A College Assistance Migrant Program Learning Community: A Faculty, Staff and Student Collaborative Approach

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Abstract

In 2019, [Sunny] (City, State) was awarded a federal College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) grant designed to provide necessary support for the first-year success of migrant and seasonal farmworkers and their direct families. This article describes programming of the CAMP grant, focusing on how it functions as a learning community through its advising, tutoring, faculty partnerships, and other supports intended to provide academic, social, and personal success to its participants. Recommendations are offered for lessons learned about communicating with students, working with tutors, selecting faculty for strong partnerships, and evaluating learning communities.

Keywords

Learning communities are now well-established in many institutes of higher education. The main commonality across learning communities is that their goals and efforts typically focus on peer support and relationships, out-of-classroom collaboration and socialization experiences for students and/or faculty, faculty relationships and interactions with students, active learning strategies, and academic success support (Solanki et al., 2019). However, there is great variability in how, when, and for whom they are offered. Some focus on traditionally-underserved populations of students, including offering a learning community to nurture engagement in high-impact practices, identity development, and travel opportunities (Gurum et al., 2020); some focus on developing higher-order thinking skills through active inquiry pedagogies (Wynn et al., 2014); some have goals of increasing diversity engagement (Wolaver & Finley, 2020); and some are major- or career-focused, such as STEM (Carrino & Gerace, 2016) or Teacher Education (Hintz & Genareo, 2017). In this article, the authors will discuss our experiences developing and implementing an inaugural College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) at Salisbury University (SU), which, in practice, functions as a learning community for migrant and seasonal agricultural farmworkers and/or their immediate families pursuing higher education.

Salisbury University enrolls over 8,000 students, of which over 7,000 are undergraduates. It is situated in Salisbury, MD on the Eastern Shore, part of the Delmarva (Delaware-Maryland-Virginia) Peninsula. The economy of the region is driven largely by a regional hospital, universities and colleges, seasonal tourism, and agriculture and chicken production. It is estimated the chicken industry employs about 18,000 people in Delmarva (DCA, 2020), many of whom, along with agricultural farmworkers, are of Latinx or Haitian background.

The most recent data (US Census Bureau, 2010) show that 14.4% of students at SU are African American, and 26.3% of students in total are of minority racial or ethnic background. The second-year retention rate at SU is 84.2% and the 6-year graduation rate is 72.0%, due in part to its strong campus academic resources (e.g., Writing Center, Student Achievement Center) and programs designed to support first-year students, including its TRiO ACHiEVE grant program, learning communities, and Powerful Connections, a freshman orientation leadership program designed to orient diverse students to campus. Though the racial and ethnic population makeup of SU represents an increase from the previous few years, the community of Salisbury is much more diverse, including an African American population of 41.0% and a non-White population of 53.3% (US Census Bureau, 2010). As part of its mission to promote equitable access to affordable and quality postsecondary education, faculty at Salisbury University wrote and received a CAMP grant in 2019. The inaugural 2020 CAMP cohort had three participants. Being a new program during a global pandemic resulted in a small cohort. However, starting with a small cohort allowed thoughtful implementation. As recruiting efforts continued during the global pandemic, the 2021 CAMP cohort expanded to seven participants. All participants in the inaugural cohort have continued attending SU. In this article, we describe how the SU CAMP has developed structures for supporting student success, partnering with faculty, and tutoring to establish a learning community among CAMP participants.

CAMP Background

In 1965, the Higher Education Act (HEA) and Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) spurred the creation of the now-named Office of Migrant Education (OME), which was responsible for dispersing grants to assist the education of, and higher education attainment, of, migrant workers (Madrid, 2019). Established in 1975, CAMP is one of those grants. CAMP annually serves approximately 2,000 students who are migrant and seasonal farmworkers or their families. CAMP is a competitive, 5-year grant that focuses on supporting eligible, first-year students in higher education (US Department of Education, 2021). Much like traditional, first-year learning communities, the supports supported by CAMP - which are formally offered during a student's freshman year - include personal, academic, and career counseling; tutoring; assisting students in understanding college processes such as admissions and financial aid; and exploration of social and cultural events. Follow-up services are offered for students as they progress through additional years of higher education, but they are not typically explicitly included in CAMP grant funding. In 2016, the last year of available data, 88.1% of CAMP participants completed their first year and 96.5% of CAMP participants continued to a second year, compared to the national first-year freshman rates of about 61% for two-year institutes, and about 81% for four-year institutes (US Department of Education, 2018).

