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A Mixed-Methods Investigation of First-Year Learning Communities in a Private, Midwestern University

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by

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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

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Abstract

In the 2017-2018 academic year, the School of Humanities of a private, Midwestern university began a pilot program of two first-year learning communities in the Fall, with an additional learning community in the Spring. Each learning community consisted of three theme-linked courses, for a total of nine courses over two semesters. As the study unfolded, the first and the third of the learning communities lived up to expectations of the faculty and administrators as communities of increased engagement and academic success. The second community struggled with engagement and both students and faculty felt that their theme-linked group failed to demonstrate the desired effects of learning communities. Research on learning communities has been heavily quantitative, based primarily on National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Malnarich et al., 2014). Therefore, the lack of qualitative data on learning communities formed a research gap, and I planned this research project to be primarily qualitative. Research focused on interviews and focus groups of both the student and faculty. The purpose of this study was to investigate how students and faculty experienced their participation in a learning community pilot project, or why students and faculty would engage in learning communities. With profound differences between the two first-semester communities, the question also arose as to why one community would flourish, while the other struggled. What makes a learning community successful for student and faculty participants?

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

Learning communities are relatively new as a subject of scientific study in higher education. According to the Resource Center for Learning Communities (n.d.), newsletters from 1986 "describe the evolution of inventive learning communities focused on improving the quality of students' learning experiences" (LC Foundations, para. 2). In 1996, Kingsborough Community College implemented learning communities, which were labeled a "promising practice" by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (as cited in Bonet & Walters, 2016, p. 225).

However, scholars published the first comprehensive review of learning community assessments in 2003, and it was not until 2007 that National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) Annual Report identified learning communities as one of the 10 "high impact undergraduate practices" by the (National Resource Center, n.d., paras. 2 and 5). Only in 2008 did researchers begin to talk about "a pedagogy of intentional integration" in the context of research on learning communities (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008).

Rationale of the Study

Because much of the data on learning communities comes from NSSE, with supplemental studies from MDRC (2012) (formerly known as the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation), quantitative methods dominate the study of learning communities. In addition, from 2008 to 2014, the Washington Center at Evergreen College (Washington Center) conducted the *Online Survey of Students' Experiences of Learning in Learning Communities*, followed by a validation study in

2014. In 2014, the National Resource Center conducted a survey validation study. By the end of the year, they had received almost 20,000 responses from over 62 institutions (Malnarich et al., 2014). In general, the study confirmed that the *Survey of Experiences* was collecting valid data, but the qualitative portion of the validation study yielded new insights.

Not surprisingly, combining qualitative data gathered in tandem with survey results yields additional insight into the mechanisms by which learning communities boost academic achievement and student engagement. Andrade (2007), one of the chief proponents of learning communities, cited NSSE data from over 80,000 students at 365 educational institutions to support her conclusions (p. 2). She noted that qualitative studies further verified these results:

> Two studies measured academic achievement through student focus groups or reflective journals, thereby offering unique insights due to the qualitative data. The academic achievement outcome in these studies was not based on grades but on students' insights into their learning experiences. (pp. 6-7).

Student engagement and increased involvement yielded consistently higher academic achievement, which then supported persistence and retention through the Freshman year and beyond. According to Andrade (2007), this was true, "regardless of institutional type or student profile" (p. 15).

Moreover, a national survey of assessment practices that colleges used to evaluate their learning communities found that most institutions used exclusively quantitative data to track student success. Most campuses focused on GPA, pass rates, course completion,

and retention (Lardner, 2014). However, qualitative data collection lagged significantly behind quantitative data. According to Lardner, "Across institutional types, fewer than half the campuses responding to this survey assess integrative and interdisciplinary learning" (p. 14). Further reflection on the integrative and interdisciplinary experiences of the learning communities can be gathered through focus groups and end-of-the-semester course evaluations, yielding a rich combination of materials for qualitative analysis.

Purpose of Study

This study aims to use primarily qualitative methods to investigate the First-Year Learning Communities program starting at a Midwestern private university in the 2017-2018 academic year. Because the NSSE 2007 Annual Report identified learning communities as a high-impact practice (Experiences that matter: Enhancing Student learning and success), quantitative methods have led in the analysis and tracking of learning community success (National Resource Center for Learning Communities, n.d., para. 5). Ten years later, qualitative studies to understand how and why learning communities promote academic success are still lagging behind NSSE data and quantitative analysis (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016).

Background

Originally proposed in Spring of 2016, the idea of cohorts of first-year students taking multiple courses together in an interdisciplinary block of team-taught (or at least team planned and implemented) courses was an interdisciplinary initiative from the School of Humanities at a private, Midwestern university. With approval from the

Provost's Office and support from multiple schools within the university, the Humanities faculty planned the first cohorts for Fall of 2017.

The concept of learning cohorts in interdisciplinary blocks was not unique to this university, but the designers of the pilot program believed that the learning communities would help the private university to rethink, reform, and renew its general education courses and curriculum. The faculty hoped to prove the relevance of humanities general education courses through a new interdisciplinary approach and to combat the often-held perception of the irrelevance of general education requirements.

Partnership with peers and a deep sense of community are strong factors in favor of learning communities, but their purpose as curricular reforms goes far deeper than that. As Jaffee (2007) summarized, "When issues, topics, debates, and concepts introduced in one class are reintroduced and reinforced in another, there is a greater likelihood that students will develop a deeper understanding of the content and material" (p. 65). In short, curriculum reformers specifically design learning communities to promote knowledge transfer and refocus education on the interconnections between disciplines. Consequently, the private university chose a theme-linked block of general education requirements as its first foray into the world of learning communities.

By the time the program began in the fall of 2017, I was on good, collegial terms with most of the School of Humanities faculty, especially those who had agreed to teach in the first batch of learning communities. My interviews with these faculty members are therefore deeply candid and enlightening. I was fortunate to be in such a situation, as it enriched my research, but the relationships engendered by my work with the school may be difficult to replicate in future research.

Questions and Hypotheses

As I envisioned the research to be primarily qualitative, the experiential aspects for both students and faculty became the center focus of inquiry. Why should students and faculty engage in learning communities? How do students and faculty perceive their engagement? Do they find the learning communities to be academically helpful or socially engaging? Do the learning communities yield any positive academic results? I explored all these questions in the research and discussed in focus groups and interviews.

Research Question 1:

Do the learning communities boost engagement and retention?

Much of the quantitative research on learning communities has demonstrated that learning communities foster increased engagement and retention (Andrade, 2007; Jaffee, 2007). The inclusion of learning communities in the list of high-impact practices served to underscore the importance of such pilot programs as part of initiatives designed to boost engagement and retention (Kuh, 2008). As the faculty and administrators who planned and supported this pilot project at our university intended to boost engagement and retention, I saw verification of results in engagement and retention as necessary for a well-crafted research project.

Research Question 2:

How do the learning communities function (socially, professionally, and academically) for students and faculty?

As noted above, researchers generally viewed learning communities as programs which boost academic excellence and retention. One method by which they support academic endeavors is by forming close social bonds among the participants. As a focus

of social interaction, learning communities should be studied qualitatively and quantitatively, so that stories of community building can be transcribed and communicated beyond the inner circle of the learning community. Only then can we learn how and why learning communities function.

Research Question 3:

How do students and faculty perceive their experiences in the learning communities? In particular, do they see integrative learning?

A growing body of literature is gathering evidence that the theme-linked learning model is particularly well suited for encouraging integrative learning. According to Bonet and Walter (2016), "Working together, students become proficient at self-re-evaluation of what they think they know and how they know it; together they learn how to renegotiate old perspectives and make way for new ones" (p. 227). Furthermore, they argue that theme-linked assignments and coursework facilitates learning because: "Students more readily identify connections and meanings because focused problem solving is embedded in their courses; assignments in each class are not mutually exclusive but rather are part of a planned instructional design across the curriculum and their instructors" (p. 227).

Or, put more simply by Jaffee (2007), "When issues, topics, debates, and concepts introduced in one class are reintroduced and reinforced in another, there is a greater likelihood that students will develop a deeper understanding of the content and material" (p. 65). The intentional overlap and reinforcement embedded in theme-linked courses sparks interdisciplinary learning and new perspectives on previously learned material.

When Group A and Group B developed very marked differences, which were noted and commented upon by both groups of faculty, the question arose as to whether the two groups of students were comparable in education and preparation for the college experience. I believed, from my interactions with the students, that the two groups were very similar in makeup. These similarities led me to two hypotheses:

Research Hypothesis 1:

Groups A and B will be statistically different in high school GPAs

and

Research Hypothesis 2;

Groups A and B will be statistically different in ACT scores.

The intent here was to eliminate background differences as a cause for the poor engagement levels in Group B, opening the study to questions of faculty engagement, methods of presentation, and the degree to which the courses were intentionally crafted to foster interaction and integrative learning.

I also questioned how engaged the faculty were in the project and in the teaching and learning experience. Through student evaluations, which contained a question specifically asking how engaging the faculty were in the course, I quantitatively measured faculty engagement.

Research Hypothesis 3:

There will be a difference in engagement for Groups A, B, and C.

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Ultimately, student success and retention were the stated goals of this pilot project. I needed to test if student success was boosted by the experience in a quantitatively measurable way. Therefore, my next hypotheses were focused on grade point average and retention after the learning communities concluded:

Research Hypothesis 4:

GPAs for Group A would be increased in the semester following the learning community.

Research Hypothesis 5:

GPAs for Group B would be increased in the semester following the learning community.

Because of the difference in experiences between Group A and Group B, I predicted that retention would be increased for Group A at a greater rate than Group B;

Research Hypothesis 6:

The retention rate for Group A will be greater than the retention rate for Group B for the Spring 2018 semester.

Research Hypothesis 7:

The retention rate for Group A will be greater than the retention rate for Group B for the Fall 2018 semester.

