

Using a Seminar to Integrate a First-Year Learning Community: An Action Research Study of Global Humboldt

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Abstract

While learning communities are widely recognized as high-impact practices, less attention has been paid to how their curricular, co-curricular, and support components are intentionally integrated in practice. This study examines Global Humboldt, a first-year learning community at Cal Poly Humboldt (then Humboldt State University), following the introduction of a one-unit seminar designed to serve as an integrative hub. Using a bounded action-research design, the study draws on end-of-year survey data from students and faculty/staff to examine perceptions of support, connection, academic and career direction, and program coherence. Participants reported strong levels of relational support and connection, while students expressed greater uncertainty regarding academic and career direction and mixed views about the seminar's relevance and accessibility. Because the seminar was implemented alongside broader changes in faculty collaboration, advising, and program coordination, the study does not seek to isolate its independent causal effects. Instead, the findings suggest that integration in learning communities is both structural and relational, involving the coordination of courses, resources, and the students, faculty, and staff who participate in them.

Keywords: learning communities, first-year experience, student engagement, student success, action research

1. Introduction

Institutions across higher education increasingly rely on first-year learning communities to support student engagement, persistence, and success. Yet while the benefits associated with learning communities are well documented, less attention has been paid to a persistent implementation challenge: how to meaningfully integrate the multiple curricular, co-curricular, and support components that constitute these programs. Without intentional coordination, learning communities risk becoming collections of linked courses and activities rather than coherent educational experiences (Pike et al., 2011; Tinto, 1994).

This article examines Global Humboldt, a first-year learning community at Cal Poly Humboldt, a rural public university on California's north coast. At the time of the study, the institution was known as Humboldt State University (HSU). Like many institutions, the university has faced ongoing challenges related to student retention, particularly among first-time, first-year students (Cal Poly Humboldt, 2025; Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2017). In response, the university developed several learning communities intended to strengthen student engagement, connection, and access to support.

Global Humboldt was designed for first-time, first-year students entering the university without a declared major. During its inaugural year, participants reported strong interpersonal connections among students and faculty, but the program lacked a consistent mechanism for coordinating learning across courses, co-curricular activities, advising, and other support services. In response to these concerns, a one-unit seminar was introduced during AY 2019–2020 to serve as an integrative hub for the learning community.

Using a bounded action-research design, this study examines participant perceptions following implementation of the seminar and considers how the seminar functioned as an integrative structure within the broader Global Humboldt program. The study draws on end-of-year survey responses from students and faculty/staff concerning support, connection, academic and career direction, and program coherence. It does not seek to isolate the independent causal effect of the seminar or to assess changes in retention or academic performance. Rather, it examines how participants experienced a learning community that had been intentionally redesigned to strengthen coordination across its curricular, co-curricular, and support components.

This focus is important because integration within learning communities is not solely a matter of linking courses. Learning communities also depend on relationships among students, faculty, advisors, and other staff whose activities collectively shape the student experience. From this perspective, integration can be understood as both a structural and relational process: program components must be coordinated, but the participants responsible for those components must also have opportunities to interact, collaborate, and make those connections visible to students.

The Global Humboldt case therefore offers an opportunity to examine how a dedicated seminar can serve as one organizational mechanism for intentional integration. The study contributes to the literature by shifting attention from whether participation in a learning community produces particular student outcomes to how integration is enacted within the everyday organization of a learning community. In doing so, it considers both the possibilities and limitations of using a seminar to connect courses, co-curricular experiences, advising, institutional resources, and the faculty and staff involved in supporting first-year students.

2. Problem of Practice and Research Questions

Global Humboldt was designed to support first-time, first-year students entering the university without a declared major, a population that may face particular challenges related to academic planning, engagement, and persistence (Cuseo, 2005; Davis, 2015). During the program's inaugural year, AY 2018–2019, an exploratory cycle of action research identified both significant strengths and a recurring problem of practice.

Interviews with participating students and faculty indicated that Global Humboldt fostered strong interpersonal relationships. Students described quickly developing peer connections and experiencing faculty as accessible and supportive. Faculty similarly valued the opportunity to develop closer relationships with students and colleagues. At the same time, participants described limited coordination across courses and program activities. Students did not always see how individual courses related to one another or to the broader Global Humboldt theme, while co-curricular activities were often perceived as only loosely connected to coursework. Faculty also identified limited advance planning and coordination across program components.

These exploratory findings were used to identify a problem of practice and inform the next cycle of program development. They were not designed as a standardized quantitative baseline against which subsequent outcomes could be measured. Rather, they suggested that Global Humboldt had established a strong relational foundation while lacking a consistent structure through which curricular, co-curricular, advising, and support activities could be intentionally connected.

In response, a one-unit seminar was introduced during AY 2019–2020. The seminar provided a shared instructional space for all students in the learning community and a consistent point of contact with the faculty leader. It was designed to make connections among courses more explicit, link students to campus and community resources, support academic and career exploration, and provide a setting in which faculty and staff contributions to the learning community could be more deliberately coordinated.

The present study examines participant perceptions following implementation of this redesigned program. Because the action-research design does not permit the independent effects of the seminar to be separated from other changes in program organization and collaboration, the analysis focuses on participants' experiences of support, connection, direction, and coherence rather than on causal attribution.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How did students perceive support and connection within Global Humboldt following implementation of the seminar?
2. What did students report regarding academic and career exploration and their sense of direction?
3. How did faculty and staff perceive connection, support, and program coherence following implementation of the seminar?

The study advances two related claims. First, a dedicated seminar can provide a structural space through which the multiple components of a first-year learning community—including courses, co-curricular activities, advising, institutional resources, faculty, and staff—can be more intentionally coordinated. In this case, the seminar is understood not as an isolated intervention whose independent effect can be estimated, but as one component of a broader effort to strengthen integration within the learning community.

Second, the study suggests that integration may be experienced unevenly across different dimensions of student experience. Participant responses indicate particularly strong perceptions of relational support and connection, while students reported greater uncertainty regarding academic and career direction and expressed mixed views about aspects of the seminar itself. Examining these differences helps identify both the potential value and the practical limitations of using a seminar as an integrative structure.

The remainder of the article reviews scholarship on learning communities, student engagement, and intentional integration, with particular attention to support, connection, academic and career direction, and coordination across participant roles. It then describes the Global Humboldt program and the seminar intervention, outlines the action-research methodology, presents student and faculty/staff findings, and considers the implications of the case for the design of first-year learning communities.

