An Analysis of the Effectiveness of Living-Learning Communities on Student Success
Linzy Martinelli
The Pennsylvania State University
Higher education today is faced with various challenges that it has seen in the past as well as new challenges that have emerged including market trends, the race for technological advances, pressures for access and resources as well as dismal persistence and retention of students. It seems a mismatch has appeared between the needs of society placed on higher education and what it is receiving, especially with respect to the value of the undergraduate education. One fear is that students are not receiving the most crucial skills needed for success in the professional world; communication skills, critical thinking skills, and civic responsibility. The development and implementation of living-learning communities has been one strategy to address some of these concerns and put students back on track to achieving one of the main goals of seeking higher education, graduation.

Before we begin a discussion of if and how learning communities are effective, it is necessary to define learning community. This is no easy task, as there are several definitions. However Shapiro and Levine (1999) suggest that it may be more important to investigate the similar characteristics they possess. These include smaller student to faculty ratio, curriculum integration, opportunities to create academic and social support networks, socialization of college expectations, focus on learning outcomes, and community-based delivery of academic support programs (p.3).

Rocconi (2010) quotes Gabelnick et al (1990) who state learning communities have been defined as “the purposeful restructuring of the curriculum by linking courses that enroll a common cohort of students” and Cross (1998) suggests that “the purpose of learning communities is to facilitate active over passive learning, teamwork and cooperation as opposed to competition, and foster a sense of community” (p.179).
Next, to initiate further analysis, we will first conduct a review of relevant literature on the subject of living and learning communities. Engstrom, C., & Tinto, V. (2008) article entitled, “Access without support is not opportunity,” the authors suggest that recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that while an estimated 56 percent of high-income students who begin postsecondary education will earn their four-year degrees within six years, only about 26 percent of low-income students will do so. In order to investigate this phenomena further, the researchers carried out a multi-institutional, longitudinal four-year study of the impact of learning communities, and the collaborative pedagogy that characterizes them, on the success of academically underprepared, predominantly low-income students with a grant from the Lumina Foundation for Education.

Moreover, Jehangir, R. R.’s (2009) article “Cultivating voice: First-generation students seek full academic citizenship in multicultural learning communities” he focuses on first generation low-income students, stating that research has shown that these students experience both isolation and marginalization, especially during their first-year of college, which impacts their long-term persistence in higher education. This article argues that learning community pedagogy designed with attention to multicultural curricula is one vehicle to address the challenges faced by these college students. An interdisciplinary Multicultural Learning Voices Community (MLVC) organized around the themes of identity development, community, and agency, was created at a large, public midwestern research university to provide students with challenging academic coursework that would connect with their lived experience and help them become integrated both socially and academically during their critical first-year of college. This article presents qualitative data from a case study of seven cohorts of the MLVC, which aims to capture students' perceptions of their experience.
Tinto’s (1997) issued an article in The Journal of Higher Education named “Classrooms as communities” in which, Tinto uses data from a study of a learning community program in an urban community college to explore the educational character of student persistence. Classroom activities influence student persistence by changing the way students and faculty interact within and beyond the classroom setting.

Furthermore, we look into Rocconi, L. M. (2011) article “The impact of learning communities on first year students' growth and development in college” from the Research in Higher Education Journal. Using a sample of 241 freshmen at a single urban research university who took the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, Rocconi investigated the direct and indirect relationships between participating in a learning community, student engagement, and self-reported learning outcomes. The results indicate that after controlling for demographic characteristics and entering composite ACT score, the relationship between learning community participation and learning outcomes are mediated by students' levels of engagement. Additionally, he states that, learning community participation was not directly but indirectly related to educational gains through student engagement, and student engagement in turn was strongly related to educational gain.

Pasque and Murphy’s (2005) article, “The Intersections of Living-Learning Programs and Social Identity as Factors of Academic Achievement and Intellectual Engagement,” navigates through a study at a research institution in the Midwest and shows findings that living-learning (LL) programs have a series of positive outcomes for both academic achievement and intellectual engagement. The authors suggest that LL programs are predictors, of students' academic achievement and intellectual engagement when controlling for past academic achievement, socioeconomic status, and demographic characteristics. In addition, the researchers
found specific academic and intellectual benefits of LL program participation for minority students in respect to color, non-Christian, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual students but also suggest that LL programs take into consideration the impact of mixed identities in their effectiveness in engaging those students as well.

Finally, we will look at a book written by Shapiro and Levine (1999) entitled, “Creating learning communities: A practical guide to winning support, organizing for change, and implementing programs.” This book provides a framework for setting up and evaluating and assessing successful learning communities through a discussion of different models of learning communities, developing curricula, building administrative structures and partnerships. The authors conclude with a summary of how learning communities affect students, faculty, and the institution as well as offer advice and reflections on their creation.