Like learning communities, CAMP functions to familiarize students with college or university life and processes, provide socialization and cohort models, and offer academic, social, and/or emotional supports (Jaffee et al., 2008). There are many foci and models of learning communities, as well as CAMP programs, but emphases on peer cohorts with students who share backgrounds and/or experiences, peer relationships, common course-taking, and positive transitions before and after the academic year (Gabelnick, 1990) tend to be most common across these programs.

Both CAMP and learning communities often offer mentorship and tutoring from peers or near-peers (Jaffee et al., 2008; Benjamin, 2020). In addition to traditional tutoring and mentoring, CAMP offers close collaborations with social, emotional, and health supports across campus (Ramirez, 2010). In CAMP at SU, as well as other CAMP sites, peer relationships and mentorship are vital components to assist the participants in their transition during Year 1, as well as developing academic habits and relationships (Escamilla, 2019). CAMP at SU, like some other forms of learning communities (Guram et al., 2020), seeks to engage participants in common courses that utilize high-impact practices. CAMP programs are shown to improve participant student first-year persistence, GPAs, and graduation rates, compared to non-CAMP students, which is similar to general findings from learning community participants (Ramirez, 2012; Tinto, 2003). In many ways, the goals, conditions, and strategies are identical between CAMP and many first-year learning communities. In this article, we discuss how we implemented supports for CAMP participants (henceforth referred to as *Scholars*) at SU and offer suggestions for non-CAMP learning communities based on our experiences.

CAMP Structure at SU

Many CAMP programs incorporate and utilize aspects of learning communities known to be best-practices of student success such as a cohort model, peer tutoring/mentoring, and attention to creating a sense of belonging. The SU CAMP program builds on these best practices through its intentional design with a focus on the co-curricular aspect of integrated learning as a defining feature. In an effort to connect general education courses, co-curricular activities, and Scholars' lived experiences outside of academia, the SU CAMP emphasizes skill development to ensure both personal and academic success. The authors of this study consider participation in CAMP as an integral co-curricular component because it provides a bridge between the general education course content and the Scholars' shared lived experiences of being part of the migrant and seasonal agricultural community. This bridge allows for whole learning to take place through access to all available supports. Stakeholder meetings are held twice during the school year and utilized for reflection, building community, and communication amongst faculty, community partners, tutors and CAMP staff. As university faculty and SU CAMP staff, we are aware of our limited influence on the curricular content presented in the general education courses. Thus, we feel our efforts are best directed at the co-curricular supports. At all times, the Scholars are at the center of our design. The Scholars are provided supports through interconnections between the CAMP Student Success Advocate (SSA), faculty partnerships with the general education course instructors, and tutors.

Student Success Advocate

The CAMP Student Success Advocate (SSA) is the foundation of our model as all components are dependent on the SSA's facilitation of learning opportunities for the Scholars. The SSA serves a vital role which includes facilitating communication amongst faculty partners and tutors. In addition, the SSA facilitates the summer immersion institute, winter STEM academy, and serves as advisor and course professor in the program. The complex role of the SSA requires facilitation across the university resulting in a deep understanding of the academic context. All Scholars participate in the summer immersion institute and winter STEM camp. The summer immersion institute introduces Scholars to transitional supports and team building. In contrast, the winter STEM academy integrates STEM content and Scholar's funds of knowledge (Meyer et al., 2021). As first-year students, Scholars are not assigned to university Professional Academic Advisors, like other freshmen. Instead, they work directly with the SSA. The SSA schedules Scholars' first year courses as a cohort. This ensures that Scholars can engage in a learning community with other Scholars as they take the same courses and complete the same assignments. First-year courses in which Scholars are enrolled fulfill university General Education requirements.

