

## **Cohort Models of Learning: Adapting Content to Women's Learning Styles**

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*Do educational cohorts help or hurt learning? While economically desirable as an educational delivery model, a debate exists as to whether cohorts improve the learning process or diminish the learning outcomes (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). This qualitative research examined sixteen non-traditional aged female college students who were enrolled in an intensive 20-month bachelor's degree completion program. The most dramatic influence of spending time in a cohort was the progression from one epistemological category to the next, which had the most profound influence on the women inside the program and in their personal lives (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997).*

### **COHORT MODELS OF LEARNING USING SOFT SKILL DEVELOPMENT**

#### **Higher Education Was Created By Males for Males**

Across the country all institutions of higher education have diverse student populations and many now enroll more females than males (Bean & Bean, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). However, the higher education structure, which was created by males for males (Bank, 2007; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Carey, 2015; Cohen & Kisker, 2010), is still using the same formats to educate a new and growing generation of minorities and women. The textbooks, language, and professional activities that construct knowledge and understanding of leadership come from a privileged perspective, which ignores issues of gender, race, and status (Carey, 2015; Rusch, 2004). American society is still a long way from the democracy, dreamed by John Dewey in 1907, in which gender, class, race, and territory are not barriers to participation (Rusch, 2004).

Traditional cohort models of education put women at a disadvantage for learning (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). The lock-step rigidity that typifies closed-cohort structures is incompatible not only with women's lived experiences and their ways of knowing, being, and relating, but also with overly occupied lives of adult education professionals (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). Relationships of choice may be more consistent with women's lived experience, and therefore more empowering of their educational journey (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010).

Having the ability to choose cohort members may positively affect women's learning outcomes in cohort programs. Affective distinctions, feels of like or dislike, develop long before the ability to make cognitive distinctions and lead people to interact with others in a group who are most similar to them (Rusch & Brunner, 2013). These affective feelings for other members of a group may influence sensemaking, a process of giving meaning to concepts (Rusch & Brunner, 2013).

The first part of sensemaking involves the construction of a personal identity, which was found during the focus group with completion program students in March, 2014. During this focus group

students compared their cohort to a family and referenced that they had assumed familiar roles, for example “the funny uncle” or “the pushy aunt.” The reciprocity and continuous recreation of the self within a cohort structure of learning is a key element of today’s social and neural networks (Rusch & Brunner, 2013).

In a broad sense, the cohort delivery model of instruction may be underutilized as an effective way to train the next generation of leaders due to widespread ignorance of the needs of diversity training on leadership. Leadership in the future requires skills in communication, teamwork, and group problem solving (Collins, 2013). There is a need for more evidence documenting the effects of cohorts on workplace practices, including leadership and communication (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2015). Without additional research, speculation will continue about the value added aspect of participating in cohorts (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000). Future studies that will influence practice applications and broader policy decisions that empower all learners, especially marginalized populations, are recommended (Bridwell, 2012).

New data about students’ experiences in cohort learning may influence the creation of education programming regarding the design, role, value, and implementation of cohort learning models (Pemberton, 2010). Knowledge about naturally emergent cohorts may be applied to many other areas of educational programming, such as undergraduate and graduate courses, and distance learning. Cohort delivery models of education may be used in many different disciplines and programs, adding to the generalizability and broad applications of the data.

### **Delivery Models Adapt to Changing Student Population**

The U.S. Department of Education calls for the increased use of learning communities to reach large populations of students with support needs (Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Chopra, 2011). Many schools and colleges are pressured for increased accountability during an era of decreased funding. These institutional facts leave faculty with the challenge of measuring student outcomes and taking corrective action when needed in order to appease stakeholders (Barnett & Muth, 2008).

In response to criticism and calls for reform in educational leadership, the cohort model reemerged in the 1980s and early 1990s as a model created to train leaders more effectively (McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2015; Paredes Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). By 1995 half of UCEA member institutions were using cohorts at the master’s level and by 2000 63% were using cohorts. Despite the renewed popularity of the cohort very little data exists on this instructional method of delivery (McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2015).

The cohort is a model of instructional delivery that groups students together according to when they enroll in a particular program and processes them through a degree program through the same sequence of courses (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000). Members of a cohort identify as being an interdependent group that is distinct from non-cohort members (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010). In recent years the definition of a cohort has been expanded to include students working together on collaborative projects and a network of academic and social support (McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2015).