3. Review of Relevant Literature

3.1 Learning Communities and Intentional Integration

Learning communities have become a prominent strategy for supporting student engagement and success, particularly during the first year of college. Although learning communities take varied forms, they generally organize cohorts of students around linked courses, shared themes, or common educational experiences intended to strengthen academic and social integration (Otto et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2003; Tinto, 1994). Research has associated participation in learning communities with stronger peer and faculty relationships, greater engagement in educationally purposeful activities, persistence, and academic success (Pike et al., 2011).

More recent research continues to demonstrate the potential value of learning-community structures while also drawing attention to the mechanisms through which these programs operate. Spiridon et al. (2020), for example, examined integrated learning communities as a peer-support strategy for first-year students, while Johnson et al. (2020) found that participation in a place-based first-year learning community was associated with stronger belonging, academic performance, and persistence. Particularly relevant to the present case, Johnson et al.'s study was conducted at Humboldt State University and demonstrates the potential for thematically organized first-year learning communities to connect academic experiences, relationships, and institutional belonging within this institutional context.

First-year seminars represent another structure through which institutions attempt to facilitate students' transition and integration. In a systematic review of recent research on first-year seminars, Samoila and Vrabie (2023) identify pedagogical, counseling, and social-relational dimensions as recurring elements of seminar-based interventions. Their review suggests that first-year seminars commonly operate not simply as stand-alone courses but as sites through which students encounter academic expectations, advising and support, faculty and peers, and the broader institutional environment.

The presence of multiple courses, services, and activities, however, does not itself ensure an integrated student experience. Lardner and Malnarich (2008) argue for a "pedagogy of intentional integration" in which connections across courses and experiences are deliberately designed and made visible rather than assumed. This distinction is particularly important for learning communities. Co-enrollment may create opportunities for connection, but students may not necessarily recognize relationships among course content, co-curricular activities, advising, or institutional resources unless those relationships are explicitly articulated.

The present study builds on this distinction between the existence of program components and their intentional integration. It examines the use of a seminar as a structural space in which connections among courses, co-curricular experiences, advising, and other forms of support could be made more explicit. In doing so, it focuses on three dimensions that emerged from the preliminary action-research cycle and subsequently informed the program assessment: support, connection, and direction. These dimensions are not treated as direct or comprehensive measures of student engagement. Rather, they represent locally developed analytic categories that overlap with concerns identified in the broader literature on first-year student engagement and integration.

3.2 Support, Connection, and Belonging

Support and connection are closely related dimensions of the first-year student experience. Students encounter college not only through formal curricula but also through relationships with peers, faculty, advisors, and other institutional actors. Research on student engagement has long emphasized the importance of these interactions (Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 1994), while more recent scholarship has further demonstrated the importance of relational experiences to students' perceptions of belonging and support.

Belonging generally refers to students' perceptions that they are accepted, valued, and part of an institutional or academic community. Using a nationally representative sample of first-year college students, Gopalan and Brady (2020) found that sense of belonging was associated with persistence, engagement, and well-being, while also varying across student and institutional characteristics. Within learning communities specifically, van der Zijden and Wubbels (2023) found that students valued both academic and socio-emotional support from peers and instructors, with supportive interactions also contributing to classroom participation and perceptions of a positive social climate.

Faculty relationships constitute an important component of this relational environment. Guzzardo et al. (2021) found that students emphasized faculty accessibility, responsiveness, engagement, and care in describing relationships that supported their learning and success. Such findings are consistent with earlier learning-community research emphasizing frequent interaction with faculty and peers as an important feature of academically and socially integrative environments.

In the present study, *support* refers to participants' perceptions of the availability and accessibility of people and resources that can assist students academically, personally, or institutionally. This includes faculty, advising staff, program personnel, and campus support resources. *Connection* refers more specifically to perceived relational ties among students, faculty, staff, and the broader university community. Connection therefore overlaps with the literature on belonging but is not treated as synonymous with belonging or as a validated measure of that construct. Instead, it captures the relational dimension that participants themselves emphasized during the exploratory phase of the action-research process.

This distinction is useful for examining learning communities because students may experience support and connection at multiple levels. A student may feel connected to peers within a learning-community cohort, supported by individual faculty or advisors, and yet less connected to the institution as a whole. Similarly, faculty and staff may perceive themselves as connected to students while experiencing weaker coordination or support at the organizational level. Examining these relationships across participant roles therefore provides a broader perspective on integration than focusing exclusively on student participation.

3.3 Academic and Career Exploration and Direction

For Global Humboldt, support and connection were particularly important because the program was designed for students entering the university without a declared major. Scholarship on undecided or exploratory students has increasingly moved away from treating indecision as a deficit and toward understanding exploration and decision-making as developmental processes that may require intentional advising and institutional support.

A recent historiographic review by Spight et al. (2023) traces the evolution of research on undecided and exploratory students from early comparisons of decided and undecided students toward greater attention to major exploration, decision-making, advising interventions, and the student experience. The authors emphasize that exploration and decision-making skills have value beyond a narrowly defined population of "undecided" students and identify continued need for stronger research on programs designed to support exploratory students. Research on advising similarly underscores the importance of institutional efforts to help undecided students navigate academic choices and understand possible pathways through the university (Wang & Orr, 2022).

For this study, *direction* refers to students' perceived progress in academic and career exploration and their developing clarity regarding majors, degree pathways, and possible careers. It encompasses a continuum from increased awareness of academic and career options and relevant resources to greater clarity regarding future educational and professional pathways. Direction therefore does not assume that students should have reached a definitive major or career decision during the first year.

This distinction between exploration and clarity is particularly important for interpreting first-year experiences. An intervention may successfully expose students to majors, careers, advisors, and institutional resources without immediately resolving uncertainty. For exploratory students, continued uncertainty may reflect an ongoing process of investigation and decision-making rather than the absence of support. Accordingly, the present study considers both

students' perceptions that Global Humboldt assisted them in exploring options and their reported clarity regarding subsequent academic and career direction.

3.4 Integration across Participant Roles

Much of the literature on student engagement and learning communities understandably focuses on student experiences and outcomes. Yet learning communities are also organizational arrangements. Their effectiveness depends on the work of faculty who teach linked courses, staff who provide advising and other forms of support, and administrators or program leaders who coordinate activities across institutional boundaries.

