Social Networks of First-Year Students: Fall 2012 Linked Course Pilot
submitted by
Dale Klopfer, Bonnie Fink, & Donna Nelson-Beene
with assistance from Jan Kauffman and Megan Lucy

**Purpose.** Of the many factors that influence student persistence after the first year of college are two that universities may be able to influence: students' academic and social integration into the university. With appropriate planning, a university can create opportunities for students to assimilate the academic purpose of the institution and to feel connected. Towards that end, in the fall of 2012, three GSW 1110 classes were linked with another class with the hope of creating for those students an environment that would promote academic and social connectedness to BGSU. To assess the success of that effort, we asked students in the linked classes to fill out a survey designed to reveal just that.

**Instrument.** The survey (see Appendix A) presented brief scenarios that were followed by an opportunity for students to nominate three individuals from whom they would seek assistance in dealing with the situation described in the scenario. For example, students would see the prompt “You've been studying hard and keeping up with the work but you’re still having trouble with one particular class. Who would you talk to about the difficulty you’re having?” and would list their first, second, and third choices of someone to talk to and their relationships with those individuals (e.g., mother, friend from home, instructor). There were eight scenarios: four that dealt with academic issues, four with social ones. An example of a social scenario is “You win a raffle for two hot beverages from Starbucks, so you decide to meet up with someone at the Union to treat him or her to coffee, tea, or a caramel macchiato. Who would that person be?”

**Participants.** Our participants were students in the linked classes as well as those in regular (non-linked) classes that we used for comparison. The table below shows that the two GSW 1110-BA 1500 linked courses were taught by the same pair of instructors, that the GSW 1110-PHIL 1020 link was taught by a different pair, and that the linked classes are generally smaller than their non-linked comparison classes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Format</th>
<th>GSW Instructor</th>
<th>Other Class</th>
<th>Other Class Instructor</th>
<th>No. of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linked 1</td>
<td>Instr 1</td>
<td>PHIL 1020</td>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked 2</td>
<td>Instr 2</td>
<td>BA 1500</td>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked 3</td>
<td>Instr 2</td>
<td>BA 1500</td>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular 1</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>PHIL 1020</td>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular 2</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>BA 1500</td>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular 3</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>BA 1500</td>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedures.** The survey was administered at two different times of the semester, once during the fourth week of classes and again during the twelfth week. Because of low response rates from students in the regular classes during the second administration, unless otherwise indicated, we report the results from the first administration. The nominations of “go to” people were placed into three categories: someone at BGSU (e.g.,
roommate, instructor, RA), someone from Home (e.g., friend from home, parents, high school teacher), or Unclassifiable (e.g., no response, non-serious response). We also combined the responses for the four social and four academic scenarios.

**Results.** The figure below and to the left shows the percentage of students who nominated someone from BGSU as a “go to” person as their first, second, and third choices in response to the social scenarios. The orange bars represent the combined data from the regular classes, red from the linked classes, and tan from the regular section of BA 1500 with only 21 students. The responses to the academic scenarios are to the right.

Students are more likely to report seeking assistance from someone at BGSU for academic than for social issues, and students in the linked classes are significantly more likely to tap their BGSU networks for both social and academic issues than those in the regular classes (the red bars are taller than the orange ones). We temper our enthusiasm about this second finding by noting that it may be a function of class size rather than the link: the tan bars, which show the responses from students in the small regular section of BA 1500, are statistically as tall as the red ones.

Class size, however, is not the only factor that is related to developing support networks. The figures below show responses separated by linked sections (the red and rose bars), with the tan bars from the small regular section added for comparison.

Students in the GSW-PHIL link reported significantly more connections with people at BGSU than those in the GSW-BA link, whose students responded much like those in the
small regular section of BA 1500. Note that an overwhelming majority of students in the GSW-PHIL link nominated a BGSU-related person as their second choice for social issues, suggesting greater connectedness to BGSU than that exhibited by students in either the GSW-BA link or the regular section of BA 1500. More will be said later about differences between the GSW-PHIL and GSW-BA links that may have resulted in the pronounced differences in connectedness.

Changes Over Time. Because a higher percentage of students in the regular than in the linked sections did not fill out the survey the second time, the conclusions we can draw about group changes in students' social networks are limited. We do have some data, though, about how individual networks changed over time, in particular, how often a student's first choice as a “go to” person changed over the course of the semester. In the regular sections, the proportion of students whose first choices switched from someone from home to someone from BGSU was the same as the proportion of switches from someone at BGSU to someone at home; this was true with both the social and academic scenarios. In the linked sections, however, switches from home to BGSU outnumbered switches in the opposite direction by a factor of 2:1. Although there was a small percentage of students whose networks changed thus over the course of the semester, students in the linked courses seemed to dropped connections to home in favor of those to BGSU more than students in the non-linked courses.

Conclusions. We are using a new measure here, and do not know how it is related to traditional measures of retention and student success. Accordingly, our conclusions about those factors are necessarily limited. At face value, though, we have a measure of how well these students are connected to the BGSU community, a measure that may reflect more the quality of their initial undergraduate experiences rather than how well they performed in their courses.

The differences we found between linked and non-linked classes are substantial, but they may be largely due to differences in class size. (Our main variable of interest was unavoidably confounded with class size.) The finding that connecting to BGSU was facilitated by linking courses – at least for some students – is intriguing and deserves further investigation, for it, too, may be due to small class size.

Not all linked sections are the same. Students in the GSW-PHIL link were more connected to BGSU than those in the GSW-BA links, whose students were no better connected than those in the small, non-linked section. Clearly, it would be nice to know how that difference came about, but there are so many different possibilities: BA 1500 is a required course for business majors, PHIL 1020 is an elective; the classes met at different days and times and in different buildings; the interpersonal styles of the GSW instructors were different, as were their pedagogical styles; the PHIL professor was male, the BA instructor female. One way that they differed, though, that we think may be critical, is the degree to which the material of the linked courses was integrated. In the GSW-PHIL link, the instructors worked it out so that the second GSW writing assignment was based on a topic being covered in the philosophy class. Furthermore, the GSW instructor attended the philosophy class on at least one occasion. Through no fault of either instructor, there was much less integration of
course material in the GSW-BA links. For example, class conflicts prevented the GSW instructor from attending the BA class. Like the GSW-PHIL students, the GSW-BA students experienced the same cohort in the two classes, but there was much less deliberate integration of course content across the link.

**Next Steps.** We recommend following up this study with a more comprehensive one to be done this fall. Not only would having data from more pairs (or triads) of linked courses allow us to generalize across disciplines, time of day, and instructor idiosyncrasies, it would potentially allow us to investigate the benefits of integrating course content across the links.

Our understanding is that faculty who are teaching linked sections this fall will be invited to meet each other, but without any expectations that they will attempt to integrate any of the course material across the links. Some faculty, though, very well might try to do so, and some will attempt to do so more than others. We could end up with several naturally occurring levels of course integration (e.g., none, low, and medium) that we could use to examine whether curricular integration is related to how readily students become connected to the university. It may be that higher levels of course integration are related to denser local networks (e.g., more BGSU nominations at the 3rd level), which may be related to higher retention and engagement. Alternatively, it may be that curricular integration yields no advantage over simple co-enrollment in three courses, in which case efforts to integrate the curriculum for retention purposes would be misguided.

We realize that it seems self-serving for us to recommend doing a follow up study. Our reason for doing so, however, is because we believe that making decisions about programs designed to enhance student success should be based on research with our students rather than on anecdotal evidence or because that’s what other schools are doing.