Cohorts are considered dynamic and adaptive entities because their main characteristic is the same members interact with each other over a period of time (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010). Interaction between group members shapes both the individual learning and the group learning (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010). Overall, the cohort structure is an academic and social support system designed to improve the teaching and learning process (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010).

Cohort delivery models follow three basic designs: closed (or pure), open (or mixed), and fluid (course-by-course) (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010; Yerkes, et al., 1995). Closed cohorts require students to complete their courses together in a specific sequence (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010). The open cohort begins with students taking core courses together then allows students to take courses outside the program to fulfill personal requirements (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010). The fluid cohort is the most flexible in that students can enter at different times and select courses based on their own needs (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010).

At the time of inquiry a quarter of universities utilized more than one style of cohort in their program; over 70% used the closed cohort model and over 60% reported using open cohorts (McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2015).

### **Women Learning in Cohorts**

The structure of programs is reported as the primary reason for student non-completion (Barnett & Muth, 2008). Prescribed cohorts that are relatively rigid or “closed” do not work as well for women as naturally emergent cohorts (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). A significant amount of learning for women takes place outside of a traditional classroom, learning from relationships and from dealing with families and communities (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Knowledge of how women learn broadens the definition of education and the concept and how, when, and where education takes place for women (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

Support from other students and feeling a sense of fitting in is probably the most important social factor in student retention, especially for women, because it is consistent with the way they have been socialized to learn (Bean & Bean, 2007; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Not surprisingly, unsatisfying relationships at school are one reason women leave college (Bean & Bean, 2007). Cohort learning addresses the needs of female learners by deliberately inviting them in to a learning community.

One of the main benefits of cohort learning is that being assigned to a cohort group of peer students creates a framework for communicative learning for the student. They do not have to spend time looking for other students to engage with as the students who are in a cohort are expected to reach out to each other and communicate on a regular basis. This understanding and acceptance of the group norms of cohort membership may help introverted students with the perceived daunting task of finding other students to study with in the beginning of a program. The established structure of the cohort learners sets the stage for communicative learning to begin.

Communicative learning, a process that involves at least two people who work together to understand each other’s values, purpose, beliefs, and feelings is essential for current educational environments in order to train leaders who have the skills to unite diverse interests (Rusch & Brunner, 2013). Relying on instruction that only requires students to read books, write papers, attend class, and earn a grade is not enough to train future leaders who will need nimble habits of mind to lead ever-evolving communities of people (Rusch & Brunner, 2013). The cohort delivery model of education is based on communicative learning by organizing students into groups with at least two students, and often many more students creating a substantial opportunity for communicative learning (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010). Many adult women learners may find communicative learning is consistent with their learning style (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), a fact which was substantiated during a previous focus group conducted in March, 2014.

### **Cohort Research**

It is important to understand the factors that influence whether faculty embrace or reject this delivery structure if cohort groups are to stay for the long term (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000). A traditional cohort is a relatively rigid or “closed” model that includes students from various regional areas, identifies them as a group, and directs them to a specific rotation of courses over a defined period of time (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Barnett & Muth, 2008; Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). Research on cohorts is still in its infancy as a result of limited samples, often focusing on one program that uses cohorts (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000).

Originating in the 1940s higher education era, the cohort style of instruction enjoyed a revival beginning in the mid-1980s in school leadership preparation programs (Barnett & Muth, 2008). Cohorts were designed to meet the needs of adult learners aged 25 and older who were working full-time and needed a part-time program (McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2015). About half of all graduate leadership programs currently utilize a cohort delivery model (Barnett & Muth, 2008). Researchers are encouraged to examine the cohort structure and the types of effects it has on students, as there is a gap in adult

education literature on this topic (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010; McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2015). Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term effects that cohort membership may have on students (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010).

Even though adult learners have been increasing in popularity over the last few decades there is still a lack of research on the adult learner and their experiences in an undergraduate classroom (Kasworm, 2003). Adopting a constructivist view, Kasworm (2003) investigated the construction of knowledge by adult learners in undergraduate classroom settings. This researcher interviewed 90 adult undergraduates with a mean of 38 years and approximately equal in gender representation. Data collected from these interviews revealed five belief structures, which she labeled “knowledge voices,” as the entry voice, the outside voice, the cynical voice, the straddling voice, and the inclusion voice (Kasworm, 2003). The primary challenge for these adult learners was embracing transformational learning, the incorporation of new knowledge in to previously constructed world views (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Kasworm, 2003).