Study Limitations

The study's primary limitation was that of size, since this was a small, pilot project. Over the course of an academic year, the project involved nine faculty members and 26 students, meaning that most of the quantitative analysis involved numbers, which were too small to be statistically significant. Originally, the project was planned to be

four theme-linked blocks, with a total of twelve faculty members and up to 80 students. However, one second-semester block was canceled for low enrollment. Group C was self-selected as a subset of Group A, thereby severely limiting the number of students involved in the project.

The proliferation of Humanities majors in the sample made the sample population more disposed to favor Humanities general education courses. This was expected because the initiative began in the School of Humanities. To counterbalance the preference for Humanities general education, two out of the learning communities included one faculty member each from other schools within the private university. One faculty member was from the School of Arts, Media, and Communications, and the second was a faculty member in the School of Sciences.

Other limitations which impacted the study were the grades and ages of the students, who were all incoming first-year students, the location of the project, which was located in a semi-urban neighborhood of a Midwestern city, and focus on Humanities courses, which limited the number of STEM students involved in the project. In further studies, the research could be expanded to include other local colleges in the region, and other subjects within the university curriculum.

Another obvious limitation is that the entire study took place within one private, midwestern university. I chose this route because I was able to investigate in my own workplace and expand upon pre-existing relationships to support the study. Indeed, as noted above, the pre-existing relationships yielded an increase in candor and sometimes extremely personal answers, deepening the qualitative data of the study. However, the single university as subject is still a limitation of the study.

Grade level.

The subject of the pilot project was first-year, traditionally aged college students. All students were between the ages of 18 and 20 years old, and most had at least one parent with a college education. Since the School of Humanities initiated this project, the student subjects were limited to incoming freshmen who intended to major in a humanities discipline, or were undecided majors. From a pedagogical point of view, some of the faculty found limiting the courses to first-year students to be problematic, since survey courses usually included upperclassmen who modeled interdisciplinary discourse for the other students.

The fact that the students were all traditional-aged undergraduates is another limitation of the study. This limitation is an outgrowth of the emphasis on first-year learning and retention, which is a major aspect of the NSSE-identified high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008; Engagement indicators and high-impact practices, 2015). In addition, concerns for first-year retention were a major motivation for creating the pilot-program, and shaped numerous other policies at the private, Midwestern university.

Because first-year retention is a major concern for most American universities, the focus on first-year experience is typical of learning community programming and research (Fink & Inkelas, 2015; Jaffee, 2007). Schneider (2010), in a study focused on first-year student attrition, warned, “Approximately 30 percent of students who start college this fall will not return to that college next year. Alarmingly, only about 60 percent of students graduate from ‘four-year’ colleges and universities within six years” (p. 2). The cost of attrition to institutions of higher education is staggering. According to Raisman (2013), “The 1,669 colleges and universities studied here collectively lost

revenue due to attrition in an amount close to $16.5 billion…with the largest single school losing $102,533,338, …and the average school losing $9,910,811" (p. 4). However, the emphasis on first-year experience means that upper-level and transfer students were not represented in the data.

Location

The selected institution was located in the county capital of a collar-county of a Midwestern city. My work at the institution which housed the project dictated the location, not because the city was well-known for this type of initiative. On the other hand, the location was fairly typical of Midwestern suburbs and the private universities located in these areas.

Subject

In an age of shrinking incoming classes and lowering graduation rates, retention and engagement are becoming powerful forces in shaping university policy and initiatives. Learning communities, as high-impact practices, are geared toward improving retention and engagement. First-year students are particularly at risk for drop-out and transfer, so the designers of the pilot project created a first-year learning community initiative that specifically targeted these issues.

Numbers of Participants

Since participants were limited to two theme-linked blocks in the fall semester, and one theme-linked block in the spring semester, student participation numbers were correspondingly small. Each class was limited to 20 students, and each theme-linked block was limited to three courses. In other words, the project was designed to enroll a maximum of 40 students in the fall, and 20 students in the spring. In actual practice, the

fall classes were less than 20, and only a handful of each theme-linked block chose to participate in the study. The spring semester, Group C, turned out to be a small group of five students from Group A, who elected to continue the experience for the second semester. All five students participated in study for the spring, yielding a natural follow-up to the Group A experience.

I was extremely fortunate that all nine faculty members, three from Group A, three from Group B, and three from Group C, participated in the study and made themselves available for interviews. Even so, the numbers were necessarily small.

Definition of Terms

As with any discipline, higher education tends to develop specialized terms when discussing specific policies and practices. Key terms for this study include cohort, First-Year experience, learning community, and theme-linked learning communities. The first two describe demographic limitations of the study, and the latter describe the particulars of the pilot program.

Cohort

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED Online, p. 1), "In demography, a group of persons having a common statistical characteristic, esp. that of being born in the same year" (2021). For the study of learning communities, researchers intend a cohort to be a "peer group …who share a similar age and academic background. It constitutes a cohort through a common curricular experience of shared classes" (Jaffee, 2007, p. 66).

First-Year Experience

For college curriculum design, First-Year Experiences are "programs to promote adjustment and academic success [of college First-Years], and to improve retention" (Andrade, 2007, p. 2). In the context of learning communities, researchers refer to the term more specifically as, "A cohort of students enrolls in two or more courses together, usually including a first-year experience or a college success course, plus other introductory courses" (National Learning Resource Center for Learning Communities, n.d.a., para. 2).

Learning Community

Defined by the National Resource Center as, "Strategically-defined cohorts of students taking two or more courses together, or sharing a residence hall experience and taking at least one course together" (Defining Features). Andrade (2007), an expert on student retention, explained: "A learning community is defined as a type of block scheduling with the same group of students enrolled together in two or more courses. Learning communities typically consist of groups of 20-25 students" (p. 3).

Theme-Linked Learning Communities (TLC)

Bonet and Walters (2016), in their study of high-impact practices, described them as: "In tandem, faculty…work together to provide supportive pedagogical structures that support student exploration and evidence-based learning. … Assignments in each class are not mutually exclusive but rather are part of a planned instructional design across the curriculum and their instructors" (p. 227).

Summary

The university studied here, like many liberal arts colleges in the 21st[t] century, must ask itself, "Where do we go next?" This question is the constant theme of every

liberal arts college experiencing rising expenses, reduced enrollment, and increased pressure from parents, states, and federal agencies, to explain rising tuition and an ongoing disconnect between education and job prospects. Across the country, faculty and educational reformers have created and studied multiple models for change. One curricular innovation, which is common across the United States, and is the focus of this current study, is forming undergraduate learning communities.

Learning communities facilitate relatedness and a sense of belonging, allowing incoming students to focus more on academics and less on the stress of negotiating new social situations. In a sense, they make it easier for students to adapt to the new college environment without lowering academic standards. Shared courses give the students shared purpose, connecting students to subject matter, as well as peers.

As the study unfolded over the course of the 2017-2018 academic year, two out or three of the learning communities at this private, Midwestern university lived up to expectation of the faculty and administrators as communities of increased engagement and academic success. The third community struggled with engagement and both students and faculty felt that their theme-linked group failed to demonstrate the desired effects of learning communities.

In answer to this expressed lack of engagement and community bonding, I amended my research to include questions of how and why these communities differed, as well as the previously stated research into how these programs were experienced by both students and faculty. Qualitative and quantitative data offered a rich source of material for research, explicating previously little understood facets of community learning.

Although differences between the three learning communities became an additional theme of the study, the rationale remained the same: to collect and analyze qualitative data to augment existing research and fully examine the experiences of students and faculty as they participated in the communities. The research questions remained the same, focusing on engagement, community building, integrative learning, academic success of students, and professional satisfaction of the faculty. Research hypotheses likewise centered on engagement, integrative learning, retention, and professional satisfaction.

The small size of the student and faculty samples impacted the quantitative data gathered, but the richness of the qualitative data offset this limitation. I was fortunate that all nine faculty members involved were willing to meet with me and participate in interviews. Students from Groups A and C were particularly active and forthcoming in their focus groups, adding much needed detail to their stories as participants in the learning communities. Even Group B agreed to follow up interviews and filled in details of their experiences in the project.

For most of the students, the experience involved some level of social and academic growth, combined with adjusting to their new role as college students through the first-year program. Even Group B, who struggled with social bonding and engagement, felt that their time was well-spent in the required, general education courses. All three groups of faculty felt bonding with their peer faculty in each group, and developed new pedagogy, based on observance of those peers. These details help inform our general understanding of learning communities and offer insights into future programing for learning communities and first-year programs.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Introduction

The first step in any scientific study is a discussion and definition of terms. Key terms have already been discussed in Chapter One, but I have only briefly discussed the history of some terms and their applications to pedagogical practice. Learning communities (LCs), in particular, have a long and distinguished history in schools and universities, but theorists have only recently identified them as high-impact practices. The rapid proliferation of learning communities across U.S. college campuses in the last 10 years, along with the wide variety of types and styles, makes a longer discussion of history, theory, and practice necessary.

For the university currently being studied, like many universities in the United States, the learning community initiative was part of a larger movement to rethink and reconfigure general education requirements. The perception of the irrelevance of general education requirements is particularly strong among those who have already chosen (perhaps in response to parental pressure) a supposedly practical major or career path. If general educations courses are merely a loose collection of introductory courses in various disciplines, why should the career-focused student take them?

Learning Communities

What are learning communities and how might they help to rework and restore general education curriculum in higher education? According to Jaffee (2007), first-year programs are a growing source of interest for colleges and universities. In particular, first-year learning communities are "designed to socialize, integrate, and retain new college students. They are based on a substantial body of research that identifies the

factors contributing to student learning and academic success" (p. 65). In other words, learning communities facilitate relatedness and a sense of belonging, which allows incoming students to focus more on academics and less on the stress of negotiating new social situations.