The SSA chooses specific General Education courses based on the teaching faculty's interest and willingness to work with Scholars as well as the relatability of specific content to seasonal and migrant farmworker issues. An example includes a sociology course that focuses on the social problems of immigration, border patrol, and human rights, or a literature course that focuses on

disenfranchised populations. This course and faculty selection process encourages collaborations between, and amongst, CAMP staff, faculty, tutors, and Scholars. In addition, the SSA works with faculty partners who identify and select tutors. The SSA then provides training and support to the tutors. It is a framework that has shown success in part because everyone is committed to the CAMP mission and focused on taking the actions necessary for enhancing the potential for Scholars' academic success.

During the first semester, besides being the advisor for Scholars, the SSA teaches a one-credit course designed with a dedicated focus on relationship building, and an introduction to: university resources, academic success strategies, and approaches to maintaining social and emotional health. It is a version of what some universities might call a freshman experience course. Due to the small cohort size, Scholars are integrated with other students who would also benefit from the course content. This course provides a safe space for Scholars to reflect on their personal and academic needs and their ability to leverage resources offered through the university through collaborative discourse with peers guided by a faculty member, the SSA.

We consider CAMP's SSA support successful for several reasons. All of the three inaugural Scholars successfully completed their first year at Salisbury University and enrolled for a second year. We have surveyed and interviewed Scholars during their CAMP participation about their engagement with campus activities, CAMP supports, and about their experiences at the end of their involvement year. According to the surveys, during the 2020-2021 year with COVID restrictions, the CAMP events - particularly advising and tutoring sessions - were the only campus supports with which they were engaged. Through the interviews, they indicated they found the weekly meetings with the SSA beneficial, and they considered the SSA as a mentor. The Scholars indicated they felt a major part of the CAMP community at Salisbury University, whereas their feeling as part of the larger campus community was "*probably the complete opposite*." Self-admittedly, they believed virtual learning due to COVID-19 restrictions prevented them from being involved in campus life, making the CAMP program even more important to their sense of community.

Faculty Partnerships

Learning communities often utilize expertise of faculty who are dedicated to student success and are willing to invest the extra time, collaboration, and training necessary to successfully be part of the learning community, particularly if they are new to the process (Eriksen et al., 2015). Faculty partners are individuals, predominately in tenure track positions, who teach the General Education courses that Scholars take their first two semesters at the university. Faculty partners have been identified in a variety of ways. Some were identified as having content that centered on migrant and seasonal farm workers and/or consistently implementing student-centered pedagogical approaches. Another group was identified and recommended by their department chairs.

All faculty partners, regardless of how they were identified, were interviewed by the SSA as to their interest in connecting their content to the lives of the Scholars. They were also asked about

their commitment to working with underserved populations, first generation college students, and CAMP staff and tutors. Only after showing interest and commitment to the University's CAMP goals and objectives, faculty partners were informed that they would receive a small stipend and the opportunity to apply for an additional stipend to purchase materials or resources needed to make connections between their course content and migrant and seasonal farm workers. Additional opportunities were provided based on students' interests such as research projects. Once the faculty partner and course were identified, a number of seats were held prior to enrollment of the general student populations in order for all Scholars to be placed in the same section. This not only created a community cohort for Scholars, it also ensured that a CAMP tutor could attend a single course section, thereby gaining access to all information needed to support academic needs of the cohort. As mentioned earlier, faculty partners identified possible tutors and therefore already have a relationship already established with them. This relationship creates an extension of respect and trust for open communication which includes Scholars. We leverage this open communication by having the faculty partner and Scholar meet once a month to complete a reflective survey together to share with the SSA.