Students are the main beneficiaries of the cohort model (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000). Cohorts are generally given credit for improving student values, increasing student interaction and interdependence, and increasing student interaction with the institution’s surrounding community (Paresdes Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Adult learners learn best when they can direct their own learning, use their own professional background experience in learning new material, and focus on problems relevant to practice, as opposed to theory (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000). The ability to influence decision making and form strong relationships with peers are also preferred by adult learners (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000). Many students choose programs that offer cohort delivery because of their preference for working collaboratively (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000).

### **Women’s Ways of Learning**

Do women learn differently than men? The prevailing mindset in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was that intellectual activity was unfeminine and harmful to women’s health and reproductive ability (Astin & Lindholm, 2001; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). During this time there was also a belief that women were less intelligent than men and therefore incapable of advanced education (Astin & Lindholm, 2001). The assumption that mental inferiority is a natural defect, rather than socially constructed, could never be justified until women got an education equal to men’s through a national system of coeducational schools (Laird, 1996).

Today it is taken for granted that both males and females have equal access to education (Astin & Lindholm, 2001). However, traditional gender roles are still present in workplace with men earning more money and women taking primary responsibility for the household (Boeren, 2011). In many industries a glass ceiling still exists that prevents women from reaching positions of top leadership in many companies (Boeren, 2011). The attitude toward gender roles creates a vicious cycle for women in the workplace. Because of gender perceptions women are not promoted to better jobs, and subsequently receive less training. Lack of training negatively influences women’s ability to achieve leadership positions (Boeren, 2011).

Gender-based stereotyping still exists within many male-dominated fields such as science, technology, and mathematics (Hong, et.al, 2012). Gender stereotyping of females leads to decreases in self-confidence and interest in STEM fields by females (Hong, et.al, 2012).

Some researchers posit that women are not drawn to more technically oriented science fields, such as engineering, because they perceive those fields as having less opportunity for social interaction (Cavanagh, 2005). Despite receiving high grades in math and science many girls have less confidence in their abilities and enjoy these subjects less than their male classmates (Cavanagh, 2005). Lack of assertiveness may be considered one reason why girls do not perceive themselves to be good at subjects they can master. Girls tend to not take as many risks in the classroom; boys will raise their hands even if they don’t know the answer (Cavanagh, 2005).

Cohorts can provide the safe place to take risks during learning and the design of the cohort is consistent with the view that women’s learning as a narrative process (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, &

Tarule, 1986; Bridwell, 2012). Group activities that are incorporated into the learning is one approach that is more likely to appeal to females (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Cavanagh, 2005).

Adults construct knowledge through different ways of knowing based on their attitude toward education (Bridwell, 2012). Instrumental knowers who believe education is pursued to acquire something tend to ask “What’s in it for me?” Socializing knowers pursue education to be someone, typically ask “What do you think I should know?” Self-authoring knowers, who also pursue education to be someone, ask “What do I want and need to know and learn? What is important for me to know to keep learning and growing?” (Bridwell, 2012).

Intuitive knowledge is generally assumed to be less valuable, due to its primitive nature, than objective knowledge that is learned in traditional settings (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Women tend to learn through socialization and through communicative learning, so they may not even know how or when they learned something. Because of this women may feel that their knowledge is somehow less valuable (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). The authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* and other feminists posit that there is a masculine bias at the foundation of every educational structure, discipline, and research method (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

Historically, the structure of education has been incongruous with ways women learn (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Intrigued by why so many women doubt their intellectual competence and identify problems and gaps in their learning, the four authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* interviewed 135 women in nine different states. Their research revealed that traditionally practiced education and clinical services do not meet the needs of women (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

Women often feel unheard in the classroom even when they believe they have something important to say (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). The participants in their study believed that men were better at getting and holding the attention of others for their ideas and opinions (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Ironically, even when the subject matter includes issues pertaining to women, such as the women’s studies programs that emerged during the 1970s, the strategies and methods of teaching and evaluation are not redesigned to fit with women’s styles of learning (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