Kezar (2005) emphasizes the importance—and difficulty—of collaboration within higher education organizations, where professional and organizational structures can separate actors whose work nevertheless contributes to common educational goals. More recent research similarly suggests that integrating student support requires attention to relationships among institutional actors as well as relationships between institutions and students. Holcombe and Kezar (2021), for example, examined integrated transition programs that bridge academic and student-affairs functions. They found that such programs can strengthen relationships among faculty and staff, facilitate learning and collaboration, streamline institutional processes, and create a more unified community of support.

This organizational perspective extends the concept of integration beyond curricular alignment. A program may connect courses thematically while faculty remain unaware of one another's assignments; it may provide advising while advisors remain peripheral to students' academic experiences; or it may offer co-curricular activities that students experience as unrelated additions rather than components of a coherent program. Conversely, structures that create regular points of interaction among faculty, advisors, support staff, and students may make the relationships among these elements more visible and usable.

The present study therefore conceptualizes integration as a *multi-level process with both structural and relational dimensions*. Structural integration concerns the intentional coordination of courses, activities, advising, and institutional resources. Relational integration concerns the connections among the students, faculty, and staff who participate in and enact those structures. These dimensions are analytically distinct but interdependent: coordinated program structures can create opportunities for relationships, while relationships among participants can make coordination more effective.

From this perspective, the Global Humboldt seminar is examined not as an isolated treatment but as an organizational mechanism through which integration could be enacted. The seminar created a common space in which students encountered the faculty leader, advisors, campus resources, co-curricular experiences, and connections among their courses. At the same time, its implementation depended upon broader coordination among faculty and staff. Examining perceptions across these participant groups therefore provides a way to assess how integration was experienced within the program while recognizing that no single component can be isolated as the cause of those experiences.

Taken together, this literature suggests that first-year learning communities are most usefully understood not simply as collections of linked courses but as relational and organizational environments. Support concerns students' access to responsive people and resources; connection concerns the relationships through which students experience membership in the learning community and institution; and direction concerns their developing capacity to navigate academic and career options. Intentional integration involves coordinating these dimensions across courses, experiences, and participant roles. The present study applies this framework to a bounded action-research case to examine both the possibilities and limitations of using a seminar as a structure for that coordination.

4. Intervention: Seminar as Integrative Hub (AY 2019–2020)

Following its inaugural year (AY 2018–2019), faculty and staff involved in Global Humboldt recognized that, despite strong interpersonal connections, the program lacked cohesion in both theme and structure. Faculty meetings held every two weeks tended to focus on monitoring student progress in individual courses rather than coordinated planning across the learning community. As one participant described, these meetings often felt like “taking inventory” of student performance, with limited opportunity for intentional curricular alignment. Activities and events were frequently planned in an ad hoc manner, with little connection to the overarching theme of the program.

The absence of a shared integrative space was particularly notable. The faculty leader during the inaugural year had no formal classroom contact with students, limiting their ability to shape a cohesive experience across courses and activities. Although individual courses addressed elements of Humboldt as a place and its global connections, these themes were not explicitly connected across the curriculum. The result was a learning community characterized by strong relationships but weak integration.

To address these shortcomings, the central programmatic change examined in this study was the design and implementation of a one-unit seminar course for the AY 2019–2020 Global Humboldt cohort. All participating students were required to enroll in the seminar, which met once per week for one hour in the late afternoon. The faculty leader (the author) served as instructor of record, creating a consistent point of contact across the learning community.

The seminar was implemented as part of a broader effort to improve coordination within Global Humboldt and therefore cannot be analytically separated from concurrent changes in faculty collaboration, advising, and program organization.

The seminar was intentionally designed to function as an integrative hub, with three primary goals.

4.1 Integrating Learning across Courses

A central objective of the seminar was to make explicit connections among the courses comprising the learning community. This goal was informed by Lardner and Malnarich's (2008) concept of a "pedagogy of intentional integration," which emphasizes the importance of designing structures that help students synthesize learning across contexts. Weekly seminar sessions included guided discussions that prompted students to reflect on connections among course topics, assignments, and themes.

Integration was further supported through a culminating assignment that required students to draw on learning from multiple courses to address a shared theme. This assignment was designed collaboratively with input from participating faculty and encouraged students to identify intersections among disciplinary perspectives. In addition, selected seminar sessions incorporated experiential components, including field-based activities and site visits, that reinforced connections between classroom learning and broader contexts.

4.2 Connecting Students to Campus and Community Resources

A second goal of the seminar was to strengthen connections between students and the broader institutional and co-curricular environment. The seminar served as a structured space in which students were introduced to campus offices, programs, and events aligned with the Global Humboldt theme.

Students were encouraged, and in some cases required, to attend a range of campus and community events, including the Campus and Community Dialog on Race, International Education Week, Geography Awareness Week, the Sustainable Futures Speakers Series, and Indigenous Peoples' Week. Seminar sessions provided opportunities to reflect on these experiences and connect them to course content.

The seminar also functioned as a bridge to student organizations and co-curricular opportunities. Students explored clubs and interest groups, with the goal of extending engagement beyond the classroom and fostering a broader sense of belonging within the university community.

4.3 Supporting Academic and Career Exploration

The third goal of the seminar focused on supporting undeclared students in exploring academic pathways and career possibilities. To this end, the seminar incorporated structured collaboration with staff from the Academic and Career Advising Center (ACAC). Advisors participated in seminar sessions and provided guidance on major selection, career exploration, and academic planning.

Additional collaborations included workshops led by library staff on research strategies and study skills, as well as sessions focused on time management and academic success. These activities were designed to introduce students to key support services while reinforcing skills necessary for success in college. For students entering the university without a declared major, these structured interactions were intended to provide regular access to advisors and support personnel, helping to demystify institutional resources and promote more intentional academic decision-making.

Taken together, the seminar was designed not only to connect curricular and co-curricular elements, but also to align the roles of faculty and staff in supporting student experience. By creating a shared space for reflection, coordination, and interaction, the seminar operationalized a multi-level approach to integration across the learning community.

5. Methodology

5.1 Action Research Design and Study Boundaries

This study employs an action research framework, characterized by iterative cycles of inquiry, reflection, and program improvement within a specific educational context (Mertler, 2017; Schmuck, 1997; Stringer, 2007). Action research is particularly appropriate for the present study because the research emerged from a locally identified problem of practice within Global Humboldt and examined a programmatic response developed by participants involved in the learning community.

