explained below how they felt they had stronger connections with their PBLC friends over their friends not participating in PBLCs, due to their similar schedules and viewpoints,

So, I noticed in the PBLCs you kind of have a better connection with them, because you have more of their classes. So then, you could relate easier if you're having hardships, then they understand. But, I have friends outside of the PBLC, I have a friend that's majoring in business, and when I explained to her like, "Oh, I'm having trouble with Botany, and the labs and everything," she was like, "Oh, what was that like?" And, I explained to her, but it's not the same as someone who's actually in that class with you. So, they can't relate as easily or they don't understand the situation. Especially because it's outside of the science community. So, they have a totally different viewpoint on that.

Another student in that group continued:

I agree with that too, but I talk mostly about how it was easier to be around the people who are in my PBLC. So, we had the same schedule pretty much, 'cause I noticed when I was trying to make plans with my friends who weren't, they might be busy with something when I was free, or I would be busy when they are free. So, it was just easier to hang out with the people who are kind of on the same schedule as you, or have the same assignments pretty much.

Alternatively, one student explained how their friend that did not participate in the PBLC program was struggling to build an academic life and find any friends at all. That student from Group 1 shared their observations of their non-PBLC friend:

I have a friend that's not a part of the PBLC, and I know that he's having a lot of trouble, especially as an undeclared major, 'cause he's just taking GEs right now so he doesn't really know what he's going to do, and all his friends are into different things and it's just a mess for him. But, I know for me it's a lot easier because everyone's into the same thing. So it's just ... It's like you're given a friend, basically, at Summer Immersion so it's pretty easy.

Student narratives expressed that because of Block Scheduling and being in the same courses, stronger friendships and peer-to-peer connections developed. Students conveyed that they were able to build stronger connections because their peers were going through the same academic situations and working on the same assignments. Students felt this created a more supportive environment and relationship.

One subtheme of the discussions was the simple day-to-day interactions that built ties between students. In the narrative below, a student from Group 6, which included two White students from the PBLC Klamath Connection, shared a common academic interaction that builds this sense of peer academic connection and support:

Definitely having that group of people there to help and support me, and you know, even just with classes. We're all like, "Oh my God, we have a quiz for Botany, we need to go take it together.

Similarly, Group 1, which included exclusively students of color, also expressed a sense of security with Klamath Connection peers in their Freshman Year Seminar "Science 100." Simply asking a peer about a class is a part of daily interactions that build these connections: "I feel like I'm even comfortable.... The people who are my immediate friends that just know, they're in my PBLC, [I can] ask them about something for class." So as in the group of White students, this group of students of color also noted tightly coupled academic and social elements of their peer community. For the students in the group interviews, these experiences meant that they were not alone in this academic journey: they were supported by others who shared their fears, aspirations, and passions.

Students noted that friendships outside of their PBLC communities were difficult to maintain. We found few narrative blocks (18) about friendships that were not related to peers in the PBLC. Furthermore, almost none of those non-PBLC friendships were discussed as “close” friends. So for PBLC students in these group interviews, we can understand a tight coupling of academic peers with friendship, and the related fusion of academic and social integration.

Trusting Faculty and Peer Mentors as Expert Guides

Faculty member and peer mentor interactions with PBLC students were also important to student sense of security on their academic journey. The 71 narrative blocks about faculty members, as well as the 33 blocks discussing peer mentors, often coupled experiences of care and experiencing trust in that support. For students in these six groups, trust was tentatively assumed given formal status (peer mentor as successful student; instructor as knowledgeable in their field), but confidence in sustained support was developed through regular successful everyday interactions.

Accounts of trusting the support of program faculty were shared across all six groups. In Group 3, which included one multiracial student and three White students, one student noted confidence in the faculty support in the PBLC academic community:

For me, my professors have always been extremely helpful. And they're always willing to help me out in any way needed to help me achieve (...) my goals. I feel like they really understand, especially because they're in your major and they're in the same department. So they kind of know where you want to head or they can help you figure out where you wanna go. So I think that's what's been really helpful.

In this statement about faculty-student relationships, we see threads of processes for building trust and academic connections with faculty members. The narratives point to interactions that, for the students, carried important meaning related to feeling supported. The interactions

reinforce a sense of security that is accomplished through regular experiences of faculty members “always willing to help,” as well as confidence with faculty member expertise in a given field. The interview accounts themselves did not explain the processes through which “expertise” was accomplished. We might assume this status is produced both through formal position (instructor), as well as the performance of “knowledgeable scientist” in the classroom and through other interactions. For the students in the group interviews, these experiences meant that they had expert guides on their academic journeys through unfamiliar grounds.