Some limitations that can be applied to many of these studies include that the research was conducted at one major institution not multiple. This dramatically reduces that ability to generalize to other types of institutions, and even institutions in other areas. Next, more often than not, living-learning community participants are self-selected which in turn one may infer that these students already have a greater interest in getting involved at the university and being successful. In addition, this relates to Pasque and Murphy’s statement that students who participate in living and learning communities show greater ratios of both women and students from a high socioeconomic background (2005, 438). Furthermore, some of these studies relied on student comments and self-reporting which may be altered due to interviewer bias.

Pasque and Murphy (2005) attempt to identify what makes students successful in college by pointing to Astin (1993) who suggests “student learning and intellectual development are influenced by a variety of factors including coursework, effort in studying, involvement in out-
of-class activities and interactions with faculty and peers” (p. 429). As I continue with the analysis of relevant literature in outlining the effectiveness of living and learning communities, you will see that student involvement in these communities improve the likelihood of implicating all of the aforementioned student success factors, in turn improving the rate of student success. In addition to the more obvious benefits of peer groups and face-to-face interactions with faculty, Rocconi (2010) noted some unforeseen benefits such as time spent on academics and course involvement, higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills, writing ability, and perceptions of supportive campus environments. However one important note he offers is that “while examining the relationship between learning community participation and educational outcomes, scholars have noticed that the benefit of learning community participation may be indirect, mediating through student engagement” (p. 179). These benefits may be indirect but they are still salient, if students are benefiting in any way then learning communities are effective.

In accordance with Shapiro and Levine (1999), learning communities “build on our knowledge of the undergraduate experience, reinvent undergraduate education, and expand on our contemporary understanding of liberal education to create a multidimensional student experience grounded on a foundation of what matters in college” (p.15). Additionally, there are three different uses of learning communities including general education programs, first-year experience initiatives, and developmental studies programs each of which is identified as having a specific benefit. General Education Program learning communities can “improve general education by bringing students and faculty together in ways that promote greater interaction with each other and deeper integration of the material being studied.” First Year Experience initiatives act as “an ideal setting to introduce students to what it means to be a college student....learning
communities located within first-year-experience programs often link academic, discipline-based courses to new or existing first-year-experience courses.” Finally, Developmental Studies Programs “provide at-risk students with a support network of faculty, peers, and counselors. Learning communities that pair developmental or skills courses promote student success through an emphasis on basic skills” (p. 20). Each of these types may have specific benefits for a target group of students but all learning communities are effective in respect to increased student achievement and retention, intellectual and social development, and social engagement.

Achievement and Retention:

If the goal of higher education is to learn and develop, then the first step in accomplishing this is for students to remain in school. Engstrom and Tinto argue that students in learning communities “perceived themselves as having experienced significantly more encouragement, support and intellectual gain” (2008, p. 47). Another pertinent issue in higher education is access for all students including low-income students who are often the most likely students to enter into college underprepared. The development of learning communities is a promising effort to adapt to the specific needs of such students. Furthermore, Enstrom and Tinto (2008) state “we found that the average difference in persistence between learning-community and comparison group students in the four-year institutions was nearly 10 percent, and in two-year colleges it was slightly more than five percent” (p. 47). With the issue of retention continuously in debate in higher education, the results found by both Engstrom and Tinto in their studies suggest that learning communities will help institutions of higher learning better in this area.

Intellectual and Social Development:
Furthermore, retention and achievement may have been increased due to the support student received to learn and develop. According to Engstrom et al, “students reported that their commitment and motivation to pursue their studies increased because of the validation they received through the mastery of key skills” (2008, p. 49). Shapiro and Levine (1999) point to a study conducted by Astin to analyze impact of college on students and found that growth in general knowledge is associated with the number of classes taken that emphasize writing, inquiry, critical thinking, and analysis skills, leadership and interpersonal skills are closely correlated with student to student interaction and socializing with students from different racial and ethnic groups (p.9). The style of learning communities lends itself to increased opportunities for dialogue between students and teachers and promoted more active modes of learning.

Additionally, the added characteristic of learning communities being a safe place for students “eradicated fears and anxieties, developed their sense of belonging, increased their confidence in their abilities, enhanced their self-esteem, and reinforced their belief that they were on the right track” (Engstrom et al, 2008, p. 49). Having a safe place to learn allowed students to engage more fully in their learning as well as feel more comfortable sharing. This inclusive environment was the vehicle by which students were able to develop more fully through the sharing of diverse perspectives. “The sharing of curriculum and the use of collaborative pedagogy that brought students and faculty together to teach added an intellectual richness to student experience that the traditional pedagogy did not” (Tinto, 1997, p. 613). It would appear as if for many students, fulfilling their social needs act as a developmental precondition for the need of intellectual engagement.