Theoretical Basis

Like the scientific study of the practice, the theoretical framework has its roots in 20th century pedagogy. Bonet and Walters (2016) summarized: "The pedagogical theory underpinning the Learning Communities model at Kingsborough is rooted in the work of John Dewey (1910), Lev Vygotsky (1978), and Paul Freire (1996), who thought of learning as reflective, constructivist, shared, and student-centered" (p. 225). This theoretical framework was then applied to pedagogical practice and research in the late 20th century.

A recent brief from the Council of Independent Colleges (2015) reflected: "A half-century of education research also has revealed a clear link between student success…and high-quality interactions between students and faculty members or among the students themselves" (p. 3). Learning communities promote these high-quality interactions, while further boosting integrative learning and interdisciplinary crossover.

Intended Outcomes of Learning Communities

Partnership with peers and a deep sense of community are strong factors in favor of learning communities, but the purpose of them as curricular reforms go far deeper than that. As Jaffee (2007) pointed out, interaction and cross-pollination of subject matter between disciplines leads to both integrative learning and deeper engagement with the course material and the underlying concepts that connect the disciplines. In short,

learning communities are specifically designed to promote knowledge transfer and refocus education on the interconnections between disciplines.

LCs as High-Impact Practices

Learning communities have been identified as a high-impact practice (HIP) since 2008, using data from the NSSE (Kuh, 2008). Other HIPs include first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service-learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects (Kuh, 2008). The private, Midwestern university's learning-communities were first-year programs, which incorporated common intellectual experiences, a writing-intensive course, and the Spring 2018 learning community had a world history course to add a global component. Some instructors also incorporated undergraduate research and collaborative assignments.

Research on Learning Communities Primarily Quantitative

Because NSSE identified high-impact practices using quantitative data, research on HIPs mirrors NSSE research and leaves the same gaps in research findings. According to Kuh (2003), "NSSE data can't provide the evidence of the *quality* of active and collaborative learning activities, only the frequency with which students say they engage in them." NSSE research was, from the start, long-ranging and ambitious, but it does not "assess learning outcomes directly" (Kuh, 2001, p. 12).

What can be measured is student engagement, which seems to closely correlate with student success and persistence. As Kuh, et al. (2008) noted in their follow-up study to NSSE survey data, "Student engagement—a range of behaviors that institutions can influence with teaching practices and programmatic interventions, such as first-year

seminars, service-learning courses, and learning communities (Zhao & Kuh, 2004) — positively affects grades in both the first and last year of college as well as persistence to the second year at the same institution" (p. 555). HIPs are therefore assumed to be effective, as they appear to boost student success, but the mechanisms still require elucidation.

The converse, that a lack of engagement negatively affects student success, is also assumed to be the case, although proof of direct causation is lacking. Kuh et al. admitted tersely,

> Few studies are based on large, multi-institution data sets using student-level data (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In addition, it is not clear to what extent student engagement and other measures of effective educational practice contribute to achievement and persistence over and above student ability (p. 542).

In short, further quantitative research was needed to fill gaps.

In the case of learning communities, one such study "suggests that the benefits of learning community participation may be indirect and act through student engagement." (Pike et al., 2011, p. 301). Kilgo et al. (2015) confirmed these findings, stating: "Although these practices are proposed to promote academic and personal development among undergraduate students, little empirical research has been conducted to test this conjecture" (p. 511). Clearly, qualitative research is needed to fully evaluate the motives and experiences of the participating students and faculty.

Quantitative data tracking HIPs, gathered for over 10 years now by the NSSE, can provide valuable information regarding how often and in what ways students participate

in high-impact practices. But it cannot explain how students experience these programs, or which components they feel should be improved. Only interviews and focus groups, conducted while the students are enrolled in these programs or shortly after they have been completed, can provide those answers.

Inspired by the success of NSSE data in tracking HIPs, the Washington Center at Evergreen State College launched the Online Survey of Students Experiences or Learning in Learning Communities in 2009. Two years into the project, a mixed-methods validation study was done from 2012 to 2013. For the most part, the study was validated, with "students from 62 institutions [contributing] nearly 20,000 usable responses" (Malnarich et al., 2014, p. 1). Portions of the results, however, raised new questions. The researchers remarked, "Some outcomes surprised us and led to a deeper investigation of a foundational assessment question: what kinds of learning do learning communities make possible?" (pp. 1-2). In order to penetrate the surface of students' experiences, deeper qualitative research was needed.

Research on the college assessment of learning communities process found similar results. According to Lardner (2014), "Across institutional types, fewer than half the campuses responding to this survey assess integrative and interdisciplinary learning, and even fewer are using direct assessments, looking at actual student work rather than at responses to survey questions" (p. 14). Even as recently as 2016, qualitative research of learning communities was seen as lagging behind the vast quantitative data gathered by NSSE and other related surveys (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tinknell, 2016).

LCs and Interactions with Other High Impact Practices

Furthermore, learning communities and other high-impact practices are rarely found in isolated circumstances. Because HIPs require additional preparation and input on the part of faculty and students, they are more likely to incorporate faculty-student engagement, student research, and integrative learning across multiple disciplines. As the NSSE report on Engagement Indicators and High-Impact Practices (2014) pointed out, HIPs "typically demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and other students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback" (p. 1). Quite simply, instructors are more invested in pilot programs and deliberately design their courses to incorporate multiple high-impact practices.

Stacking or interacting high-impact practices becomes even more the norm when the initiatives are scaled to campus-wide initiatives. As Kuh et al. (2005) noted, "Sustainable improvements are not usually the work of a single unit. Rather, these innovations typically cross traditional organization boundaries, such as the collaborations between academic and student affairs on learning communities" (p. 49). University administrations across the country are beginning to recognize that HIPs do not appear out of a vacuum. They are practices which are instituted across broad stretches of the curriculum, usually as part of an administrative initiative. Ultimately, they do not thrive as wide-spread practices without administrative support.

Qualitative research is beginning to underscore the importance of stacking or combining high-impact practices, although the data is new and yet incomplete. Mumford et al. (2017) reported that a combination of undergraduate research, learning

communities, and integrative learning boosted student learning more than any one practice by itself. Although early in the study, they found "the qualitative evidence is compelling. First-semester, first year students worked together to produce interdisciplinary solutions to a complex global problem and presented their research in public" (p. 30). Furthermore, students developed a sophisticated awareness of their integrative learning, and continued to seek out new opportunities to expand upon it. How and why successful results are increased remains to be investigated.

Student research and integrative learning can be boosted further when combined with student diversity and global perspectives. According to Banks and Gutierrez (2017), "infusing [student research] experiences with a global perspective has a high potential to yield extraordinary outcomes for academic communities" (p. 25). Expanding student diversity is especially important because research shows that not all students have equal access to high-impact practices. According to the NSSE study, Enhancing Student Learning (2007), "First-generation and transfer students were much less likely than other students to participate in a high-impact activity such as a learning community, a research project with a faculty member, study abroad, or culminating senior experience" (p. 14).

Differences in gender, or a diversity of genders, may likewise play a role in student success in learning communities. Seifert et al. (2014) noted the lack of research currently devoted to these issues: "Few studies have examined whether all students benefit from good practices in similar ways. For example, do women and men benefit from cooperative learning experiences in the classroom to the same degree?" (p. 354). Not surprisingly, Seifert et al. found that high-impact practices, and learning communities in particular, had variable impacts depending on the backgrounds and prior knowledge

which students bring with them to college (p. 555). In other words, they concluded, "our findings strongly suggest student background characteristics and the precollege effective reasoning and problem solving . . . that students bring to postsecondary education may substantially moderate the benefits students derive from exposure to, or engagement in, high impact/good practices" (p. 557).

Nevertheless, increased diversity in the backgrounds of students and faculty is closely correlated with increased academic success within high-impact practices. Once again, qualitative research is necessary to the mechanism at work within the approach. According to Soria and Johnson (2017), "Some of the most potentially important high-impact practices revealed in this study include . . . courses involving themes of diversity or global learning. All of these high-impact practices were significantly and positively associated with students' self-reported leadership development and multicultural competence" (p. 108). Moreover, they noted, "Many high-impact practices also increase the likelihood students will interact with peers who are different from themselves" (p. 102).

Their research builds upon, and largely agrees with research from Pike, Kuh, and McCormick: "The relationships between learning community participation and diversity experiences and integrative and higher-order thinking were also strong" (p. 314). In short, institutions looking to strengthen and increase their learning community programs should do increased outreach to minority students and faculty, and build more integrative learning into courses using high-impact practices.

Finally, longitudinal quantitative evidence continues to support the idea that high-impact practices are useful for all types of students and colleges. As

Kilgo et al. concluded: “Institutions should strive to provide students with opportunities to engage in high-impact practices, particularly practices such as undergraduate research and active and collaborative learning, which are shown to have vast positive impact for student learning and development” (p. 523). Increased qualitative research will work to underscore the importance of these pedagogical tools, and will explicate the inner-workings of their processes.

Interdisciplinary Connections

Learning communities are constructed to extend disciplinary boundaries, and even to bridge vastly different areas of knowledge. Such bridge-building is itself then facilitated by the diversity of the student population. Furthermore, interdisciplinary connections foster integrative learning, as students learn to connect ideas and concepts beyond the disciplinary boundaries of individual courses. Student engagement and intellectual curiosity then foster academic achievement, as students apply ideas from their coursework in their other coursework and in their daily lives.

Diversity of Thought and Worldview

As early as 1994, Tinto and his fellow researchers noted: “The multi-disciplinary approach also provided a model that encouraged students to express the diversity of their experiences and world views. In doing so, it allowed age, ethnic, and life experience differences among students to emerge and become part of class content” (Tinto et al., 1994, p. 10). Diverse perspectives contributed additional intellectual and emotional depth to the experience and encouraged to students to take ownership of their own insights and learning. Interdisciplinarity is thus a necessary and integral part of the learning community experience, furthering engagement as well as deep learning.