Fostering a strong sense of support and bonding with faculty members was intentional in the design of the PBLC program. Students highlighted the everyday interactions that produced relaxed relationships that formed with faculty during Summer Immersion and the Freshman Year Seminar “Science 100” class. These repeated forms of “friendly” interaction eased some of the anxiety that new students experienced when interacting with professors. Students also shared that faculty members reached out to them during difficult times. Student comments from Group 6, the exclusively White Klamath group, evidenced other common interaction patterns and meaning attributed to those everyday interactions with PBLC faculty members:

Most of the Sci 100 or just PBLC [Professors], they're always more understanding and [say]... “call me by my first name, (...). Call me “Prof.” And all those types of things. It helps take the edge off the intimidation and makes it easier to talk to [them].

In this narrative, establishing the norm of calling faculty members by their first name made the student feel more comfortable talking with their faculty members. This feeling of approachability was further accomplished through participating in social events where students had fun with faculty members in non-academic settings as discussed by group 6 that consisted of all White students:

I think it's also seeing them outside of class... like we had the beach pizza party at the very end, one of our Sci 100 teachers were out there and he was playing volleyball with us and stuff. Then you go into class and you're like, okay, I played volleyball with this guy. I can't be too intimidated by him. It helps, making those connections.

Seeing and interacting with faculty members in these non-academic settings broke down the social distancing that can be produced in rigid faculty-student relations that provide little to no sense of the faculty member outside their academic identity. In the account above, playing volleyball with a teacher mitigated “intimidation” that they may have otherwise experienced.

All the groups talked without prompting about the process of journaling for their Science 100 First Year Seminar. While all groups talked about journaling as tedious, two students in two different groups (Group 2 and 4) felt the assignment helped them stay connected to their instructors. Students in the interview groups reported that their peers complained that journaling was mundane and “busy work,” but two students participating in the group interviews found that the journals were a helpful check in to let the professors know what was going on in their lives. The journals provided a conduit for students to discreetly divulge issues and receive supportive feedback from faculty.

One student from Group 2, students of color with the Klamath Connection, shared their observations about journaling:

I know a lot of people complained about how there are journal entries we had to make every week. And some people felt that they were too personal or they're just tedious or time-consuming. They're just like, "Oh, there's really no need for this. They don't need to know this. It's just for a class." I know a lot of people didn't even like that. Even times where I was just like, "Oh, I have to do this journal entry for Sci 100." Just because it's time-consuming. But in reality, it's helpful. It's beneficial to our professors so they can help us. I know a lot of people didn't like Sci 100. I know a lot of people from each of the PBLCs. And that was really the only complaint I've ever heard myself.... I mean, homework. Nobody really likes homework. ... I think the PBLCs are great. I think they're great. There's not any big flaws I could point out.

Another student from group 4, which included one Latino and one White Klamath student, felt even stronger that the Science 100 journals were a positive component of the class: they knew someone was listening to them:

I just really liked SCI 100 because it was a pretty simple, straight forward class. I never really had to worry about anything. But I think, like the check ins really made it more personal for me. And like I knew at least somebody was hearing my voice sometimes.

So the regular act of journaling also produced security in knowing that faculty were “hearing” them. And at least for these groups of PBLC students, feeling heard at a “personal” level was important to their academic connections.

Across all groups, students also expressed that their RAMP mentors were the university academic support staff they would go to most when they were going through stressful and emotional situations. Their mentors connected them with helpful resources. Below, a student from focus group 5, which included one Latino and one biracial African American/White student, shared how much they appreciated their RAMP mentors:

But also, my RAMP mentor helped me a lot. If I told her that I was feeling stressed, she immediately was like, oh, do this. Or go here, you know? And she was always quick to offer resources. So I really appreciate my RAMP mentor. And I really am thankful for the things that she does and sends to me. If I didn't have her, I would probably be having crisis every day.

Students were at ease with their RAMP mentors, as they were also college students and similar to their own age. They conveyed their trust of peer mentors by sharing personal struggles such as roommate conflicts and difficulties with professors. In Group 1, the Klamath group of students of color, one student stated:

I feel like I mostly talk to my RAMP mentor about things that I felt would be most insightful from a college student. When I was having problems with my roommate, how to address that and stuff....