Student Involvement:
The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University found that the best examples of undergraduate research opportunities were found in learning communities. “Research universities should foster a community of learners. Large universities must find ways to create a sense of place to help students develop small communities within the larger whole” (Shapiro et al, 1999, p. 14). Lacking a support system is one major difficulty in retaining students as they feel disconnected and alone in the university setting. At this point their need for social engagement precedes their academic pursuits and both the student and the university suffer as a result. These students find refuge and support through the immersion into a social community of shared ambitions and interests found in Living and Learning communities. Students’ perceptions of the institution environment account for the motivation and setting for student growth and development as well as learn expectations and acceptable behaviors. “the nature of learning communities fosters student and faculty interaction, collaboration on coursework, and relationships with other students, which promote positive perceptions of the collegiate environment and positive perceptions of academic gains” (Rocconi, 2010, p. 189).

To look deeper into a specific student population we can examine the results of Jehangir, R. R. (2009). He decided to look specifically into the ever-present isolation of first-generation students who often feel that they lack permission to to engage fully or authentically in their learning. Additionally, learning communities offer students the chance to find their voice which is identified as the “capacity to engage in self-expression and, in doing so, to construct knowledge. It is to engage in the world of ideas, concepts, and feelings, both cognitive and affective, and to find ways to articulate one’s place in that world” (Jahangir, 2009, p. 40). Involvement in living and learning communities develops a safe space for this interaction and flow of ideas to occur, resulting in a transformational development. Jehangir suggests that
involvement in learning communities provides these students with the opportunity to get involved, develop social networks, and have access to multicultural curriculum.

Questions/Limitations:

Are there ways to evaluate learning communities that go beyond indirect effects to suggest the quality of these learning communities. Some studies such as simply rely on student feedback through student surveys and interviews on their progression in college and the effectiveness of programs and activities they have been involved in. One would argue, we cannot solely rely on these student surveys and interviews. Due to the immense flexibility of learning communities, and the consequent difficulty in a common research method, there may be a call by some for studies to focus on more quantitative data to express learning community’s effectiveness. While one may recognize this flexibility, describing how this learning occurs should be analyzed with respect to its effect on such outcomes as achievement, persistence, and satisfaction with the institution. One way to accomplish this is through an analysis of grade point average, total credit hours attempted and completed, grade comparisons and performance results on departmental exams comparing learning community participants and nonparticipants according to Shapiro and Levine (1999).

Moreover, some research suggests the effect of learning communities on students but there is still a need to look into the effect on faculty who are involved in terms of teaching practices or attitudes toward learning as well as the overall effect on the institution in terms of the perceptions of learning communities. In addition, further research needs to be completed in terms of implementation of learning communities and how to change the culture of the campus which may not be an easy task.
College is often a place where students come because they have a sense of motivation for success, but there may be factors that hinder their ability to be successful. Students may be coming to school with a limited peer base, or lose the security of their home foundation, as many out-of-state student do. Traveling sometimes hundreds of miles away from home for school, students can feel both lost and disconnected to the university; but can find refuge in a living and learning communities. In instances such as these, it is vital for programs to be put in place so that students quickly gain a support system, friendship, and camaraderie in a positive social atmosphere. Moreover, these types of programs allowed for Student Affairs professionals to be of vital importance, as their key component is in the social roles they play with students, rather than solely authoritarian, which has outreaching benefits for a student’s success, or failure, when a student feels they have nowhere to turn.

While no one suggests that learning communities are the magic fix for all challenges faced in higher education, the evidence presented in the literature does propose that learning communities do have outreaching benefits. Shapiro et al (1999) summarized it eloquently stating, “whether it is a statistical measure of persistence and retention, or gains in critical thinking and writing abilities... creating learning communities on campus leads to greater student success in college” (p.14-15). The outcomes and benefits seen as a result of learning community participation, do tackle some of the major issues seen in higher educations such as retention of students, academic achievement, intellectual and social development, and student involvement. As we reflect again on Pasque and Murphy’s (2005) attempts to identify what makes students successful in college by pointing to Astin (1993) who suggests “student learning and intellectual development are influenced by a variety of factors including coursework, effort in studying, involvement in out- of- class activities and interactions with faculty and peers” (p. 429). We find
that student involvement in these communities improve the likelihood of implicating all of the aforementioned student success factors, in turn improving the rate of student success.
References


208048579?accountid=13158