The first cycle of inquiry occurred during AY 2018–2019, Global Humboldt's inaugural year. Semi-structured interviews with four students and two faculty participants were used to identify strengths and challenges within the program. As described previously, these interviews indicated strong interpersonal relationships alongside concerns about coordination among courses, co-curricular activities, and program participants. These exploratory findings informed the design of the one-unit seminar introduced during AY 2019–2020.

The AY 2018–2019 interviews were not designed as a standardized baseline or pretest against which the subsequent survey results could be quantitatively compared. Rather, they served a diagnostic function within the action-research process by identifying a problem of practice and informing the next cycle of program development. Accordingly, this study does not make claims about measured changes between the two cohorts.

The present analysis focuses on assessment data collected at the conclusion of AY 2019–2020, following implementation of the seminar. The seminar was one component of a broader effort to strengthen coordination within Global Humboldt, including increased collaboration among faculty, staff, advising personnel, and other campus resources. The research design therefore does not permit the independent effect of the seminar to be isolated from these concurrent programmatic changes. The purpose of the analysis is instead to describe how students and faculty/staff perceived support, connection, academic and career direction, and program coherence within the redesigned learning community.

This is consequently a bounded action-research case rather than an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation. Its findings are intended to provide contextual and practice-oriented insight into the implementation of an integrative structure within one first-year learning community rather than statistical estimates that can be generalized to other student populations.

5.2 Participants and Data Collection

Participants in the AY 2019–2020 Global Humboldt cohort included 22 first-time, first-year students enrolled in the learning community and seven participating faculty and staff members. Thirteen of the 22 students completed the end-of-year survey, representing a response rate of 59.1%. All seven faculty/staff participants completed the corresponding survey.

Data were collected through anonymous online surveys administered using Google Forms during the final weeks of the Spring 2020 semester. The surveys combined Likert-scale items, a multiple-choice item concerning time commitment to Global Humboldt, and open-ended questions designed to capture participants' experiences of the program.

The student survey included 14 Likert-scale items. These items reflected themes that emerged during the exploratory phase of the action-research process, including support, connection, coordination of program components, and academic and career direction. Representative items included statements such as “I feel connected to the faculty of Global Humboldt,” “Global Humboldt helped me explore my major and/or career options,” and “I know what major I would like to pursue for my bachelor's degree.” A multiple-choice question asked students to estimate the number of hours per week they devoted to Global Humboldt activities. Three open-ended questions asked students to identify the most rewarding and challenging aspects of their experience and to reflect on what they wished they had known before entering the university.

The faculty/staff survey included nine Likert-scale items addressing parallel dimensions from the perspective of program personnel. Representative items included “I see the connections between the courses, housing, and student support resources in Global Humboldt,” “I feel connected to students in Global Humboldt,” and items concerning participants' roles in helping students explore academic and career options and become aware of campus resources. Faculty and staff were also asked about their time commitment to the program and were invited to reflect in open-ended responses on program strengths, challenges, and prior expectations.

5.3 Measures and Analysis

The survey instruments were developed locally for the purposes of program assessment and action research. They were informed by themes identified in the AY 2018–2019 exploratory interviews rather than drawn from validated psychometric instruments. Accordingly, support, connection, and direction are used in this study as organizing analytic dimensions rather than as validated scales.

As defined in the preceding literature review, *support* concerns participants' perceptions of access to responsive faculty, staff, advising, and institutional resources. *Connection* concerns perceived relationships among students, faculty, staff, and the broader university community. *Direction* concerns students' academic and career exploration and their developing clarity regarding majors, degree pathways, and possible careers. These categories were used to organize the analysis while recognizing that individual survey items capture particular aspects of each dimension rather than comprehensive measures of the underlying concepts.

Quantitative responses were analyzed descriptively using response distributions and mean scores. Responses of "I don't know" were excluded from the calculation of item means. Given the size and bounded nature of the participant group, no inferential statistical tests were conducted, and the quantitative findings are interpreted as descriptions of participant perceptions within this particular learning community rather than estimates of population-level effects.

Open-ended responses were reviewed for recurring patterns and themes. Responses were considered in relation to the broad dimensions of support, connection, and direction while also allowing concerns not captured by those categories to emerge from the data. Particular attention was given to qualitative responses that elaborated upon, complicated, or qualified patterns evident in the quantitative results. These included student comments concerning interpersonal relationships, seminar relevance, scheduling, and the challenges associated with transition to the university.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative responses was used to provide complementary perspectives on participants' experiences. This mixed-format assessment does not constitute independent methodological triangulation in a causal sense; rather, the qualitative responses provide additional context for interpreting patterns found in the descriptive survey results.

5.4 Researcher Positionality and Methodological Limitations

The researcher's position within Global Humboldt combined elements of both insider and outsider participation. During AY 2019–2020, I served as the faculty leader for Global Humboldt and as instructor of record for the seminar. In these roles, I participated in regular faculty meetings and interacted with students during weekly seminar sessions. This position provided direct insight into program implementation and into the ways participating faculty and staff discussed the progress and challenges of the learning community.

At the same time, I did not teach any of the substantive courses that comprised the Global Humboldt learning community during the two years considered in this study. Faculty teaching those courses interacted with participating students for substantially more classroom time each week and were responsible for evaluating students' work within their respective courses. My position was therefore that of a participant-observer with direct involvement in the seminar and program coordination but more limited involvement in students' experiences within the linked academic courses.

This positionality offered advantages for action research because it allowed the study to emerge directly from an identified problem of practice and provided sustained access to the processes through which the intervention was implemented. It also introduces potential sources of bias. As the faculty leader and seminar instructor, I had a professional investment in the program's development and may have interpreted participant responses through my experience of the intervention. The anonymous survey format reduced the possibility that respondents would need to identify themselves directly to the researcher, but it does not eliminate potential social-desirability effects or researcher interpretive bias.

Several additional limitations should guide interpretation of the findings. First, the study involves a small, bounded participant group. Thirteen students completed the survey, and the findings therefore cannot be assumed to represent either all students enrolled in Global Humboldt or students participating in first-year learning communities more generally. Second, the measures were developed locally and were not validated instruments. Third, the study lacks a comparison group and standardized pre-intervention measures. The exploratory AY 2018–2019 interviews identified concerns that informed the redesign but cannot establish measurable change between program years. Finally, the implementation of the seminar occurred alongside other changes in faculty collaboration, advising, and program coordination, making it impossible to attribute participants' perceptions independently to the seminar itself.