Integrative Learning

Student engagement closely links integrative learning to academic achievement, particularly in the learning community setting. Jaffee (2007) summarized the research briefly: "There is now considerable evidence that [Freshman Learning Communities] enhance student retention rates and academic performance…, student engagement …, and student motivation and cognitive development" (p. 66). The exact mechanisms by which engagement and academic achievement reinforce each other are still under investigation, but the positive results of learning communities are clear.

Andrade (2007) expounded further upon the broad range of evidence in support of learning communities: "One particularly significant study examined NSSE data from over 80,000 students at 365 four-year institutions (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Results support previous research that learning community participation leads to strong academic performance [and] engagement" (p. 2).

Andrade (2007) also noted that this find was verified by qualitative as well as quantitative data:

> Two studies measured academic achievement through student focus groups or reflective journals, thereby offering unique insights due to the qualitative data…. In one of these learning communities, students felt that connected learning, in which they recognized links among academic disciplines, helped them understand complex topics (pp. 6-7).

Academic achievement, spurred by student engagement and increased involvement, yields consistently higher academic achievement, which then supports

persistence and retention through the Freshman year and beyond. According to Andrade, this was true, "regardless of institutional type or student profile" (p. 15).

Intended outcomes of the Pilot Project

In 2016, after a year of task force deliberations and painful faculty debates, the institution being studied revised its general education requirements; reducing the total number from 46 credit hours down to 42, and conflating several of the general education categories. According to the faculty members who represented the School of Humanities on the General Education task force, the driving force behind this change was Missouri's General Education and Credit Transfer Policy, but administration also cited student concerns regarding the relevancy of some of the required courses. It was clear to the Humanities faculty that the university was entering a period of revisiting and revising its curriculum for 21st century learners and pedagogy.

The role of the School of Humanities in the university's curriculum was not a matter of idle inquiry. The widened and combined categories of world history, philosophy, religion and cross-cultural requirements had already cost some 40 adjunct faculty members their part-time employment, and one retiring faculty member was not replaced for the 2018-2019 academic year. Humanities faculty members saw their role as teaching critical thinking, research skills, and history of the social and political institutions that still shape our lives. However, it was also clear that the School of Humanities needed to rethink and reconfigure its core requirements and, if possible, make them more attractive and relevant to incoming students.

One curriculum proposal which showed signs of bearing fruit was the idea of offering theme-linked courses for incoming first-year students. First proposed in the

spring of 2016, the idea received approval from the Provost's Office a year later, and the project's faculty taught the first two interdisciplinary course blocks in the current fall 2017 term. The goal was to combat the perception of the irrelevance of general education requirements by demonstrating the power of integrative learning across multiple disciplines. In this way, students would experience core humanities as much more than boxes to be checked off on a curriculum bingo sheet, and begin to apply humanities skills to other courses and life problems.

History and Theory of HIPs

In many ways, high-impact practices are more easily identified than they are defined. Loosely described by George Kuh (2008), they are "teaching and learning practices [that] have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds" (para. 2). For the most part, HIPs in general and learning communities are closely associated with the research of student engagement, which is generally assumed to increase student success and student retention (Kuh et al., 2008, p. 542).

As beneficial practices, however, HIPs predate Kuh's work and the NSSE. According to Seifert et al (2014), "Chickering and Gamson (1987, 1991) were the first to synthesize a coherent list of principles of good practice in undergraduate education" (p. 532). The list overlapped significantly with the list of high-impact practices, especially on such points as "(a) student-faculty contact; (b) cooperation among students;" and most important for learning communities, "(g) respect for diverse students and diverse ways of knowing" (pp. 532-3).

Diversity lead Seifert et al. (2014) to a second, closely related point: that learning community participants vary widely, and so, unsurprisingly, do their learning outcomes. In short, they summarized, "a small body of research suggests the relationship between postsecondary engagement in high impact/good practices and learning outcomes may differ based on student demographic and background characteristics" p. 532. This may explain different levels of success in high-impact practices, but also argues that more and different kinds of research should be done to clarify the impact of these practices.

Historical Definitions

Some would argue, however, that there is very little that is new in learning communities, since students have always taken classes together and learned in groups. Indeed, in the early years of American universities, when class size and curriculum were both extremely limited, student cohorts must have formed, whether by design or accident. Medieval monastic schools, the predecessors of modern boarding schools (including Hogwarts), combined living-learning communities with service and experiential learning.

In their historical study of learning communities in the U.S., Fink and Inkelas (2015) returned to late 20th century definitions of the practice as "curricular linkages that provide students with a deeper examination and integration of themes or concepts that they are learning" (p. 5). Nevertheless, they noted that learning communities are not unique to American higher education.

Rather, they link learning communities to earlier practices found at Oxford and Cambridge, intentionally copied when early colonists set up educational structures in the New World. Fink and Inkelas (2012) summarized learning community development in early American colleges: "Intent on molding students' whole selves, students and their

tutors lived, worked, studied, and socialized together as a part of the residential college model" (p. 6). In other words, learning communities have always enjoyed a place in American higher education, but the purpose has changed as educational institutions developed.

Mission, Vision, and Coherence

In the early years of American colleges, the communal setting was thought to facilitate the transition from home to university life, and aided in student development (Rudolph, 1990, p. 88). The cohort model was seen as a necessary support to the academic success. Because assigned texts were written in Latin, most early American college students required intensive language tutoring. According to the ASHE report, History of learning assistance in U.S. postsecondary education (2010), "After admission to prestigious colleges such as Harvard and Yale, students entered a cohort. Each week they met with the same tutor for group sessions" (p. 25). The cohort experience was further intensified by a Protestant religious heritage (Nieli, 2007, p. 312), and a unified curriculum "consisting of courses in Greek, Latin, mathematics, and moral truths" (Boning, 2007, p. 2).

Yet more cohesion was due to the similarity of backgrounds of early American college students. As Boning (2007) summarized, "From the time Harvard was founded in 1636 until the mid-1800s, the typical college student was a young man from a privileged background" (p. 2). Homogeneity of class, race, and religion culminated in a unified vision of purpose for universities. As Nieli (2007) noted in his historical overview: "There was one simple and overriding goal: the production of morally earnest Christian gentlemen, well versed in liberal learning and in the classics of Greco-Roman and

Biblical high culture" (pp. 313-314). For more than a hundred years, the unifying themes of classical learning and Protestant theology ruled college classrooms and dormitories without question or comment.

Electives and Distribution Requirements

In the 19th century, new disciplines and a new emphasis on research and the expansion of knowledge changed the structure as well as the theoretical underpinnings of American higher education. As Wells (2016) noted, "Professors, increasingly educated in specialized graduate programs, influenced the organization of academic departments, and influenced the shift toward narrower curricular channels" (p. 22). Specialization also widened the gulf between faculties, and generally came at the cost of a sense of community and devotion to the welfare of the university as a whole (Boning, 2007, pp. 5-6). In general, educators felt that the change was necessary, in order to "keep up with the changing demands of America's increasingly science- and technology-based economy and the explosion of knowledge in many academic fields" (Nieli, 2007, p. 317).

The Rise of College Electives

The rapid proliferation of courses, departments, and disciplines in the newly expanded research universities made it impossible for the standard undergraduate, already struggling from a general lack of college preparation, to take a single, unified course of study. As Nieli (2007) cogently commented, "With the expansion in the size and scope of course offerings, the older ideal of the 'unity of knowledge' was placed under the severest of strains" (p. 318). Reactions to this whirlwind change, however, were decidedly mixed. Faculty members embraced the "freedom to pursue their own interests," especially since "the process of scholarship became recognized as a

professional activity" (Boning, 2007, p 4). Education reformists, on the other hand, expressed concern that "common knowledge and shared values were being displaced by specialized research and career preparations" (Wells, 2016, p. 22).

Inevitably, not all institutions could be all things to all students. Further specialization was required, and American higher education branched to offer both general undergraduate education and specialized graduate degrees. As Geiger (2015) summarized the new trend in the last quarter of the 19th century, "Cornell's melding of academic and practical studies would characterize American state universities. [Charles Eliot] oversaw the transformation of undergraduate and professional education at Harvard. And Johns Hopkins stood for research, graduate education, and the American Ph.D." (p. 287). These transforming structures would reorganize the relationships between students, faculty, and knowledge, and prepare them for a society which was increasingly "urban, industrial, and science-based" (Nieli, 2007, p. 316).

Initially offered to fill the course offerings for students who struggled with remedial education in the classics (History of Learning Assistance, 2010, p. 33), electives took on a life of their own in the new research university. While the reform movement included such luminaries as Andrew Dickson White of Cornell, Daniel Gilman of Johns Hopkins, and Frederick Barnard of Columbia, the shift to an elective system is most closely associated with the work of Charles Eliot (Nieli, 2007, p. 317). According to Robinson (2011), Eliot believed in "the humanist ideal of education—the production of citizens with the 'power of reason, sensitivity to beauty and high moral character'" (p. 604).

Consequently, Eliot devised and advocated a system with few limits, and only emerging checks and balances. Nieli (2007) explained the transition and its ultimate form: "Pioneered by Harvard College in the 1870s under the leadership of Charles Eliot, the elective system… represented the triumph of diversity and educational choice over the older ideal of a common curriculum" (p. 318). And as had already happened so often in the past, where Harvard led others followed. A focus on a general education, experienced in community by all incoming undergraduates, was swept away on a tide of curriculum electives. Only in the next century, did the idea of some basic prescribed curriculum for new students reemerge in the debate over American higher education.