The benefits of identifying interested faculty and working with department chairs are numerous. Schedules can begin to be developed even before Scholars are identified. There is a developed and shared goal of Scholar success. Collaborative relationships between faculty, tutors, and SSA strengthen the likelihood that Scholars will not fall through academic cracks. These collaborations benefit the Scholars, but they also benefit the faculty and the CAMP staff by creating spaces to work together for the common goal of enhancing the lives of underrepresented populations and creating a more collaborative university environment. This collaborative environment allows for the possibility of a more integrative learning approach as the faculty partners who teach the courses have a commitment to integrating their course content and the lived experiences of migrant and seasonal farm workers.

Illustrating the benefits of these collaborative relationships, a particular situation comes to mind. A Scholar was identified early but was not admitted to the university until the eleventh hour. Within an hour of discovering this Scholar's admittance, the SSA was able to contact faculty partners on a Friday afternoon and have a full schedule for the Scholar for the start of school on Monday. What was miraculous about this feat was that all courses that the Scholar was enrolled in were already closed to the general freshman class. Another situation that highlights the collaborative nature between CAMP and faculty partners involves providing quality educational opportunities for Scholars beyond the classroom. One faculty partner, recognizing the value of the lived experiences of a Scholar in her class, encouraged the Scholar and CAMP tutor to be paid research interns during the summer months. This research involved creating bilingual children's stories using both the Scholar's indigenous home language and English to be shared with elementary classroom teachers. After completing the research, the faculty partner further supported them as they developed research presentations to disseminate at conferences.

We feel our current faculty partnership model is effective. First, in a survey, all CAMP tutors indicated they had adequate interaction with the faculty in order to effectively tutor. One wrote, "*I*

did have enough interaction with the faculty. A couple emails here and there were just what I needed to ensure I was giving my Scholar the right information." Individual Scholar interviews shed light that the Scholars felt all their course faculty provided effective interactions. Additionally, a survey of participating faculty showed all were given the support they needed and checked that they would be willing to be an involved faculty member partnering with CAMP again in future semesters.

Tutors

Scholars are required to attend tutoring. There is evidence that peer mentors, broadly defined as experienced peers who support academic and non-academic development of their mentees, are a valuable asset in learning communities if the mentors are selected, trained, and supported by the faculty (Benjamin, 2020). Tutors are identified for CAMP through recommendations made by faculty partners who provide a list that ranks the potential tutors based on Faculty Partners' preferences. The SSA contacts the top nominees for each position outlining the tutoring positions, requirements, job responsibilities, etc. Tutors are selected based on the Faculty partner's recommendation and student interest in the position.

Once all tutors for a given semester are hired by the CAMP program, an induction meeting is conducted. At this meeting, new tutors are trained on documenting their work using tutoring logs which include specific activities (class attendance, tutoring, tutoring preparation, etc.), and notes about the details of the work they completed. They are also given access to an online course platform dedicated to resources for CAMP tutors. The course resources include: a link to biweekly virtual team tutoring meetings with the SSA, detailed information about the National College Assistance Migrant Program Association as well as the SU CAMP program, the role and responsibilities of tutors, information regarding migrant and seasonal farmworkers and their families, information outlining academic success strategies, social, emotional, and physical resources available for all students attending the university, and materials outlining the potential struggles and barriers to achievement for college students from migrant and seasonal backgrounds.

Scholars are required to meet with their assigned tutors for a minimum of one hour per week. Tutors assist Scholars in reviewing the course materials, and assignments. Tutors are given broad access to the learning management system course sites and can view course postings, materials, assignments, and due dates, but cannot access any specific Scholar grade or assignment information such as late or missing work. Tutors report agendas and accomplishments from meetings with Scholars through an online tutoring log accessible to CAMP staff. Tutors meet biweekly as a team with the SSA to reflect on Scholar learning across the courses. If necessary, tutors might also meet more frequently on an individual basis to discuss Scholars' course progress, identify additional academic support needed and report on strengths Scholars have shown.