These limitations are consistent with the study's purpose as action research. The analysis does not seek to demonstrate causal effects or statistical generalizability. Rather, it examines participant perceptions within a particular implementation context in order to identify patterns, challenges, and design considerations that may inform the development of integrative structures in other first-year learning communities.

6. Results

The findings below describe perceptions reported by students and faculty/staff participating in Global Humboldt during AY 2019–2020. Because the study is based on a small, bounded participant group and does not include standardized pre-intervention measures or a comparison group, the results are presented descriptively rather than as estimates of the seminar's causal effects.

6.1 Student Participants

6.1.1 Descriptive Survey Results

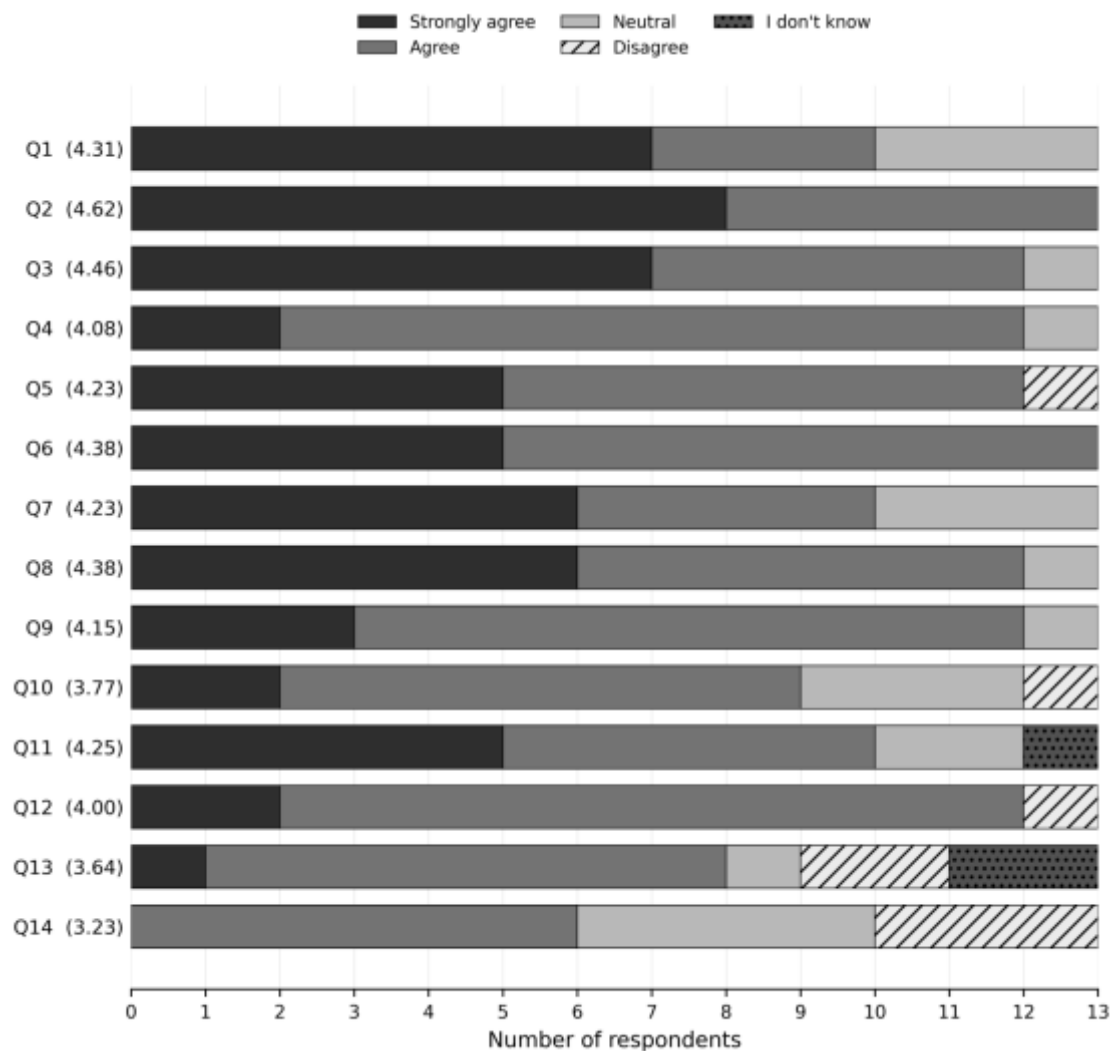
Among the 13 students who completed the survey, responses reflected generally strong perceptions of support and connection within Global Humboldt (see Figure 1). Students reported that Global Humboldt made their first-year experience easier (mean = 4.31) and that they felt supported by the program (mean = 4.46). Responses also indicated strong perceived connections with peers (mean = 4.23) and Global Humboldt faculty (mean = 4.38). Students similarly reported a sense of belonging within the broader university community (mean = 4.23).

At the same time, responses suggest that students distinguished between their experiences within Global Humboldt and their experiences of the university more broadly. Students reported relatively strong agreement that their cultural identity was valued within Global Humboldt (mean = 4.15), while the corresponding perception at the institutional level was lower (mean = 3.77). This difference suggests that students' experiences of belonging and recognition within the learning community did not necessarily correspond to equally strong perceptions of the institution as a whole.

Results concerning academic and career direction were more mixed. Students reported that Global Humboldt helped them explore academic and career options (mean = 4.25) and increased their awareness of campus resources (mean = 4.00). However, responses indicated less clarity about specific future pathways. The mean response for knowing what major to pursue was 3.64, while the mean for seeing a clear pathway to degree completion and a career was 3.23.

Taken together, these responses suggest an important distinction between *exploration* and *clarity*. Students generally perceived Global Humboldt as helping them encounter academic and career possibilities and become more aware of relevant resources, but this exploration did not necessarily result in a settled major or clearly defined degree-to-career pathway by the end of the first year.

Students reported spending either 0–2 hours per week (61.5%) or 3–5 hours per week (38.5%) on Global Humboldt activities.



- Q1. I feel that Global Humboldt student learning community made my first-year experience easier.
 Q2. I feel supported by Global Humboldt staff (RAMP mentor, academic advisor, administrative support coordinator).
 Q3. I feel supported by Global Humboldt as a program.
 Q4. I see the connections between the courses, housing, and student support resources in Global Humboldt.
 Q5. I feel connected to other students in Global Humboldt.
 Q6. I feel connected to the faculty in Global Humboldt.
 Q7. I feel a sense of belonging in the HSU community.
 Q8. I feel safe in my student learning community.
 Q9. I feel that my cultural identity is valued in Global Humboldt.
 Q10. I feel that my cultural identity is valued in the HSU community.
 Q11. Global Humboldt helped me explore my major and/or career options.
 Q12. I am aware of campus resources that can help me complete my goal of a bachelor's degree.
 Q13. I know what major I would like to pursue for my bachelor's degree.
 Q14. I can see a clear pathway in earning my degree and pursuing a career.