A student from Group 2, the Stars to Rocks group with one Latino and one Multiracial student, highlighted the ways in which RAMP mentors served as bridges to faculty and other campus resources:

My RAMP mentor is one I could think off the top of my head who's really been really helpful even in this semester as far as resources, just anything. When I was struggling in that English class, she was the one who told me to email that teacher. Though it's unfortunate she (the teacher) wasn't willing to help me out.... but still my RAMP mentor gave me a little extra shove to even email in the first place. So I wouldn't have known, unless I tried. That's how she helped me.

In this student account, we highlight the process through which a connection with a faculty member was produced. First, the narrative suggests that the RAMP mentor created an awareness that a student could/should share their academic struggle with their instructor. Second, the student attributes their own agency to “a little extra shove” from their mentor. Finally, even though the communication with the faculty member did not produce a desired outcome, the student communicates a sense of satisfaction (and learning) based on the interaction: “I wouldn’t have known, unless I tried.”

Talking about Racial and Ethnic Identities

In conversations related to diversity and valuing of ethnic/racial identities, students discussed across 79 narrative blocks two main themes: an appreciation for the program emphasis on Indigenous land and culture, and tepid experiences of the alignment of programmatic and local contexts with their own racial and ethnic identities.

Two explicit questions produced narratives about diversity: “How do you feel the PBLC experience has prepared you for connecting, working, and living in a diverse community (i.e.

culturally, ethnically, economically)?" "How do you feel your ethnic/racial identity is valued?"

In addition, a more open question about challenges also produced accounts about racial injustice: "What challenges have you faced, prior to and during your time at HSU, that get in the way of your personal and academic growth?" Below we explored student discussions of these questions, and consider differences between White student accounts and those of students of color.

Living, Learning, and Working with Indigenous Communities

Students across all six groups discussed the value of learning about the Indigenous history and current tribal work of their (new) Northern California home. They appreciated learning about the local Indigenous communities and their relationships with the land. Group 4, which included one Latino and one White student, spoke about PBLC work to teach about local Indigenous cultures and their connection to the river:

They did a great job by introducing me to like the Indigenous Peoples and stuff like that. Like I thought it was really awesome to learn about their community and how their life revolves around the Klamath river. And I'm like, like, I don't know. It's just their lifestyle. Like the way that they taught us about the stuff I found that really fascinating....

Group 3, which consisted of entirely White students, discussed the connection between local tribal connections to land and their own identities of land stewardship:

I was just going to say that I really liked how Klamath Connection emphasized that we're on native Wiyot land especially. We were on a lot of Yurok land too. It's important for me, as an ESM major, to realize how much Indigenous Tribes have strong connections to protecting the land and to environmental science itself. I was reading "How would it help you in work?" (in the interview guide in the packet). In work, it's very important to realize that, as an environmental science major, that they're gonna have that connection too. And we can work with them.

To this extent, the PBLC emphasis on education about and connection with Indigenous communities, allowed Group 3 participants to imagine possibilities for partnerships with tribes and working toward common goals.

Group 1 students of color were uncertain what they learned in the PBLC for “connecting, working, living” in diverse communities, beyond the land and culture acknowledgement.

I said I’m not really sure what they were. What were specific things they were trying to show us to do that. Except for just the land acknowledgement of where school is. And pretty much if we stay in Humboldt, the field we’ll be working in, the people's land. It is the Wiyot Tribe’s and stuff. And just acknowledging that culture.

Even for students who identified some potentially more complicated messages about diversity, their understanding was limited. For example, one group of White students (Group 6), discussed the guest speaker who talked about Indigenous communities and White privilege. They noted “I think they are making a good point to not put White people above, but also celebrate everybody as an equal. So I like that.” This account of the takeaway message from that talk suggests the limited exposure to more complicated education on power and privilege where narratives of equality are problematized.

Invisibility and Outsourcing of Ethnic and Racial Belonging

While all groups appreciated the PBLC emphasis on area Indigenous communities, some groups engaged in more tepid conversations about their own racial and ethnic identities and their experiences of the PBLCs, HSU, and the local community. While there was some evidence that the PBLC spotlight on clubs and cultural centers created a sense of belonging for at least one group, other groups called attention to a narrow program focus on diversity. In addition, groups talked about racialized challenges of moving across campus and local spaces, as well as not seeing people like themselves in the PBLC program.