### **Cohort Use in a Completion Program**

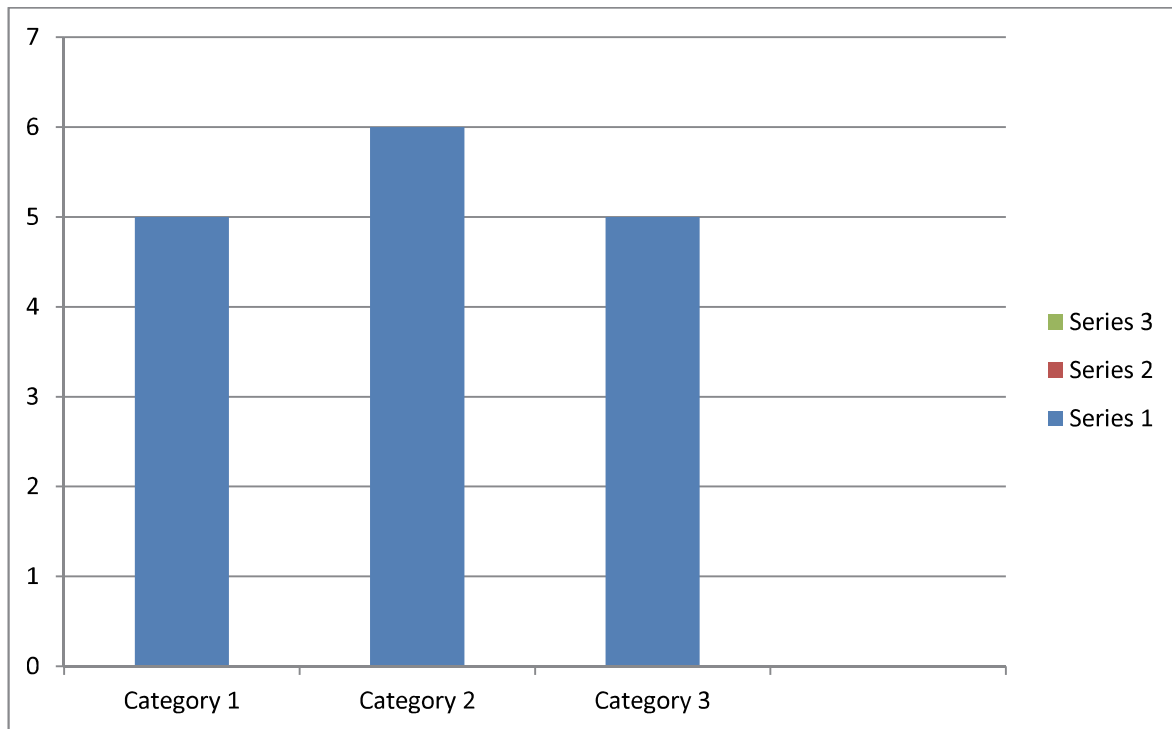
Founded in 1928, Mulberry College is a small, Catholic liberal arts college located in New England. Originally created as a normal school, nursing and social work programs were introduced in 1978. Mulberry College has evolved in to a coed institution that offers over 30 degree programs, including business and social science degrees. Enrollment is approximately 1,400 undergraduate and 300 graduate students. In recent years the primary enrollment growth has come from partnerships with community colleges to form off-site degree programs and the growth of graduate degree programs. The bachelor’s degree completion program partnership with HCC is a successful example of how Mulberry has increased its undergraduate enrollment by forming a partnership with the local community.

Data was collected from sixteen participants in two ways: a personal, in-depth interview and a brief survey. All sixteen participants completed a demographic survey before their scheduled interview. The following table includes the participants’ pseudonym, age, occupation, minority status and major course of study in the Mulberry-HCC bachelor’s degree completion program.

**TABLE 1  
TABLE OF PARTICIPANTS**

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Minority Status</b>	<b>Major</b>
Alexandra	52	Fiscal assistant	No	Healthcare Management
Barbara	55	Accounting	Yes	Accounting & Business Mgmt
Carly	27	Operations coordinator	Yes	Healthcare Management
Diana	31	Director of community relations	Yes	Management & Marketing
Emily	49	Accounting manager	No	Accounting & Business Mgmt
Fiona	43	Director of finance and administration	No	Accounting
Grace	50	Administrative assistant	No	Business Management
Holly	49	Financial institute specialist	No	Accounting
Isabella	33	Audit and accounting associate	No	Accounting
Joelle	45	Assistant town administrator	No	Management & Marketing
Katie	49	Underwriter	Yes	Management
Lauren	43	Human resource specialist	No	Management & Marketing
Monica	26	Practice coordinator	Yes	Healthcare Management
Nicole	36	Accountant	No	Accounting
Olivia	35	Business office manager	No	Healthcare Management
Patty	54	Staff accountant	No	Accounting