Figure 1. Assessment Survey Results for AY 2019–2020 Global Humboldt Student Participants.

Note: At the time the surveys were administered, the university was named Humboldt State University (HSU). Survey-item wording is reproduced as administered. The institution was renamed Cal Poly Humboldt in 2022. Also note: Response options ranged from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). “I Don’t Know” responses were excluded from calculation of item means. At the time the surveys were administered, the university was named Humboldt State University (HSU). Survey-item wording is reproduced as administered. The institution was renamed Cal Poly Humboldt in 2022.

6.1.2 Qualitative Results

Students' open-ended responses reinforced the prominence of relationships and interpersonal support in their experience of Global Humboldt. When asked about the most rewarding aspects of the program, students frequently identified relationships with peers and faculty. Several responses emphasized the importance of having a community during the transition to college. One student described the value of “feeling less alone in the uncertainty of the future,” while others emphasized that faculty made students feel welcome and were willing to provide assistance when needed.

Students also identified experiential and field-based activities as meaningful parts of the program. These responses suggest that some of the experiences students valued most extended beyond individual courses and involved interactions with peers and faculty through places and activities connected to the broader learning-community experience.

At the same time, students' comments complicate an interpretation of the seminar as uniformly successful as an integrative structure. Some respondents described the seminar as a lower priority relative to their other courses, while others reported difficulty recognizing clear connections between particular seminar activities and the remainder of the Global Humboldt curriculum. Scheduling was also identified as a barrier, particularly the seminar's late-afternoon meeting time.

Students identified additional challenges associated with the transition to college, including hesitancy in asking for help and difficulty opening up to others. When asked what they wished they had known before entering the university, responses emphasized three recurring areas: the extent to which faculty would be available to support them, the academic rigor of university coursework, and aspects of campus life. These responses further illustrate the importance participants placed on interpersonal support while also highlighting the broader transitional challenges facing first-year students.

6.2 Faculty and Staff Participants

6.2.1 Descriptive Survey Results

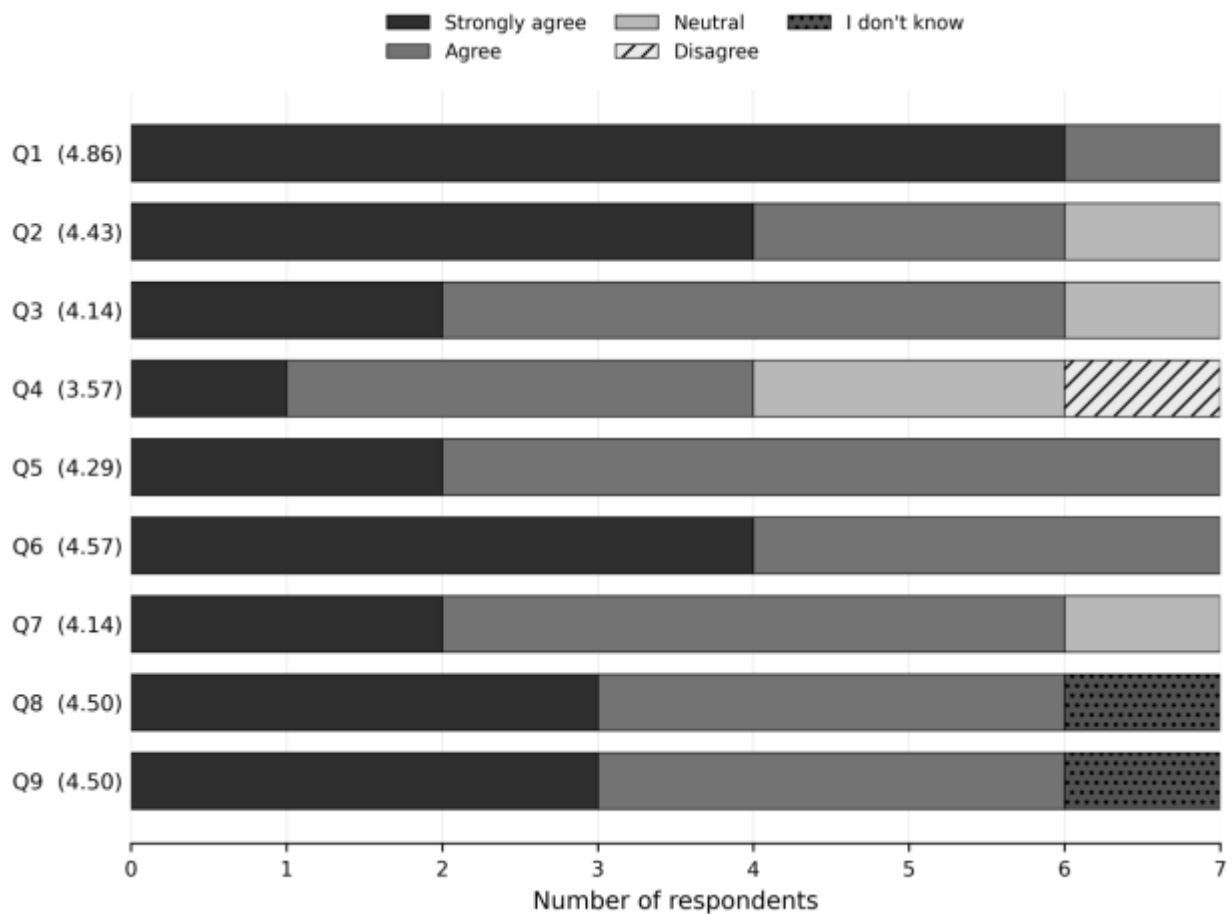
Responses from the seven participating faculty and staff members also reflected generally strong perceptions of student support, interpersonal connection, and coordination within Global Humboldt (see Figure 2). All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Global Humboldt made students' first-year experience easier (mean = 4.86). Faculty and staff also reported seeing connections among courses, housing, and student support resources (mean = 4.43).