In particular, interview groups with students of color, as well as White students from diverse home communities, named the challenge of the Whiteness of the campus and local community. Even the predominantly White Group 3 noted that the PBLCs themselves were not as diverse as the communities that they came from. Group 1 students of color had this conversation about not feeling comfortable walking in the local community, as well as the absence of “brown people” in the PBLCs:

Again, I came here for STEM because I want to go into sciences. But I just feel like not a lot is offered. Even outside of school for me. Because I've been outside and I've gotten stares at me just because I'm walking. It doesn't feel good, you know. And then I come back into HSU and then again, there's not a lot of, at least for me. I don't really see a lot of brown people around. And I'm coming from Los Angeles, where it is so diverse. There's a lot of different cultures. A lot of different racial backgrounds. Coming to this area, I feel like. I don't know, at least for me, not a lot was offered in the PBLC to help me feel more supported.

The conversation continued:

[In Summer] immersion maybe there were only two or three other people of Hispanic descent, and well ... Me not included. So, two other people. I felt like I didn't really see much of people were of Hispanic descent ... At least for me personally, it's part of my identity to be Hispanic. So, it's kind of important to find those connections with people who are of Hispanic descent.

In contrast, the Group 2 students of color valued the program orientation to clubs and cultural centers. One participant in that group said:

I'm Hispanic, a girl. I feel my identity has been very valued. And even if I wasn't either of those things still will be valued. I feel like the school itself is proactive on encouraging and uplifting the little guy, the minority. As far as Stars to Rocks PBLC I was in, I appreciated the seemingly constant presentations of, oh, we have this club or program or this center you can go to. For me, I'll be applied to Latinx or something. I would even go to the African American Center. Stuff like that is awesome. Having that readily available for people that look like you -- that come from a similar background to you -- that's cool. I really don't have any complaints as far as that goes. I feel like everybody has a place where they belong and not just specifically to a culture. I feel like everybody is intertwined in a way.

This narrative from Group 2 suggests a “seemingly constant” offering of resources that helped PBLC participants feel like “everybody has a place where they belong.” At least for the students of color in Group 2, the clubs and centers were enough to signal their belonging and security in their new space.

Yet for two of the other groups with all students of color, their conversations hinted at a desire for more programmatic or curricular integration of a broader range of ethnic identities. Like the students in Group 2 above, these groups also pointed to the PBLC promotion of ethnic-related clubs and cultural centers as a signal of program efforts to create belonging. Yet for Group 1 and Group 5 students of color, we see more tepid experiences of the PBLC focus on the clubs and centers, as they related to their racial and ethnic identities. They felt their identities had just not been “a focus” for the PBLC. When asked “How do you feel your ethnic/racial identity is valued,” a student in Group 1 noted:

I wouldn't say that, 'cause I'm half Filipino. I wouldn't say that that's not valued. It's just they didn't focus or make it a point to address it or anything.

The same student with more prompting noted that the PBLCs gave limited “one day” attention to multicultural resources:

I don't know. I want to say that they gave it a thought. But they didn't really go the extra mile to tell us about it. I don't know. They told us about the multicultural center, and the other programs that you can go to. Yeah, but that there's a one day thing. Yeah.

A similar account was shared by Group 5, which included one Latino and one biracial student. They felt that the PBLC acknowledged diversity and the students’ ethnic and racial identities in the First Year Seminar Science 100, but did not provide any great emphasis to diversity in other areas of the program:

I know there was like one lecture in our Science 100 period about the different centers you can go to. But again, there was really no emphasis on it. They were just like, “Yeah. They're here.”

Group 1 students of color suggested more integration of diversity in the program design including exposure to successful people of color in STEM professions:

I don't really feel like it was addressed really. We didn't do much for it other than viewing the clubs we fit into based on what we identify with ethnically, or racially. Like when we went to the club fair, that's pretty much it. Yeah. I don't feel like they ... Not to say they have to do this. But if they showed us people who are like us or identify as the race we do who are successful in our field and stuff like that, I think that would be really cool if they addressed it that way.

In summary, when it came to non-Indigenous ethnic and racial identities, group discussions were mostly tepid around conversations of diversity and inclusion. The Whiteness of the PBLCs and community was highlighted by both student groups of color, as well as White students from diverse home communities. In conversations about diversity, groups pointed to the PBLC spotlight on clubs and cultural centers. Yet for at least two groups of students of color, this outsourcing of diversity suggested an area of needed improvement for the PBLC program design.