By the turn of the 20th century, the flaw in a broadly-based electives system was becoming clear to university faculty and administrators. According to Boning (2007), "Despite Eliot's original intentions, the elective system became nothing more than a means for students to take whatever classes they wanted on their way to a degree, no matter how fragmented and incoherent their experiences" (p. 5). On the other hand, as Robinson (2011) noted, "The institutionalization of an educational discourse tied to democracy and individualism increasingly de-legitimated the view that choice was dangerous" (p. 605). A pattern of fragmenting cohesiveness emerged in universities, while "rapidly abandoning their older mission of passing on a valued spiritual and intellectual heritage to succeeding generations" (Nieli, 2007, p. 318).

Lack of cohesion in purpose and practice had long term consequences for institutions of higher education. Still dependent on tuition dollars, colleges increased enrollments without concern for proper college preparation. For the first time, retention became an issue for faculty and administrators. As Geiger (2015) highlighted the issue:

"This problem was manifest in the low rates of completion of bachelor's degrees…. State universities, in particular, dropped a significant portion of students for academic reasons" (p. 456). Some student guidebooks expressed caution regarding the limitless course offerings, recommending that students consult with faculty or parents (Robinson, 2011, p. 606). Clearly, some further curriculum adjustment was required, to regularize the college experience and stem the drain of student dropouts.

Classics Curriculum and Great Books

One voice of change which emerged from this chaos was that of Woodrow Wilson, while serving at Princeton first as a faculty member and then as president. Wilson advocated a renewed focus on the liberal arts, which he saw as a training in "moral, intellectual, and aesthetic values" in which "the end purpose was preparation for leadership and national service" (Geiger, 2016, p. 611). Furthermore, he argued, this could only be achieved through a residential college setting, commenting "you cannot go to college on a streetcar and know what college means" (Geiger, 2016, p. 611). By 1902, he was president of Princeton, and immediately set about reorganizing undergraduate education. He worked with faculty to develop undergraduate majors, which were then required for junior and senior years of study. As Geiger noted, "the Princeton curriculum established a balance between breadth and depth—concentration and electives—that served as a model for other colleges."

Seven years later, Abbot Lawrence Lowell succeeded Charles Eliot as president of Harvard, proclaiming an end to free electives in his 1909 inaugural address. According to Boning (2007), "Although praised for many of his accomplishments during his tenure at Harvard, Eliot was also blamed for problems of incoherent undergraduate

curricula that developed because of his fascination with the elective system" (p. 6). Like Princeton, Harvard turned to "a distribution structure made up of four subject fields: the biological sciences, the physical sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities" (Boning, 2007, p. 7). Once again, other institutions followed suit with a wave of educational reforms, extending through the 1920s and ending only when the Great Depression refocused student concerns on occupational training and employment opportunities (Boning, 2007, p. 8).

At the same time, educational reformers were still struggling to restore coherence and balance to the college curriculum, without losing the breadth of knowledge for which the American research university was now famous. According to Boning (2007), "Among the new approaches were interdisciplinary courses and senior seminars. Columbia College introduced an interdisciplinary course, 'Contemporary Civilization,' that focused on methods, applications, and citizenship" (p. 7). The new course was based on a two-year honors course piloted by literature professor John Erskine, who believed that education had "lost its coherence and its sense of a civilizing mission" (Nieli, 2007, p. 321). The course, which involved "exposing students to the greatest literature and philosophy that Western culture had produced" (Nieli, 2007, p. 321), was termed the Great Books approach, and was adopted as a required sequence by Columbia in 1937.

Various versions of the Great Books program were repeated across prominent East Coast colleges through the 1930s and into the 1940s. The courses offered a return to an earlier period of classical studies, combined with a general introduction to liberal arts values and traditions. Again, Rudolph (1990) noted the integral connection between curriculum reform and educational coherence and continuity: "Where the general

education or core-course program received its most dramatic treatment, there the forces of chaos had earlier made their most dramatic impact.… General education proposed to restore some balance, to revitalize the aristocratic ideal of the liberal arts as the passport to learning" (p. 455). Again, Geiger (2016) concurred, remarking, "By the late 1930s, general education became the accepted rubric for addressing the discontents associated with undergraduate education under conditions of relentless disciplinary specialization" (p. 467).

Campus Community—General

Campus community organized as a facet of residential life was a characteristic of college or university life from the very beginnings of higher education. According to Fink and Inkelas (2015), residential life on campus dates from the earliest days of American history: "Colleges such as Harvard, Princeton, William and Mary, and Yale followed the Oxbridge residential college model by colocating students' sleeping quarters, dining halls, lecture halls, tutor residences, and common areas" (pp. 5-6). Living and studying in close quarters caused students and faculty to develop a tight bond which extended well beyond the classroom.

Care and supervision of young students developed into the legal doctrine of *in loco parentis*, in which "faculty members were expected not only to educate students but also to act on behalf of parents in developing high moral standards in the students entrusted in their care" (Davis et al., 1997, p. 3). This principle of oversight, originally intended as reinforcing the religious upbringing of good Christian leaders in a frontier society, eventually developed into a guiding principle for university organization. As Davis et al. (1997) summarized, "This provided a strong, unifying purpose for higher

education institutions that contributed towards the development of a college campus community" (p. 3).

Campus community organized around *in loco parentis* meant that student life had three main aspects: a pseudo-familial setting which eased the transition into adult life (Rudolph, 1990, p. 88), a community which largely agreed upon their rights and obligations to the group (based as it was around traditional family roles), and an educational mission based upon the study of the classics (Boning, 2007, p. 2). All three of these guiding principles were to crumble and be swept away by an influx of new and radically diverse students in the second half of the 20th century.

In loco parentis was dismissed by the courts in the 1960s, as part of the sexual revolution and Vietnam war protests. Activists argued that 18-year-old males were old enough to be drafted and serve in the army; consequently, they were old enough to vote and marry without their parents' permission. The courts agreed and colleges and universities were left to find new principles around which to organize student government and student conduct. This shift was made more difficult by the fact that the changed circumstances were neither understood nor accepted by parents and society at large. As Boyer (1993) noted, "The assumption persisted that, when an undergraduate went off to college, he or she would, in some general manner, be cared for by the institution" (p. 323). Parents wanted their children cared for while living in unfamiliar circumstances, and even courts agreed that higher education institutions held legal responsibility for the safety and general welfare of their students. As Boyer summarized, "College officials knew they were no longer 'parents,' but they also knew that their responsibilities, both legal and moral, extended far beyond the classroom" (p. 323).

Campus Community and Purpose

If forming an extended family unit for the purposes of overseeing religious and moral development of young people is now a discarded model for higher education, then the original educational mission must now take center point as the purpose for colleges and universities. As Boyer (1990) pointed out in his seminal study of campus communities, "First, a college or university is an educationally purposeful community, a place where faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on campus" (p. 9). The mission statement, once a single aspect of a multi-pronged approach to human development in higher education, takes on new meaning as the college or university's single point of communal agreement.

Even mission was experienced or perceived differently by the various constituencies which make up a modern college or university. Cress (2008) commented on the complexities of campus research,

> Studying campus climate is an attempt to describe how students, faculty, and staff experience interactions with one another which are laden with individual values and meaning. In other words, it is a way of discerning how the environmental complexities of a campus affect the overall functioning of both its members and the organization. (p. 96).

Cress hoped, by understanding the complexities of these interactions, that campus climate could be changed to better support teaching and learning.

Boyer (1990) likewise sought to connect community with educational mission. Not only did he see the educational purpose of higher education as the central unifying theme for the communities which inhabited colleges and universities, but he also feared

the world in which "students and faculty cannot join together in common cause" (p. 3). In Boyer's mind, universities were microcosms for the greater society for which higher education prepared its students. If educational institutions could not come together to support a higher purpose, then how could we expect cities, countries, and governments to work?

This theme of common purpose for building a better society was continued by Boyer's intellectual heirs. E. G. Brogue, in a *festschrift* honoring the late Boyer, remarked, "Colleges and universities exist for purposes beyond developing knowledge and skill in our students. They are also sanctuaries of our personal and civic values, incubators of intellect and integrity" (p. 8). Or, as Boyer (1990) saw it, "Great Teachers not only transmit information, but also create the common ground of intellectual commitment…. They encourage students to be creative, not conforming, and inspire them to go on learning long after college days are over" (p. 12). In both visions, society was dependent on the unity, purpose, and vigor of the common intellectual endeavor experienced by students in colleges and universities.

Student Attrition and Retention

Nowhere does higher education seem more like a business than when researching the drive of colleges and universities to admit and retain students in order to generate tuition revenue. Whether or not one believes that higher education institutions should be run as corporations, the reality remains: tuition and student fees are the primary drivers of educational expansion or retrenchment. Federal and state subsidies likewise support educational institutions but bring with them a scrutiny from the public and policy makers. What are federal and state aid spent on? How successful are our higher education

institutions in educating the students they have admitted? As Kretovics noted (2011), "Higher education is one of the few industries in which individuals and institutions are asked (sometimes required) to publicly justify their existence, or at least their funding" (p. 65).

Such scrutiny is justified, however, when we consider the scope of the funds being directed to higher education in the United States. Kretovics (2011) continued, "According to the NCES, the total revenue of post-secondary institutions in the United States surpassed $400 billion…during the 2005-2006 academic year, making higher education one of the largest industries in the country" (p. 66). Even so, this staggering amount would probably be considered justified by the public and policy makers alike, if higher education fulfilled its function of producing broadly educated citizens, with public values and critical thinking skills, prepared to tackle the budding problems of the 21st century.

The issue, then, is to what extent colleges and universities can make the case that they do serve the public and prepare citizens for a highly technologized and globally complex world. Learning outcomes are a complex subject and are prone to constant reconsideration and reconfiguration. But one metric is clear: higher education is failing to retain, let alone graduate, a sizeable proportion of its admitted students, at tremendous cost to the country and to individual institutions. How to address the retention gap is becoming the compelling subject of research and public policy for 21st century education. How can we serve our students if we cannot even persuade them to stay? How does this impact the future of higher education in the United States, and how does it

shape the fates of individual institutions as they struggle for a dwindling share in the college-age market?