Participants reported strong perceived relationships with both students and colleagues. The mean response for feeling connected to Global Humboldt students was 4.28, while the mean for feeling connected to other participating faculty and staff was 4.57. These responses indicate that participants perceived Global Humboldt not only as a student-facing program but also as a setting that facilitated relationships among the faculty and staff involved in delivering it.

Perceptions of support from the broader institution were less uniformly positive. The mean response concerning support from college administration was 3.57, notably lower than responses concerning relationships within Global Humboldt itself. As with the student findings concerning cultural identity, this pattern suggests that positive experiences within the learning community did not necessarily translate into equally strong perceptions at the broader institutional level.

Faculty and staff also reported substantial involvement in helping students navigate academic and career options. Mean responses were 4.50 for both helping students explore majors and increasing students' awareness of campus resources.

Reported time commitments varied among faculty and staff, with most respondents indicating that they devoted approximately 3–8 hours per week to Global Humboldt activities.



Q1. I feel that Global Humboldt community made our students' first year experience easier.

Q2. I see the connections between the courses, housing, and student support resources in Global Humboldt.

Q3. I feel supported by Global Humboldt as a program.

Q4. I feel supported by the college administration.

Q5. I feel connected to students in Global Humboldt.

Q6. I feel connected to other faculty in Global Humboldt.

Q7. I feel a sense of belonging in the HSU community.

Q8. I helped students explore a major and/or career options.

Q9. I helped bring awareness of campus resources to my students to help them.

Figure 2. Assessment Survey Results for AY 2019–2020 Global Humboldt Faculty and Staff Participants.

Note: At the time the surveys were administered, the university was named Humboldt State University (HSU). Survey-item wording is reproduced as administered. The institution was renamed Cal Poly Humboldt in 2022. Also note: Response options ranged from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). "I Don't Know" responses were excluded from calculation of item means. At the time the surveys were administered, the university was named Humboldt State University (HSU). Survey-item wording is reproduced as administered. The institution was renamed Cal Poly Humboldt in 2022.

6.2.2 Qualitative Results

Open-ended responses from faculty and staff similarly emphasized relationships and collaboration as central features of the Global Humboldt experience. Participants frequently described a strong sense of interpersonal connection, with one respondent stating that the learning community “felt like a family” and another comparing the experience to “being at home.”

Several respondents also described the program as more organized and coordinated than they had anticipated based on prior experience. These comments are consistent with the survey responses indicating that faculty and staff perceived connections among courses, housing, and student support resources. Because the study does not include comparable standardized measures from the preceding year, these comments are treated as participants' retrospective perceptions rather than evidence of measured year-to-year improvement.

Faculty and staff responses also revealed challenges associated with the relational intensity of the learning community. One participant observed, “Sometimes I felt like a counselor,” illustrating the extent to which close involvement with students could expand participants' perceived responsibilities beyond conventional instructional or administrative roles.

7. Discussion

This study examined participant perceptions within Global Humboldt following the introduction of a one-unit seminar designed to provide a shared space for integration across courses, co-curricular experiences, advising, and other forms of student support. Taken together, the findings suggest that participants experienced the redesigned learning community as a strongly relational environment characterized by high levels of support and connection. At the same time, students reported less certainty regarding academic and career direction, and some questioned the relevance and accessibility of the seminar itself. These findings illustrate both the possibilities and limitations of using a seminar as an integrative structure within a first-year learning community.

The findings are consistent with prior research emphasizing the importance of relationships, belonging, and support within first-year learning environments (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Pike et al., 2011; Tinto, 1994). Students reported strong connections with peers and faculty and generally perceived Global Humboldt as a supportive environment. Faculty and staff similarly emphasized relationships with students and with one another. These patterns suggest that the integrative work of a learning community occurs not only through curricular alignment but also through the relationships that enable students to access people, information, and institutional resources.

This relational dimension is particularly important for understanding integration across participant roles. Learning communities are often described primarily in terms of student participation in linked courses or shared experiences. The Global Humboldt case suggests that integration also depends on coordination among the faculty, advisors, staff, and program personnel who create those experiences. In this respect, the findings are consistent with research emphasizing the organizational importance of collaboration across academic and student-support functions (Kezar, 2005; Holcombe & Kezar, 2021). The seminar provided one recurring setting in which students could encounter these different components of the program and in which connections among them could be made more visible.

The findings should not, however, be interpreted as demonstrating that the seminar independently produced participants' perceptions of support, connection, or coherence. The seminar was introduced as part of a broader redesign of Global Humboldt that also involved increased faculty coordination, greater involvement of advising and support personnel, and more deliberate planning of curricular and co-curricular experiences. These concurrent changes represent plausible alternative explanations for the positive perceptions reported by participants. Indeed, rather than viewing them solely as competing explanations, they may be understood as part of the process through which integration was enacted. The seminar's role may therefore have been less that of an isolated intervention and more that of an organizational structure through which broader changes in collaboration and coordination became visible and accessible to students.

This interpretation shifts attention from the question of whether a seminar “causes” integration to the question of how integrative structures function within learning communities. A seminar can provide a common meeting point, but its effectiveness depends on the degree to which faculty, staff, advisors, activities, and course content are themselves coordinated. The findings therefore support a multi-level understanding of integration involving both *structural coordination* and *relational alignment*. Structural coordination concerns the deliberate linking of courses, activities, advising, and resources, while relational alignment concerns the connections among the participants responsible for those elements. The two processes are mutually reinforcing but cannot be reduced to one another.

The results concerning academic and career direction further demonstrate that integration may operate unevenly across dimensions of the student experience. Students generally reported that Global Humboldt helped them explore majors and career options and increased their awareness of campus resources. They expressed less certainty, however, regarding the major they intended to pursue or the pathway connecting a degree to a future career. This distinction between *exploration* and *clarity* is particularly important for a learning community serving students who entered the university without a declared major. Exposure to options, advisors, and resources may represent meaningful progress even when it does not result in an immediate decision.

Accordingly, the comparatively lower responses concerning academic and career clarity should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence that the program failed to support direction. Scholarship on exploratory and undecided students increasingly treats academic decision-making as a developmental process rather than assuming that uncertainty itself represents a deficit (Spight et al., 2023). The Global Humboldt findings are consistent with this distinction: students appeared to perceive substantial support for exploration while remaining at different stages in the process of selecting a major and envisioning longer-term pathways. For learning communities serving exploratory students, a more realistic goal may therefore be to strengthen students' capacity to navigate options and access relevant resources rather than expecting uniform clarity by the end of the first year.