**FIGURE 1  
PARTICIPANTS' WORK EXPERIENCE UPON ENTERING PROGRAM**



## **An Investigation of Cohorts**

Program design at many colleges needs to be revisited because of widespread changing demographics of college students (Carey, 2015). The basic structure of higher education in the United States was created by men for males and some institutions have not changed in response to contemporary society (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). This study was designed to investigate the phenomenon of cohort models of education and its influences on learning style, leadership, and personal development of women. Knowledge about these areas will inform the creation of future bachelor's degree completion programs and other organizational training programs.

As enrollment numbers continue to rise along with the cost of higher education administrators are challenged with designing programs that meet the needs of students and employers without an unnecessary raise in tuition. The Mulberry-HCC bachelor's degree completion program was created to fill a demand in the local economy for students who need to finish their bachelor's degree in a condensed timeframe for a reasonable amount of tuition. The Mulberry-HCC adopted a cohort model in order to deliver a bachelor's degree within a twenty month timeframe. Keeping the students together for a scheduled rotation of classes is economically desirable.

Researchers of cohort models of education agree on the many positive effects of cohort programs, including providing a framework for communicative learning; providing a framework for transformative learning; an opportunity to establish long term connections and networking; a framework for enhancing grit; and a forum within which to practice leadership skills and improve communication skills (Barnett, Bason, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Barnett & Muth, 2008; Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010; McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2015; Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). This study was designed to reveal both the positive and negative effects of cohort programs specifically from female students' perspectives. Gathering information from students during in-depth interviews provides more robust data than the exit survey currently being utilized.

A generally held perception is that the students are the main beneficiaries of cohort programs (Barnett, Bason, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Barnett & Muth, 2008; Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010; McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2015; Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). Data collected from the students' perspective will help administrators revise the current program and help them to create new programs in the future. Knowledge about students' perceptions of cohort models of education will also help programs to be marketed more effectively to specific target markets.

There is a general consensus on how women learn better in groups and when they are given the opportunity to direct their own learning (Bean & Bean, 2007; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Kasworm, 2003; McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2015; Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). This study looked at how women learned together in cohort groups and the degree to which they directed their own learning and the influence that had on their leadership potential in the workplace.

The main source of debate or non-consensus surrounds the design of cohort program, open or closed, and whether or not cohorts are here for the long term. Barnett and Muth (2008) maintain that cohorts are too rigid and are the primary reason for student non-completion. Pemberton and Akkary (2010) posit that rigid or closed cohorts do not work as well for women as naturally emergent cohorts. This research was designed to examine the overall effectiveness of closed cohorts, and the influence that cohorts have on women's learning styles, leadership, and personal development. Retention of current students is a perennial concern for every institution of higher education. This data may help improve the target marketing efforts of future programs, which may increase the retention rate over time.

Rusch and Brunner (2013) state that affective feelings influence sensemaking, a process of giving meaning to concepts, therefore affective distinctions influence learning, which would make closed or rigid cohorts inherently less conducive to learning. Conducting personal, in-depth private interviews, as opposed to a focus group, allowed the incorporation of the degree of affinity for other cohort members and whether or not that influenced learning outcomes. According to Rusch and Brunner (2013) it would be unlikely to document an extremely successful closed cohort program. However, the following research reveals how effective a closed cohort program can be for all of the participants who were assigned a cohort according to when they enrolled in the program.

Having been designed by men a century ago, traditional college courses are inherently more objective and rational, which worked when the courses were designed for men entering an all male workforce and working in traditional masculine roles (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Cohort programs are more subjective and feminine in their approach to learning. The cohort approach is more effective at teaching and measuring the skills needed by a contemporary workplace, for example, teamwork, listening, communication, and collaboration (Collins, 2013). One of the driving questions of this research was the influence of cohort members on women's leadership practices in the workplace. Knowledge about how cohort membership influences women in the workplace may help organizations that wish to develop more female leaders.

Lectures, the mainstay of the traditional college course, are static, and are characterized by one-way communication originating from the instructor and directed at the students. This style of teaching was consistent with historical methods of management that favored authoritarian leadership (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The teaching methodologies of the cohort model are adaptable and interactive, which is more consistent with training managers for contemporary styles of leadership that involve participatory decision making and more democratic and egalitarian organizational structures. This research gathered detailed descriptions of how women learn more effectively with the communicative style learning fostered by the cohort, rather than traditional lectures. One of the major areas of inquiry of this research is the pedagogy within the structure of the cohort. Knowledge about how students learn from each other, both in and out of the classroom, will be helpful to educators who are tasked with creating programs in the future.