Student Retention Rates

The need for swift and effective action to correct and reverse the trend of lost students and lost opportunities is made even more urgent when one considers that the trend is by no means of recent origin. According to Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2008), "Student attrition has been an issue of concern for more than three decades" (p. 308). The numbers that they cite are equally dismal: "Nationally, the three year graduation rates for community and two year colleges is less than 45%; for four year colleges and universities, the five year graduation rate approximates 50%" (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2008, p. 308).

Other scholars offer equally bleak statistics for college retention in the United States in the 21st century. Schneider (2010), in a study focused on first-year student attrition, warned, "Approximately 30 percent of students who start college this fall will not return to that college next year. Alarmingly, only about 60 percent of students graduate from 'four-year' colleges and universities within six years" (p. 2). Johnson (2012), in a study of the institutional costs of college attrition, concurred, remarking, "One-third of students who enter postsecondary education expecting to earn a degree leave without one" (p. 1). There can be no doubt that higher education attrition and retention rates constitute a crisis in post-secondary education. Urgent steps must be taken immediately to correct the problem and stem the hemorrhaging of students and resources which are currently wasted in the United States.

Cost to United States Overall

The cost to individuals is apparent: students incur debt while they invest time, energy, and money into the educational process. But for the 30% or so who leave without graduation, they have little to show for the efforts beside debts. Johnson (2012) remarked sympathetically, "For many, especially for students from lower income backgrounds, leaving prior to completing a degree or credential is a missed opportunity and a lost investment. Students have devoted both time and money to their unsuccessful effort" (p. 1). For a country that needs an educated and informed public for the democratic process to work, let alone allow the United States to compete in the wider global marketplace, 30% of the undergraduate body is too high a cost to pay.

Yet the loss of opportunity to rising U.S. citizens is only part of the problem. The state and federal resources, which are allotted to pay for their education, are also wasted. Johnson (2012) likewise made note of this loss of capital: "The public has contributed as well, through state appropriations to postsecondary institutions and state and federal financial aid" (p. 1). And it is precisely this waste which brings attention to the crisis from the policy makers and stakeholders. As Kretovics (2011) sagely remarked, "College and university administrators must consistently demonstrate that they are good fiscal stewards by demonstrating sound fiscal accountability" (p. 66). So, what is the level to which we support institutions that fail to retain students?

In fact, the sheer scope of the problem is staggering. According to Schneider (2010):

> We spend about twice as much per student as the United Kingdom, Germany, or Japan and about three times as much as most other industrialized countries in Europe and Asia, according to the Organization

> for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Factbook…. Yet American students' success is not commensurate with these world-class expenditures. (p. 2).

Exact amounts are difficult to measure and vary from year to year, but Schneider (2010) estimated that "in the 2003 academic year, about $240 million in state grants and $270 million in federal student grants went to students who did not return for a second year" (p. 5). These numbers do not include the indirect cost to the federal government for federal student loans, which may never be repaid by workers who lack the education to compete successfully in the workforce.

Cost to Individual Institutions

While individual institutions feel the impact of attrition in the loss of tuition and fees revenues, and the longer-term impact on their ability to develop lucrative relationships with their alumni, the greatest toll is in the loss of public trust and the corresponding lack of support from policy makers and the funds over which they hold control. Titus (2006), in a study on the financial context of student persistence, noted, "While policy makers are making an effort to link public funding to institutional persistence rates…state appropriations, as a percent of all funds to degree-granting public higher education institutions, fell from 44.0% to 32.3%" (p. 354). Public concern regarding persistence rates is costing colleges in state appropriations and in the reputation of higher education.

Loss of income from state appropriations means that schools must make up the income from other sources. According to Titus (2006), between 1981 and 2000, while state appropriations fell dramatically, "the percent of revenue derived from tuition

increased from 12.9% to 18.5%, while the percent of revenue derived from federal grants and contracts rose from 8.8% to 9.4%" (p. 354). Tuition, however, is only a short-term stopgap measure, as it costs more to attract new students than it does to retain them. Additional costs in admissions and first-year student support are lost, if students do not stay through the second year. Furthermore, federal oversight may at some point focus on persistence as a key factor for continued support, just as state funding already has. The situation is unsustainable over the long-term.

The short-term impact of student attrition is also considerable. Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2008) draw on corporate expertise for insight into the situation, noting that in industries it can cost "from five to seven times more to acquire new customers than to retain those with which the firm was already doing business" (p. 314). They argue that the principle would apply equally to institutions of higher education, since "recruitment and admissions functions at colleges and universities represent significant institutional expenditures" (p. 314). They further argue that "the longer a customer stays with an organization, the more they spend and the less price sensitive they become…. Students who remain enrolled at the institution 'learn' their way…. As a result, they require less time, effort, and resources" (p. 315).

In contrast, the loss of student retention equals immediate and long-term loss of income. Raisman (2013), while studying attrition at four-year colleges and universities, summarized the problem, "Each student who walks out the door takes his or her tuition, fees, and other revenue the school might have been able to receive such as for housing, food, and bookstore purchases" (p. 3). When viewed in total, the amounts are overwhelming. According to Raisman, "The 1,669 colleges and universities studied here

collectively lost revenue due to attrition in an amount close to $16.5 billion…with the larges singe school losing $102,533,338, …and the average school losing $9,910,811" (p. 4). Faced with the enormity of the problem, it is no wonder that more and more small colleges are closing their doors in response to financial crises.

Possible Causes of Student Attrition

When retention is discussed in a higher education setting, the lack of preparation of the incoming students inevitably becomes the focus. When colleges and universities expand their outreach to include more and more new high school graduates, a lowering of standards is thought to be inherent in the process. First-generation college students are also thought to be less prepared for the college process, and many institutions have rushed to create additional services to tutor and advise the low-achieving ranks of their newly admitted student body. Yet research does not support the contention that retention is all about college preparation.

In fact, a surprising number of high-achieving students choose to drop-out of college, both early in the process and even in the late stages of their education. Johnson (2012), studying the attrition phenomenon, pointed out, "Perhaps surprisingly, the proportion of students who leave higher education because of clear-cut academic failure—grades in the D and lower range—is relatively small" (p. 9). On the contrary, the study continued, "Conversely, fully 40 percent of dropouts had estimated GPAs in the A and B range…. And 17 percent had 'Mostly As' — a higher proportion than had Ds and Fs" (p. 9). Clearly, something else is affecting students and discouraging them from continuing in the educational process. But if academics are not the problem, what is?

And how do educational institutions work to retain students, if the normal steps of tutoring and advisement are not sufficient?

Institutional Resources and Retention

One issue that causes colleges and universities to revisit their priorities is the question of institutional resources and retention. Does the way an institution allots funding for students, staff, faculty, and administrative services really affect retention? Recent research certainly supports the claim that resources and priorities matter to students, sometimes to the extent to which the institution retains its students. According to Gansemer-Topf et al. (2018), in their study of finances and institutional retention, "Educational research has demonstrated that revenues, staffing, and resource allocation patterns affect student outcomes" (p. 175).

Not surprisingly, investing in student-centered activities and programs carries with it the best return in student retention. Salaries for part-time staff and adjunct faculty yielded negative results, while "expenditures related to enhancing academic engagement positively contributed to retention and graduation" (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2018, p. 175). Other research confirmed this finding on the subject. According to Ryan (2004), in a study on the relationship between institutional expenditures and degree attainment, "instructional and academic support expenditures remain significant even after the model controls for other important retention variables" (p. 111).

Also predictable was student rejection of significant increases in administrative services. Perhaps because the students negatively associated administrative tasks with busy-work and needless run-around, administrative functions were perceived as institutionally focused, rather than student-centric. The trend was clear from multiple

studies. Titus (2006) noted that persistence connected to institutional expenditures but warned that the emphasis should be on expenditure patterns rather than gross expenditures. Titus (2006) concluded "that the average chance of persistence decreases with increases in the percent of an institution's expenditures on administrative functions. This finding is important, given the trend in higher education towards increases in the percent of expenditures on administration" (p. 369). Colleges and universities sometimes concentrate on improving processing, which would ordinarily be considered good customer relations. However, customer services only went so far without deeper engagement.

Social Bonding—Or Lack Of

Indeed, engagement turned out to be the key to better retention, with the lack of engagement or social bonding at their institutions severely impacting students. According to Schudde (2011), who analyzed college residence as a retention factor, "Psychological stresses, including loneliness, isolation, and anxiety are correlated with dropping out" (p. 582). These stresses are particularly hard on students in the first-year experience, following so rapidly after the admissions experience, in which they are showered with attention and positive reinforcement. Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2008), who focused on relationship management in higher education, noted the problem: "During the recruitment phase, the institution usually takes great care in communicating with potential students, and these efforts take place in several stages…. All too often, meaningful social bonding activities come to an end once the recruit becomes a student" (pp. 324-5). Students however, sometimes separated from their families for the first time,

required social support and the opportunity to engage with their fellow students and permanent faculty.

Recent studies have confirmed the importance of engagement and social bonding as a necessary component to the successful student experience. Millea et al. (2018), studying college success and retention factors, emphasized the centrality of engagement: "Involvement and engagement have been identified as keys to student success in college. Students who feel connected to their academic endeavors are more likely to succeed" (p. 310). Schudde (2011) likewise saw the importance of direct connections to peers and social support: "Because living on campus implies greater interaction with peers, who experience similar stressors, campus residency may facilitate increased social support. Social support is directly beneficial and acts as a buffer protecting students from the impact of external stressors" (p. 582). The basic need for human connection drove many students, and its lack, either through lack of programming or through the personal fears and anxieties of students, kept students from succeeding and drove up attrition rates.