At the same time, students' negative feedback concerning the seminar identifies important limits to its intended integrative function. Some respondents described the seminar as lower in priority than their other courses or reported difficulty seeing how seminar activities connected to the broader Global Humboldt curriculum. Others identified the late-afternoon meeting time as a barrier to engagement. These comments indicate that the existence of a common seminar does not by itself ensure that students will experience it as integral to the learning community.

Three design implications follow from these findings. First, *curricular connections must be explicit and visible to students*. If the seminar is intended to connect learning across courses, faculty should identify and reinforce those connections through coordinated assignments, shared themes, and direct references between seminar activities and students' other coursework. Integration should not depend on students independently recognizing relationships that faculty and staff intend to exist.

Second, *the seminar must be positioned structurally as a central rather than peripheral component of the learning community*. A one-unit course scheduled late in the day may unintentionally communicate lower priority while also competing with employment, transportation, co-curricular activities, or other demands on first-year students. Scheduling and credit structure are therefore not merely logistical concerns; they can shape students' perceptions of the seminar's importance and their ability to participate consistently.

Third, *integration should reduce fragmentation rather than add another layer of activity*. Co-curricular events, advising sessions, and experiential activities are most likely to contribute to coherence when their relationship to the learning community's academic and developmental goals is clear. A smaller number of deliberately coordinated experiences may therefore be more effective than a larger collection of loosely connected activities.

Faculty and staff responses also point to a potential cost of relational integration. Participants valued close relationships with students and colleagues, yet one respondent's observation that they sometimes "felt like a counselor" suggests that intensive relational support may blur professional roles and increase emotional demands. Learning communities that depend heavily on faculty accessibility and informal support should therefore consider how advising, counseling, and other responsibilities are distributed across faculty and professional staff. Multi-level integration requires not only increasing connections but also ensuring that the responsibilities associated with those connections are sustainable.

The findings also reveal a recurring distinction between experiences within the learning community and perceptions of the broader institution. Students reported stronger perceptions that their cultural identity was valued within Global Humboldt than at the university level, while faculty and staff reported stronger relationships within the learning community than perceptions of support from college administration. Although the small sample precludes broader conclusions, these patterns suggest that a well-integrated learning community can function as a supportive local environment without necessarily resolving students' or employees' experiences of the institution as a whole. This distinction reinforces the importance of examining integration at multiple organizational levels.

Taken together, the Global Humboldt case suggests that the value of an integrative seminar lies not simply in adding another course to a first-year learning community, but in creating a recurring structure through which relationships, resources, and academic experiences can be intentionally coordinated. The findings do not establish the seminar's independent causal effect, nor do they demonstrate measurable improvement from the preceding year. Rather, they

provide practice-based evidence concerning how participants experienced a learning community redesigned around a more explicit integrative structure.

The broader implication is that integration should be understood as an ongoing organizational and relational practice rather than as a program feature that exists simply because courses or activities are linked. Seminars can provide a useful site for this work, but their effectiveness depends on curricular relevance, accessible scheduling, faculty and staff coordination, clearly articulated connections, and sustainable forms of student support. These conditions help explain both the strengths participants identified in Global Humboldt and the limitations they encountered.

8. Conclusion

This study examined the use of a one-unit seminar as an integrative structure within Global Humboldt, a first-year learning community serving students entering the university without a declared major. Using a bounded action-research design, the study focused on how students and faculty/staff perceived support, connection, academic and career direction, and program coherence following a broader redesign of the learning community.

The findings suggest that participants experienced Global Humboldt as a strongly relational environment. Students reported high levels of support and connection with peers and faculty, while faculty and staff similarly emphasized close relationships with students and with one another. At the same time, students reported greater uncertainty regarding academic and career direction, particularly in relation to selecting a major and identifying a clear degree-to-career pathway. These findings suggest that relational integration and academic or career clarity should not be assumed to develop at the same pace. For exploratory students in particular, meaningful progress may consist of increased access to resources, exposure to options, and opportunities for reflection even when uncertainty remains.

The study also illustrates the importance of understanding integration as both a structural and relational process. Learning communities do not become coherent simply because students are enrolled in linked courses or invited to participate in shared activities. Integration requires deliberate coordination among courses, co-curricular experiences, advising, institutional resources, and the faculty and staff responsible for them. In the Global Humboldt case, the seminar provided one recurring space in which these connections could be made visible, but its effectiveness depended on broader patterns of program coordination and collaboration.

The findings should be interpreted within the study's methodological limits. The small sample, locally developed measures, absence of standardized pre-intervention data or a comparison group, and simultaneous changes in program organization prevent causal attribution to the seminar or statistical generalization beyond this particular context. The study therefore does not demonstrate that the seminar independently produced stronger support, connection, or coherence. Rather, it provides practice-based evidence about how participants experienced an effort to organize a learning community around a more explicit integrative structure.

Student feedback also demonstrates that such structures require careful design. Some participants experienced the seminar as peripheral to their other coursework or found its late-afternoon scheduling difficult. These responses suggest that integrative seminars are most likely to be effective when their curricular relevance is made explicit, their place within the program is structurally clear, and their scheduling and workload support rather than hinder participation. Faculty and staff responses further indicate that highly relational models of support can increase emotional and professional demands, making the distribution of advising and support responsibilities an important consideration in program design.

The data for this study were collected during AY 2019–2020, approximately six years before publication. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as describing the current form of Global Humboldt or the current experiences of its students. Their continuing relevance lies instead in the persistent organizational problem examined by the study: how first-year learning communities can intentionally coordinate curricular, co-curricular, advising, and relational forms of support. Recent scholarship reviewed in this article continues to emphasize the importance of belonging, student support, first-year transition structures, and collaboration across institutional roles, suggesting that this design problem remains consequential for contemporary higher education.

The broader contribution of this case is therefore not evidence that a seminar constitutes a universally effective intervention. Rather, it demonstrates how a seminar can function as one organizational site for the ongoing work of integration. For institutions developing first-year learning communities, the central lesson is that integration is not simply a feature of program structure; it is a practice that must be continually enacted through visible curricular connections, coordinated relationships, accessible support, and collaboration across participant roles.

Future research should examine these processes across larger and more diverse learning-community contexts and should employ longitudinal or comparative designs where possible. Such research could investigate how different

forms of structural and relational integration relate over time to students' sense of belonging, academic and career decision-making, persistence, and academic success.

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