Taking Initiative and Learning to be a Student

The PBLC program was also designed to build foundation so that students would have the skills and resources to eventually take initiative on their own. While there were few accounts that directly spoke to self initiative, a few groups did engage in these discussions in response to questions about seeking support. We identified a few narratives (22 blocks) that can be understood as accounts of taking initiative. Students talked about seeking out faculty and

tutoring services, as well as taking the initiative to make social connections. Students also discussed initiative and learning around time management.

In Group 3 that included three White students, one student shared:

I wanted to get an early start on an English essay, because I knew I had a lot of projects due in other classes the week that the essay was due. I wanted to get a head start, but I didn't understand it yet 'cause they hadn't gone over it in class yet. So I went to my professor's office hours, and they helped me through. We bounced ideas off each other. That was really great.

In this account, the student took the initiative to not only get an early start on an essay, but also to get faculty support needed to actually begin that process. Their initiative was rewarded by a positive one-to-one learning experience with a faculty member. While ideally all student initiative for faculty contact and support is similarly rewarded, we note the cultural and structural elements of the PBLC communities that likely seed these positive outcomes. As noted discussed above, PBLCs support the building of student trust in their faculty relationships. Because of this trust built through repeated positive contacts, students develop confidence in the potential of their own initiative.

In Group 5, students discussed working on their own to make connections in the broader campus community. While the PBLCs made one student aware of the cultural centers, they went on their own to make connections:

I think that the PBLCs open the door kind of, but a lot of the relationships that I have with people at these specific, I guess organizations, they were built by me because I actually did the groundwork. And I feel like no one was really there to help, so I did it myself in a sense. So I feel better about it in that sense. But also kind of like I didn't have enough support to do everything.

In this account, while we threads of disappointment that “no one” facilitated their direct connection with the cultural centers, they had enough knowledge and confidence to make that final and rewarding leap on their own.

Sometimes forms of taking initiative are not necessarily supportive of student success.

For example, skipping class was an early form of initiative that did not work well for students.

One student in Group 1 shared:

Making the right judgment calls. First semester, I'm not proud to say, but I definitely just missed some classes, just 'cause I thought I could since I was given that freedom from transition from high school to college. I'm just like, "Okay, I'm sleepy, I'll just miss this class." But then you realize that, even though you're allowed to do that, it actually does affect you. And you get to class the next time, and you're like, "Okay, I don't know what's going on."

Whether it was learning “not” to skip classes, or better organizing their day, students across the groups talked about Science 100 and their own trial and error helping them to better manage their time and studying. As the student above from Group 1 continued:

Time management was hard for me. Like knowing is it a good idea to study with this person? Are we just going to joke around all the whole time? Or are we actually going to get stuff done? And also figuring out what works for me academically when I was studying. If I needed to write things out on a board or not. 'Cause at first I just tried to stay in my room most of the time. But I realized I studied better ... when I was in the library and did things out in front of me.

In this account, we see threads of the processes of learning to be a college student.

Across discussions, students wove together accounts of learning via program structures (Science 100), as well their own trial and errors in their first semester in college. While this journey of learning from mistakes is typical, PBLC program structures likely provided atypical intentional scaffolding to convey often hidden knowledge about becoming a college student and mitigating the impact of mistakes.

Discussion and Recommendations

In this report we analyzed the experiences of 14 PBLC students as discussed across six small group interviews facilitated in the Spring of 2019. Across the data, we found stories of building communities processes. Through these experiences, students developed feelings of academic and social belonging. Within the community building theme, students discussed accounts of making their way with academic friends, building trusted relationships with faculty and peer mentors, and a range of experiences of racial and ethnic identity in relationship to the PBLC program organization and communities. The program design and the resources including summer immersion, block scheduling, and Science 100 helped students get through challenging academic and personal situations from roommate troubles to panic over assignments and tests. Woven together, these otherwise mundane everyday interactions produced a web of social and academic belonging.

On the theme of diversity, students emphasized the importance of learning about Indigenous communities in the region. At the same time, two groups of students of color -- none of whom identified as Indigenous -- hedged in their accounts of the value of their own ethnic and racial identities within the program structure itself. Their discussions pointed to the PBLC outsourcing of their ethnic and racial connections to clubs and cultural centers. These discussions were very forgiving, suggesting that their own racial and ethnic identities were “just not the focus.” Yet these accounts warrant consideration by program faculty and staff for future conversations about PBLC design, diversity, and inclusion.