Reallocation of Resources

Focusing on student engagement and whole-student well-being will require a shift in paradigm for higher educational institutions. But students, parents and policy-makers continue to pressure institutions to become more accountable for the students they admit and the students they fail to retain. Gansemer-Topf and Schuh (2006) summarized the matter briefly: "This is the question that institutional stakeholders (students, parents, legislators) are pressing institutions to answer: How can 4-year institutions allocate limited resources …and still maintain or increase…retention and graduation rates" (p. 614)?

In order to answer this question, institutions must revisit their missions and reprioritize their goals. Whether not-for-profit or for-profit in nature, educational institutions profit from their students, but they prosper only when they return value for their students investments. Instructional and academic support should then be their primary concern, if they wish to return good value for their tuition.

Research confirmed the necessity to reemphasize the importance of instruction as the primary focus of all higher educational institutions. Gansemer-Topf et al. (2018) noted the trend, "Expenditures related to enhancing academic engagement positively contribute to retention and graduation, whereas expenditures related to administrative tasks do not" (p. 175). Ryan (2004) concurred, offering in explanation, "Instructional and academic support expenditures may provide more support for student integration, involvement, engagement, and meaningful experiences that enhance student retention" (p. 111). Once again, engagement was key to institutional, as well as student success.

Slow but steady progress has been made by institutions that embraced this reaffirmation of mission and reallocate resources accordingly. According to Gansemer-Topf and Schuh (2006), "Expenditures dedicated to instruction significantly contributed to first-year retention and 6-year graduation rates…. Unlike other institutional expenditure categories…, instruction expenditures consistently and positively contributed to retention and graduation rates" (p. 631). The shift should be particularly strong in those institutions that rely primarily on tuition. As Titus (2006) aptly noted, "as institutions increase their reliance on tuition as a source of revenue, institutions will increasingly focus on retaining students" (p. 369).

In contrast to increased funding for instructional categories, resource allocation for student services have proven to have mixed results. Although student-centric in nature, student services are one-step removed from the educational mission of the institution. While they may boost morale or peer-to-peer engagement, they do not boost direct engagement in the educational process. This may be why the research on their effectiveness is inconsistent and incomplete. On the one hand, Ryan (2004) found that "student services expenditures do not appear to have a positive or significant effect on degree attainment" (p. 109). Millea et al. (2018), however, cited research that student services expenditures did increase graduation and retention rates (p. 310). Perhaps the best course, then, is to prioritize academic support first, and student services second.

The Promise of High Impact Practices

One recent trend for boosting retention and engagement is for educational institutions to invest in high impact practices. Originally identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, high impact practices are "programs and activities [which] appear to engage participants at levels that elevate their performances across multiple engagement and desired-outcomes measures such as persistence" (Kuh, 2008, p. 14). Championed by George Kuh (2008), the researcher who initiated the National Survey for Student Success (NSSE), the positive outcomes of high-impact practices are now demonstrated through multiple years of NSSE data (p. 13).

While there are 10 high-impact practices in all, the practices that lend themselves best to first-year experience and are tied to retention to the second year are first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing intensive courses, and service learning. According to Kuh (2008), "The nature of these high-

impact activities puts students in circumstances that essentially demand they interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters…. A human-scale first-year seminar makes anonymity impossible, fosters face-interaction, and fuels feedback" (p. 14). Most importantly, "historically underserved students tend to benefit *more* from engaging in educational purposeful activities than majority students" (Kuh, 2008, p. 17). For institutions that wish to boost retention of their most at-risk populations, high-impact practices are essentially mandatory. Based upon his research with NSSE, Kuh (2008) recommends that best practice is to have all students engage in one to two high impact practices during the undergraduate career (p. 19). If such a course were followed, he guaranteed that achievement and retention would undoubtedly follow.

Even more than first-year seminars, learning communities are a high impact practice that engages students in peer-to-peer interaction, faculty involvement, and are usually combined with some writing intensive and/or student research component. Composed of "small cohorts of students in one or two-semester blocked programs" of two to three theme-linked courses, learning communities "develop …cooperative relationships among students, instructors, tutors, and advisors, focused on student learning outcomes" (Bonet & Walters, 2016, p. 225). Through their study of a pilot program in Kings College in the City University of New York system, Bonet and Walters (2016) found that the learning communities were particularly well suited to "reaching and communicating with immigrant and other 'at risk' students through…faculty-student engagement and curriculum design" (p. 231). Again, any institution that sought to increase minority representation and retention would be well advised to invest in learning community programming.

Community and Diversity

One dividing force that threatens to facture the unity of higher education communities is the very diversity of the students who have enrolled in the last 50 or more years. As Boyer (1990) himself noted bitterly, "While colleges and universities celebrate …pluralism, the harsh truth is that…many campuses have not been particularly successful in building larger loyalties within a diverse student body" (p. 4). Nevertheless, he argued that, "Above all, colleges and universities should seek to build racial and cultural understanding, not just socially, but educationally as well" (p. 32). Cultural sensitivity was an integral part of his vision of a college community made up of disparate parts but united in educational mission. As he stated as part of his agenda for campus community: "A college or university is a just community, a place where the sacredness of each person is honored and where diversity is aggressively pursued" (p. 25).

Ethnicity, Race, and Diversity

Current research supports the idea that a plurality of ethnicity and race in the student and faculty bodies brings with it a new plurality of thought, experience, and learning. Yet, as Ancis, Sedlacek and Mohr (2000) warned, not all diversity was either just or equitable: "Although educational institutions enroll a diverse student body, research suggests that these students do not necessarily experience a similar campus environment. For example, students of color … often experience a lack of support and an unwelcoming academic climate" (p. 180).

This negative experience is because diversity must be addressed programmatically, through the curriculum, rather than simply though admissions. As Bowman and Park (2014) pointed out, "having a racially diverse student body is simply

not sufficient to unlock the benefits associated with racial diversity" (p. 601). Interracial encounters must be fostered through a variety of techniques, including through curriculum, rather than the haphazard interactions which result from admissions alone.

Part of the problem may be that the nature and definition of diversity has changed radically over the last 50 years. As Levine (1993) noted, diversity in the 1960s was defined as equal representation; while the definition in the 1970s it grew to include retention and support. Later in the 1970s and early 1980s, researchers focused on integration. More recently, theorists have envisioned diversity as multiculturalism (p. 334). Without a consistent definition or public consensus regarding the meaning or purpose of diversity in higher education, programmatic solutions to the tensions caused by diversity have been incomplete and inconsistent. Levine (1993) himself concluded, "Higher education is deeply divided about its meaning, its importance, and what should be done. This is why diversity is such a frightening issue" (p. 342).

However, research also demonstrates that diversity benefits the entire community. According to Bowman and Park (2014), "a point of interest is the consistent significant results of cross-racial interaction across groups for two dependent variables: college satisfaction and self-reported growth" (p. 615). This dovetails with the findings of Victorino et al. (2013):

> positive faculty perceptions of campus racial climate (e.g., lower levels of subtle discrimination and institutional priorities to increase the representation of minorities) had a significant effect upon faculty satisfaction. Studies among students similarly found that campus racial climate significantly affected student outcomes (p. 792).

Positive outcomes to diversifying the educational community may be a result of Boyer's (1990) vision: "Above all, colleges and universities should seek to build racial and cultural understanding, not just socially, but educationally as well" (p. 32). Or, as Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) phrased it, "An understanding of the particular experiences and perceptions of African American, Asian American, Latino/a, and White college students may also influence the development of culturally relevant and effective interventions" (p. 183). Further research on the culture and climate of the collegial community will allow more intentional and better designed academic and student affairs programming to support greater diversity.

Women and Diversity

Like students of color, women students have historically struggled to access equal education or admission to high-status and male-dominated professional training programs. The lack of progress was sadly apparent to Boyer (1990) in the Carnegie study: "even though bias against women is no longer institutionalized, sex discrimination in higher education persists in subtle and not-so-subtle forms. It shows up informally, we were told, in the classroom, and occasionally in tenure and promotion decisions, too" (p. 2). He cited multiple cases of faculty members deliberately discouraging female students from advanced training or technical courses. Finally, he summarized, "It was regularly apparent during our study that sexist attitudes persist…. Not only do men talk more [in class], but what they say often appears to carry more weight with some professors, and this pattern of classroom leaders and followers is set very early in the term" (p. 33).

Unfortunately, 2525 years after Boyer's research, little seems to have changed. Victorino et al. (2013) noted, "Across the United States, 56.8% of undergraduate students

are female, and 35.7% are of racial/ethnic minorities…; yet, just 47.1% of the approximately 1.5 million faculty . . .are female, and only 18.0% are racial/ethnic minorities" (p. 769). Again, educational institutions have few clear plans for correcting this demographic injustice, and social progress likewise lags behind.

Religious Diversity

Another aspect of student and faculty diversity, which is frequently overlooked, is that of religious diversity. According to Bowman and Toms-Smedley (2013), one method for instituting transformative change for diverse students "is to broaden and deepen current conceptions of minority status. For example, religious minorities are often overlooked in these discussions, despite growing concern regarding interfaith dialogue and conflict on campus and in the broader society" (p. 746). State-run institutions may struggle to incorporate interfaith initiatives into secular mission statements, and students and faculty of no religion may respond negatively to students of traditional or unfamiliar religions. A global religions requirement as part of a history of ideas curriculum could ease tensions and broaden educational perspectives.

However, one prospective source of opposition to interfaith dialogue may come from institutionalized or unconscious religious privilege. According to Mayhew et al. (2014), Christian students, who enjoy a religious majority on most college campuses, "perceive and experience the campus climate as more negative than students from other faith traditions and nonreligious students" (p. 240). In other words, students accustomed to Christian privilege perceived themselves to be persecuted when their implicit assumptions are challenged. Only by working through these uncomfortable feelings can they progress to a stage where plurality is accepted and celebrated.