The structure and philosophy of the cohort program differs from a traditional college course in several ways that influence learning outcomes (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). In a traditional college classroom, the unit of analysis is an individual; whereas in the cohort program the unit of analysis is the cohort. All sixteen of the participants felt that being identified as a member of a group positively influenced their attitude and orientation toward learning, effort expended on learning, and goal commitment. Students personally identified as feeling like they belonged to their particular cohort by the end of the second 8-week session. This knowledge may fundamentally change how programs are assessed in the future based on shared learning outcomes, shared assessments, and more comprehensive rubrics tied to assessments.

## **Research Findings**

Learning in the context of a cohort had a profound effect on the participants, changing the way they learned, the methods they used to learn, the depth of exposure to different worldviews, an increase in overall confidence, and an increase in leadership skills. The participants acknowledged that they cared more about learning and about how other students in the cohort were learning. All sixteen participants agreed that it was a more positive experience to learn in a cohort as compared to a traditional classroom structure.

Participants' perceptions of how their experience in a cohort model influenced their personal development fell in to five major themes: Cohorts provide an opportunity for long term relationships and networking; Cohorts provide a framework for communicative learning; Cohorts provide a framework for transformative learning; Cohorts provide a framework for enhancing grit and self-efficacy; and Cohorts provide a framework for improving communication skills and increasing leadership skills.

### **Theme #1: Cohorts provide an opportunity for long term relationships and networking.**

While the program did present many challenges it also presented opportunities for the women to give and receive support from each other as they shared their struggles to balance everything in their lives. The opportunity and ability to give and receive support in this program built confidence in the women as they found a community of learners who were all motivated and goal oriented. Determination to finish the program was a universal theme as was amazing support.

The group camaraderie that they enjoyed has had lasting effects beyond the end of the program. Many of the students have stayed connected and get together for social events. This has allowed the women to maintain the relationships that they've established during the program and continue networking as many



of them move in to different positions of increasingly higher responsibility. Having helped each other personally they were poised to help each other professionally. The commonality of being working adults in a bachelor's degree completion program was just the beginning of their network. Several of the women shared the same concerns about industry, in particular the healthcare industry, which had prompted them to finish their degrees so they could make a difference. They were intrinsically motivated to learn more about the current problems in their industry and brainstorm within their cohort.

The fact that the participants became so connected so quickly within the cohort stands in contrast to Rusch and Brunner's findings that affective distinctions influence learning (2013). The women in the cohort were learning from each other, even if they didn't exactly like each other. Most of the women in the cohort did genuinely like each other, but not all of them. They were focused on the goal of learning, which superseded their reliance on affective feelings to produce sensemaking, a process of giving meaning to concepts. This may have been because the research focused on a cohort model of business students, who are known for being task-oriented. Affective distinctions may have influenced the learning outcomes had this been a cohort of social work students.

The end of the program did not mean the end of their cohort. Social media has made it easier for the participants to stay connected and keep each other informed about their lives. While they were sad at the end of the program, they also knew that technology would help keep track of everyone. All sixteen of the participants acknowledged that being enrolled in the program and attending classes on Friday nights and Saturdays for a twenty month period of time was an intense experience. Several of the women felt that there needed to be some kind of decompression period during which they are still active in the program, but not as all-encompassing as they were when they were enrolled. Completing the program felt like it was too abrupt of an end for most of the women. Creating a structured bridge program that eases the student who just graduated from the completion program back in to civilian life is the next priority for this successful program.

## **Theme #2: Cohorts provide a framework for communicative learning.**

Students enrolled in the cohort developed a long term orientation to learning, which influenced their progress in a variety of positive ways. They knew they would be in class with the same people for the next 20 months, so there was a strong initial incentive to make the effort to get to know their classmates and understand how they approach learning. At first this was somewhat of a forced act on behalf of many students who were not naturally oriented to group work.