To determine the efficacy of tutoring, a Qualtrics electronic tutoring survey was sent to all CAMP tutors and individual interviews were conducted with participating Scholars. The survey indicated the tutors felt positive and supported during the experience. The tutors felt the experience was as beneficial for them as it was for the Scholars they mentored. One wrote: "*I can not begin*

to explain the impact that tutoring my Scholar has given me. I have such a great appreciation for the class I was tutoring and reviewing the material helped me with my own course work." Another noted about its relevance to their own teaching career: "*Overall, my experience as a tutor for the CAMP program was a very positive experience! As a future teacher, this tutoring experience was great preparation for what it will be like to help my students in the future and to teach them in ways that meet their individual needs.*" They felt well trained to work with the Scholars, with one writing: "*The meetings with [the SSA] were monumental in adapting teaching style to ensure the Scholar's full comprehension of course material.*" We did find, though, that tutors were sometimes frustrated when they felt they were unable to help Scholars with soft skills such as organization or motivation.

In an interview with Scholars, they noted that it was a learning experience to be tutored, and they found it academically and personally beneficial. One said, "*During the tutoring sessions, since it was like the first time I ever gotten tutored and she ever tutored anybody, it was like something new for both of us...If I ever needed anything, I could just text her...She would [also] give me ideas of how to like pay attention more in class.*" Another noted: "*[The tutors] had helped me so much. I don't think I could have [made the transition from high school to college] without it. Yeah the tutors are great.*"

Additional Supports

Scholars have access to CAMP Power Lounge, a designated safe space for Scholars on campus, when they want to work, relax, socialize, or discuss coursework. They have keycard access any hours of the building's operations. It has a computer, printer, refrigerator, microwave, comfy seating, and feels like a distraction-free, aesthetically pleasing loft with windows and a city view. During an evaluation interview, one Scholar said they used the CAMP Power Lounge for "*a lot of class [work], tutoring sessions, like, I would just, it was kind of like a nice space where I could concentrate. I like the view.*" This designated space provides a location for Scholars to congregate as a group and reflect on their learning as it relates to their academic and personal lives.

CAMP also provides financial support and learning resources to participating Scholars. During the first year at Salisbury University, financial supports include needs-based scholarships for tuition and housing, small monthly stipends for personal expenses, meal plans, and stipends for participating in offered events during the academic off-season (such as a Winter STEM camp). Learning resources provided are a book lending library for texts required in Scholars' courses, access to laptops and tablets, and school supplies. In an evaluation interview, one Scholar noted, "*They gave me a scholarship that did help a lot. And then...small like random things that I would need, like one time...I needed a calculator for an exam or something, and they were able to provide that.*" By removing some of the financial stressors encountered by first generation students, Scholars are able to focus on their academic and personal learning.

Suggestions for Learning Communities

We understand funding of learning communities, unlike CAMP grants, is often minimal, if present at all. We next offer suggestions of ways learning communities may frame or implement programming using lessons we learned and strategies developed using Salisbury University's CAMP funding.

Maintain Consistent Communication

Now that we are beginning our third year of offering CAMP, we have learned the importance of effective communication when working with faculty, tutors, and Scholars. We recommend that multiple levels of communication be used to communicate with key stakeholders. We have built in this communication through biannual meetings, weekly check ins, and monthly communication between Scholars, faculty, and the SSA.

We recommend learning communities designate an individual from the first day to oversee students' success and maintain regular contact during their first year such as our SSA. In CAMP, our contact is often at least once a week, even if just to ask how Scholars are doing. A designated space such as the CAMP Power Lounge allows for almost daily informal communication. Additionally, we have found that multiple forms of communication are necessary. In our experience, students are more likely to respond to texts, and we offer the ability for students to be reached by text, drop-in or scheduled meetings, virtually, by phone, or two other university messaging systems. Having spent the last year-and-a-half managing CAMP during COVID-19 restrictions, we have found value in virtual meeting platforms and believe many students are comfortable with it as a communication resource.

Establish and Encourage Peer Tutoring

Many learning community programs utilize peer mentoring, and we encourage programs to also include peer tutoring, which can take many forms. If possible, course-specific tutors can be utilized, where they meet consistently (weekly or bi-weekly) to check in with participants and offer ideas and feedback on assignments. Peers will need assistance to learn how to be a tutor, so we recommend offering easy-to-read resources about tutoring, as well as institutional resources and policies, such as where to direct students who disclose certain types of personal information and needs.