Finally, as building foundations for student initiative and self-advocacy are important to the PBLC program design, we discussed in the last analysis section accounts related student agency. On the latter, more research is needed to directly understand the processes through

which students develop agency, belief in the efficacy of their initiatives, and the relationship of these to the PBLC program design.

While the above themes are not generalizable to the experiences of all PBLC students, they do represent a range of experiences for the 14 students (6 groups) of students who participated in the spring 2019 interviews. To the extent that their discussions may also resonate with observations and other sources of data available to PBLC faculty and staff, we offer the following suggestions for future program design.

1. Maintain programmatic structures that build strong academic friend, faculty, and peer mentor relationships that sustain and nurture PBLC students. These included Summer Immersion, RAMP mentors, Science 100, and block scheduling.
2. Evaluate further the processes through which students develop agency and self efficacy. This work might focus not only on the development of academic self advocacy and agency, but also on skill sets and confidence that would support holistic independent living.
3. Continue work to further diversify faculty and staff in program leadership, as well as recruiting diverse student cohorts.
4. Expand the visibility of more diverse groups of professionals, faculty, advanced undergraduates, and graduate students through guest visits and social opportunities (in person and/or virtually).
5. Structure student exploration of “people like me” who are studying or working on challenges facing their communities.

6. Expand the visibility of diversity across the science curriculum. Teach authors from diverse backgrounds. Highlight author biographies and links to their research, teaching, service and/or professional pathways.
7. Continue and expand professional development on critical and inclusive pedagogies.

Intentional design on diversity and inclusion dimensions recommended above provide direction for significant progress that mitigates student experiences of the outsourcing of diversity work. The recommendations call for expansion of student exposure to diverse groups of people and experiences – authors, professionals, and peers – in their everyday interactions and in the curriculum. In addition, the recommendations point to pedagogy informed by critical theories of teaching and learning. To the extent that pedagogy has already been a focus for program design and development, program planners have a strong foundation on which to build. Faculty professional development has already been informed by validation theories that look particularly to classroom, field, and laboratory cultures and practices that affirm a diverse range of identities. When these building blocks are strengthened, the program should see shifts in student narratives on their experiences of PBLC diversity work: We would expect in the future to hear diverse groups of PBLC students reporting that their own racial and ethnic identities indeed “were a focus” for the program.

Appendix A: PBLC Focus Group

The purpose of these focus groups are to gain a better understanding of your experience within our Place-Based Learning Communities (PBLCs), Klamath Connection, Stars to Rocks, and Rising Tides, as we are working to improve our programming. Place-Based Learning Communities consist of five components: (1) a summer immersion experience, (2) Science 100 course, (3) RAMP peer mentors, (4) blocked scheduling, and (5) themed housing. Your responses will be kept anonymous.

1. How did you make your closest friendships at HSU?
2. How do your friendships compare with people who are in the PBLCs to those outside of the PBLCs?
3. How do you feel the PBLC experience has prepared you for connecting, working, and living in a diverse community (i.e. culturally, ethnically, economically)?
4. How do you feel your ethnic/racial identity is valued? Please provide examples.
5. When you reach out to your professors, advisors, and peers, do you feel they understand your needs and concerns?
 - a. Professors
 - b. Advisors
 - c. Peers
6. If there was a time you struggled academically or emotionally, how did your professors or your peers offer support?
7. What challenges have you faced, prior to and during your time at HSU, that get in the way of your personal and academic growth?
8. What type of support (i.e. Financial Aid, Counseling and Psychological Services, RAMP mentor, the Learning Center, etc) have you utilized, that the PBLCs connected you to, which helped you overcome these challenges? What support would you like to be given to thrive throughout your time here?
9. Are there other topics you would have liked us to discuss?

Major declared upon entering HSU:

Current major:

Which Place-Based Learning Community (PBLC) were you a part of?

- Klamath Connection
- Stars to Rocks
- Rising Tides

What academic year did you participate in?

- 2015-2016
- 2016-2017
- 2017-2018
- 2018-2019

Housing location off or on campus (if on campus please note which dorm)?

Please select the option that best describes your financial situation:

- Working class (low-income)
- Middle class
- Upper class (high-income)

Please specify your race (select all that apply):

- African American
- Native American
- Asian
- Hispanic/Latino
- Pacific Islander
- White
- Other(s): _____

Do you further identify with any ethnicities (i.e. LatinX, Chicano/a, Black, etc)?

What is your gender?

How would you describe your sexual orientation?

Have you been diagnosed with a disability?

- Yes
- No

What are your religious affiliations or beliefs?