A second fundamental influence of cohort membership on learning is the phenomenon of a shared interest in learning outcomes. The cohort model fostered a culture of support, rather than competition. While the students did regularly engage in friendly competition during classes in the form of debates and other class activities, the overall attitude was of helping each other so that all could succeed and finish the program. The students quickly learned each other's strengths and weaknesses in an effort to complete coursework, developing more patience with differing opinions and perspectives along the way. In this way the cohort became a motivating agent for doing homework, sharing notes, and helping each other study and learn the material. This finding was consistent with Greenlee and Karanxha's position that highly cohesive groups have a greater commitment to group goals (2010).

Learning different ways of doing things that could be applied to how you learn was also an influence of the cohort on the participants' learning styles. By the time they took business strategy at the end of the program they were completely comfortable asking each other for help. Most of the students said they were always available to their cohort no matter what because they all understood how much support was needed and appreciated. This data is consistent with Barnett, Bason, Yerkes, and Norris's work that maintains that students are the main beneficiaries of cohorts (2000).

Knowledge about the power of communicative learning and the corresponding shift from personal to group learning outcomes, and from short to long term learning goals may significantly influence the design and evaluation for a wide variety of programs in the future.

### **Theme #3: Cohorts provide a framework for transformative learning.**

A more subconscious theme throughout the cohort experience was a change in the ways of knowing, which was consistent with Scribner and Donaldson's finding that cohorts provide a framework for transformative learning (2001). For the five women who began the program as subjective knowers this influence was more significant than an improvement in the communication and interpersonal skills because it influenced the fundamental message and content of their communication. One woman identified the change in herself as accepting the fact that there is more gray area in knowledge and life in general. Participants described the cohort as a learning environment that was transformative and themselves as being in a state of constant improvement.

The seven women who began the program as procedural knowers were overwhelmed with learning new frameworks for solving problems and new tools to work with. Figuring out what tools to use and when was a main part of the cohort's group discussions. The four women who began the program as constructivists did not experience a change in their stage of knowing, but they enjoyed the camaraderie of the cohort model and appreciated the opportunity to brainstorm with other members.

Cohort membership having the power to transform the epistemological state of women is the most significant finding of the study. Data from this study adds to the significant work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) who interviewed 135 women in nine different states. This research focuses on 16 women in a highly concentrated program of twenty months duration. The fact that 12 of the women in the study experienced a change in epistemological state underscores the long term value of cohort membership. Knowledge about the fundamental changes that are possible with cohort membership may influence program design in a variety of settings.

### **Theme #4: Cohorts provide a framework for enhancing grit and self-efficacy.**

An overt theme of the program was the challenge it presented and the opportunity it provided for the women to show how resilient and determined they can be when they set out to achieve a goal. Cohorts acting as a framework that enhances grit and self-efficacy was a theme that was shared by Barnett and Muth (2008) who also stated that cohorts increase academic rigor. This study found that the students all wanted to maximize their experience in the program; therefore they set higher standards for themselves and other cohort members. As they got to know each other better, it meant more for them to increase their effort on coursework in a friendly camaraderie of helping each other maintain a quality program. This may have been influenced by the fact that the participants were enrolled in a business program, as Barnett and Muth (2008) studied educational leadership cohorts.

The fact the women were so invested in their learning goals and finishing the program, sometimes in spite of serious obstacles, contradicts the position of Barnett and Muth (2008) that closed cohorts are too rigid and a source of non-completion. However, Barnett and Muth's study (2008) was on educational leadership programs, which may account for the difference. Knowledge that closed cohorts can be created and become a significant source of grit and self-efficacy may have implications for future program design.

### **Theme #5: Cohorts provide a framework for improving communication skills and increasing leadership skills.**

The most significant influence the cohort had on the women's personal development was an improvement in communication and interpersonal skills. Responding to McCarthy, Trenga, and Weiner's call for more evidence documenting the effects of cohorts on workplace practices, including leadership and communication (2015), the results of this study included all sixteen of the participants' description of how spending time in the cohort allowed them to develop a more nuanced way of thinking and communicating, which resulted in an increase in leadership skills for many of the women.

Learning ways to respectfully disagree was important, as they were assigned many group projects throughout the program. Hearing other people's perspectives allowed them to develop more patience and more empathy as they were relating to people of different backgrounds. Learning to listen more and be more open minded was a positive influence on the students. Pemberton and Akkary's position that the benefits of cohort membership extend beyond the classroom (2010) was substantiated by the data related to this theme.