We recognize that course-specific tutoring is not always a possibility. Therefore, if a learning community utilizes some type of common course to teach success strategies for students, perhaps group 'tutoring' can be implemented. One idea would be to invite previously successful students to join sessions where they share tips regarding how they navigated instructors or classes and give advice for the group about how to do well in specific courses. Also, peer-to-peer assignment editing and feedback sessions could be implemented, if appropriate. We have found that, often, our CAMP Scholars need as much help with global academic skills (study strategies, writing strategies, deadline-meeting) as they do with specific content tutoring. In our experience, tutors

are valuable for many reasons, and one of the most important is that they serve as an accountability partner to keep students on task and meet deadlines. One-on-one meetings with learning community staff could serve this important function, if no other options were available, where goals are set and reviewed, assignments are checked to ensure completion, and concerns discussed.

Develop Strong Faculty Partnerships

Our CAMP program would not work well if not for strong partnerships of involved faculty. The SSA uses her knowledge of faculty to choose those who demonstrate the ability to be engaged with students and good, caring instructors. If a learning community gets a choice in course selections learning community students make, or of faculty involved in the learning community itself, we recommend they also make choices based on criteria necessary for the success of the students, however a learning community defines that. Additionally, we have found it necessary to rethink partnerships as an educational experience that teaches both the students and their instructors more about one another. Links to short video clips can be provided to learning community students' instructors explaining the learning community goals and/or theme, who the students are in the learning community (both broadly, and perhaps the specific students in their courses who are involved in the learning community), how they can support the learning community students, who to talk to if there are issues with learning community students, and how they can become involved in the learning community.

Establish Evaluation Protocols

We encourage learning communities to evaluate the efficacy of their programs to continuously improve operations, outcomes, and student experiences. Following recommendations of evaluating learning communities by Hintz and Genareo (2017), we feel process and outcome evaluations must be systematically planned and implemented. Process, or formative, evaluations should examine the programming itself and ways in which staff and students experience it. Thus, evaluation is a means of communication to gain insights on what is done well and what could be improved. The SU CAMP uses data logs, observations, surveys, and interviews to determine if the program is functioning as intended, and this would work for other learning communities. All learning communities should be planned using measurable outcomes that can indicate how a program achieved its goals. Learning community outcomes vary depending on the context of the programs or institution, but, similar to the SU CAMP, they may relate to students' academic success, such as course grades, GPA, course or learning experience event attendance, persistence in subsequent semesters or graduation, or choice or majors or programs; and non-academic indicators of higher education success such as sense of social belongingness, social integration, satisfaction, and self-efficacy (Liebowitz et al., 2020; Solanki et al., 2019). These outcomes can be measured by examining academic data of students, surveying present students, or interviewing students, both past and present.

Conclusion

At Salisbury University, CAMP functions as a learning community; it is one of the reasons that drew us to implement the program. Inherent in what we do is to focus on community. In our cohorts, we attempt to build community among staff and students, and hope we can facilitate participants' feeling of community acceptance in the larger campus and town. Among the most valuable components of the programming are our efforts in developing effective advising, tutoring, and faculty partnerships. This article explained the background of CAMP, how it functions as a learning community, how it is implemented in Salisbury University, and how other learning communities might implement some of the concepts with which we have been successful.

We continue to evolve as we recruit larger cohorts of Scholars and implement more efforts to grow the sense of community among those involved. Every year, we utilize feedback regarding students' needs and program evaluations to improve the SU CAMP program. We adapt based on the students we have that year and the larger community context, such as the shift to virtual programming and focus on technology resources during the COVID-19 lockdown. We believe we must accept responsibility to serve the students in our learning communities and meet their needs. With effective advising, forms of mentorship or tutoring, faculty partners who are invested in the success of students, and evaluation procedures to help determine the programming areas of strength or improvement, learning communities will be positioned for success.

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