The most significant future influence cohort membership had on the participants was in the competency of leadership potential in the workplace. Many women discovered they had latent leadership skills, brought out by being leaders of their cohort and taking leadership roles in group projects. Gaining confidence in themselves as leaders helped several of the participants learn how to interact with superiors at their own organizations. For example, several of the women mentioned that they now felt they had more overall professionalism and a strengthened sense of professional integrity. These enhanced areas of self-image gave the women more confidence to stand up for themselves in the workplace.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The participants in this study were all female. It would be interesting and useful to conduct this same study on a cohort that was both male and female and compare the same driving questions. Conducting the same study on a mixed gender cohort would provide data that is applicable to more settings, as most settings are mixed gender. Studies that investigate cohort models of education in organizational training programs would also provide more insight in to the effectiveness of cohorts. The utilization of cohort models in different settings and applications beyond education would broaden the general knowledge about cohorts and the opportunities for utilizing them in different industries.

It would also add to the body of knowledge to conduct the same study on an all male cohort. Particular consideration could be given to comparison of shared interest in learning outcomes as it relates to gender. All male cohorts may not experience the same benefits as the all female cohorts realized, for example, an increase in leadership skills. It would be interesting to know if an all male cohort would produce the same changes in epistemological stages as the all female cohort. In order to conduct this research on the influence of cohort membership on male epistemological stage it would first have to be determined if men follow the same stages of knowing as outlined by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997).

A group of studies that increased the number of males enrolled in the cohort might reveal when the masculine influence reaches a critical point and begins to shift the learning goals from shared to individual. For example, the first cohort would be all women; the second cohort would include one male; the third cohort would include two males; and so on. This type of study design would attempt to discover at what point a male presence in the cohort begins to significantly influence the learning goals from shared to individual. Knowing this point could have profound effects on program design in certain circumstances of enrolling people in training for academic or other purposes.

Longitudinal studies could trace the long term workplace influences of cohort leadership experience on both men and women. This could help document the long term value of cohort membership for women in the workplace. A controlled study should be included that documents non-cohort men and women along with men and women who have spent time in cohorts. Then the differences between gender and cohort membership could be documented and analyzed.

Other longitudinal studies could trace the long term effects and outcomes of networking, the origins of which began in a cohort model. Virtually all of the students utilize social networking and many have made significant life changes based on contacts maintained in this manner. The long term effects of networking should be studied as the use of Linked In and Facebook and other social media sites have reached critical mass. It would be interesting to document how long these social networking sites remain relevant to participants in a study.

As this study involved a range of ages, future studies might focus specifically on one generation, for example generation Y, to discover if there is a correlation between generation and outcomes to the same driving questions. One of the significant findings of this study was how having one singular goal unified

women of any age and background to work together. A study of a cohort comprising of participants from the same age range may produce similar or dissimilar results, which would add to our understanding of generational influences on shared learning goals.

## SUMMARY

Leaders in education should consider creative ways to harness the power of cohorts by adopting a cohort model when designing new programs. The positive effects of cohorts outweigh the amount of time and minimal amount of money spent creating a cohort, as compared to enrolling students in traditional courses. Management skills that are increasingly valued in today's organizations include the traditional female skills of listening, communication, and teamwork (Caproni, 2012; Collins, 2013; McKee, 2011). These are precisely the skills that are enhanced during the cohort model of education. Utilizing cohort models is a relatively inexpensive way to develop new leaders in any organization. Top managers at organizations should consider using a cohort model when designing professional programs such as company orientation, diversity and sensitivity training, and technical training. Bridge programs that allow associates to become mentors could be added to the end of professional programs that utilize cohorts.

The United States is part of a global economy and our society's workforce is increasingly diverse (Canas & Sondak, 2011). Historically, one of the missions of higher education has been to benefit society by promoting a more egalitarian community structure. Adopting more cohort models within the structure of higher education will help to effectively serve the needs of both men and women in the future.

The overall trend in management is working in groups and teams (McKee, 2011; Robbins, Decenzo, & Coulter, 201). More women will be in leadership positions in the future (Canas & Sondak, 2011; Pierce & Newstrom, 2011). It is crucial to the economy and society that more women are trained in leadership skills and have the confidence to move forward in to leadership positions. Supporting more women to be successful in higher education is an important part of training the next generation of leaders (McKee, 2011). During the first half of the twentieth century women who were admitted to male dominated colleges were forced to adapt to masculine ways of learning (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). It is time to make changes to the structure of higher education in order to benefit both genders.

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