Conclusion on Diversity

As uncomfortable as diversity can sometimes be for college and university communities, there is no question that educational institutions benefit from increased diversity. According to Victorino et al. (2013), "Studies …found that campus racial climate significantly affected student outcomes—for example, efforts to increase diversity and enhance campus racial climates have consistently been related to cognitive, psychosocial, and interpersonal gains for both White and racial/ethnic minority students" (p. 792). These findings are confirmed by Bowman and Park (2014): "A point of interest is the consistent significant results of cross-racial interaction across groups for two dependent variables: college satisfaction and self-reported growth" (p. 615). Diversity is a driving force for expanding educational horizons. But colleges and universities need to accept and embrace multiple facets of diversity, rather than giving lip-service and then ignoring it.

Summary

Learning communities are thus a continuation of an ongoing debate regarding the purpose of college education, the meaning of general education requirements, and the role of coherence of both the educational experience and the college community. These issues have played out for decades, if not for centuries, but learning communities bring a new focus on integrative learning and diversity of thought, as they are experienced in the classroom and in the wider community.

Learning communities have been studied for the past twenty years, and new theoretical understandings of them have been emerging over the past decade. However, much of the research has rested on NSSE data and is correspondingly quantitative in

nature. More qualitative research would therefore fill a literature gap and further illuminate the workings of the learning communities from both a faculty and a student perspective.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Overview

In the 2017-2018 academic year, the School of Humanities of a private, Midwestern university began a pilot program of two first-year learning communities in the Fall, with an additional learning community in the Spring. Each learning community consisted of three theme-linked courses, for a total of nine courses over two semesters. The School's dean enrolled entering freshmen as part of the regular enrollment process over the summer of 2017. The School informed students and their parents about the learning community project, and some students chose to opt out of the learning community initiative. Other students expressed little interest in the program but remained enrolled in the project. Many admitted later that they had not really comprehended what the project was about until after the first day of class.

As mentioned earlier, research on learning communities has been heavily quantitative, based primarily on NSSE data (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Malnarich et al., 2014). The NSSE tracks learning communities as a type of high-impact practice, which improves engagement and retention, especially when programmed into the first-year experience (Kuh, 2008). The lack of qualitative data on learning communities therefore formed a research gap, and I planned this research project as primarily qualitative.

Data Collection

I gathered qualitative data twice a semester in both Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 for both students and faculty members. Students gathered into focus groups, meeting first in the second month of each semester, followed by a second focus group near the end of the

semester. The intention was to gather their impressions of the learning community once they had become immersed in the coursework, and then again when they could reflect over the bulk of the semester.

Faculty were interviewed on a one-on-one basis, once in the middle of the semester and once at the end. With three courses in each theme-linked block, and three learning communities in total (two in Fall and one in Spring), I was able to interview nine faculty members twice each for a total of 18 interviews. The faculty involved in the study also consented to give me access to their course evaluations for both semesters, supplying me quantitative data to supplement and compare with the qualitative data gathered in the interviews. In particular, the course evaluations contained data on student engagement, which helped to augment engagement data from the qualitative research.

Students

The pilot project targeted incoming first-year students at a private, Midwestern university, and these parameters dictated the student sample. All of the students were traditional-aged undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 20. Some of them admitted to being first-generation college students, and two were people of color (one African-American male and one Asian female). Because the students were enrolled by the School of Humanities, they were all either Humanities majors or still undecided. Students were assigned to the project as part of a routine summer enrollment process for all incoming Humanities and undecided students, and the designers of the program assumed that they would be representative of the general undergraduate population. That assumption, and the comparable status of Groups A and B, would later be called into question. Statistical data related to this question will be discussed further below.

As soon as I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the institution being studied, I arranged to visit a class in Group A and one in Group B, the two learning communities running during the Fall 2017 semester. In each class, I made a basic appeal to the students, explaining that I was a graduate student who needed their help as I was interested in their experiences in the program.

Students in Group A responded favorably, and eight students enrolled immediately in the research project. This proved to be a trend with Group A: they were friendly, engaging, and open to me, both during the focus groups and when I encountered students across campus. They would greet me by name and ask about the progress of the research project. I also gathered from the faculty in Group A that their students were engaged in the classes and unafraid of joining in discussions. The students communicated among themselves via a group Snapchat, formed spontaneous study groups, and offered each other encouraging advice daily.

Students in Group B were visibly disengaged when I visited their class to make my appeal, and only one student signed a consent form on the day of my appeal. I had hoped that more students would enroll in the study later, but participation from Group B proved to be problematic throughout the semester. In fact, the faculty of Group B remarked early in the semester that they were struggling to reach their students and expressed surprise that the students did not bond as a group or even break into smaller groups. Group B established no central method of reaching individuals, and they seemed to have little interest in engaging with each other or with the faculty.

All students in Groups A and B were invited to the focus groups, but only students from Group A participated. To balance the study, I requested an amendment

from my IRB to allow for follow-up interviews in the Spring semester. No one from Group B was still in the program, but I was able to interview four students from Group B directly. I have also incorporated qualitative data from an anonymous end of the semester assessment administered in one of Group B's classes.

In an unexpected twist, Group C turned out to be a subset of Group A, as some of the students were interested in extending the learning community experience into the second semester of the first year. These five students were all willing to be part of the study, attending two focus groups during the semester, and sharing openly on many aspects of their experience.

Faculty

As a staff member of the School of Humanities, I was already on friendly terms with all the faculty involved in the study. I solicited the faculty as soon as I received IRB approval, and all faculty members involved in the project signed up to participate in my study. All nine members of the faculty involved in the study had been among the original organizers of the pilot project and were enthusiastic about starting a new program in the school. They were extremely candid about their expectations and aspirations for the project and were frequently self-critical when the project did not produce expected results. I believe that the level of candor in the interviews was an aspect of our already existing relationships, and would be difficult to replicate with another group or researcher. The prior knowledge of each other and the trust that already existed in our relationships should be considered a limitation to the study, as these relationships could not be easily replicated.

Faculty members were recruited by word of mouth by a few key leaders, mostly housed within the School of Humanities, although some effort was made to reach out to other schools for representatives of the Sciences and the Arts. Ultimately, nine faculty members self-divided into three teams consisting of three faculty members each, teaching three theme-linked courses to cohorts of incoming students. Both first semester teams consisted of two Humanities faculty, teamed with a member of another school to increase interdisciplinary cross-over. The third section, which was the only block offered in the second semester, consisted exclusively of Humanities faculty.

One theme that united all three theme-linked teams was an emphasis on developmental writing. Each first semester theme-linked block included a section of Composition I, and the second semester block included a section of Composition II. The inclusion of composition courses was meant to fulfill required general education requirements and to provide the opportunity for students to process their experiences through writing assignments. The intention was that metacognition would occur as part of the writing process, and students would gain greater insight into their interdisciplinary studies and experiences.

The nine faculty members who participated in the project represented a wide range of ages and experience levels. One faculty member was a young assistant professor, who had been recruited to the school's faculty only two years before. Several faculty members were associate professors, having taught at the school between five and ten years each. One faculty member was a full professor and chair of the department. Another faculty member served as assistant dean of a school and was phasing out teaching on the undergraduate level in favor of teaching graduate school in a newly

constructed MA program. However, all faculty members had a minimum of five years of teaching experience on the college level, and lack of experience did not appear to be a factor in any student outcomes.

Privacy Protection

Every effort was made to protect the privacy of the students and faculty who participated in this study. Students were asked to sign in before taking part in focus groups in order to ascertain that I had signed permission forms for all participants, but no names or identifying details were attached to the transcriptions from focus group recordings or to the coded analysis from these transcriptions. In order to test whether all three groups were made up of comparable students, I requested high school GPA and ACT test scores for all of the students. Only anonymous, averaged data have been used in this study.

Eight of the nine faculty participants were well known to me before the study began, but every effort has been made to keep their participation anonymous. As with the students, no names were used in the transcriptions from our interviews or the coded analysis of the interviews. In addition to interview data, I requested and received permission to access student evaluations for the classes in the study. As suggested by the IRB chair of the university, all identifying details of gender, discipline, or school have been removed from the qualitative data contained in the evaluations. Only anonymous, averaged quantitative data from the evaluations have been used in this study.

Types of Data

As previously stated, primarily qualitative data were collected through focus groups and interviews. Initially, all student data were to be collected through focus

groups. However, it became clear early on that group A was interested in participating in the study, but outreach to group B only yielded one participant, who never attended focus groups. In order to fill this data gap, I requested an amendment to my IRB approval, and did follow up interviews with four participants of group B.

I collected faculty data personal interviews, which took place in their personal offices. Generally, the faculty members felt comfortable with me, and with their surroundings, resulting in the high-level trust and candor which is reflected in the data gathered from the interviews. When it became clear that student data from Group B would be sparse at best, I requested IRB permission to also collect student evaluations. Permission was granted, and all nine faculty members agreed to give me access to the student evaluations collected for that semester. This additional source of information provided qualitative and quantitative data relating to student satisfaction and engagement.

Instruments

Questionnaires were carefully crafted to contain a variety of different kinds of questions, offering a guide to structure the interviews and focus groups. As Patton (2002) noted, "An interview guide lists the questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview. An interview guide is prepared to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed" (p. 343). Especially in the case of one-on-one interviews, questionnaires guaranteed a standardized set of questions, while allowing individuals to comment and expand upon their experiences at length. As Patton (2002) continued, "The guide helps make interviewing a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored" (pp. 343-344).

Open-ended questions were intentionally designed to elicit details and reflections upon experiences within the learning communities. As Ponsford and Masters (1998) pointed out, "Questions are purposely open-ended to encourage discussion as opposed to highly structured questions that limit the scope of the answers" (p. 3). Discussion was useful in the one-on-one interviews, but it was vital in the focus groups. The students needed to feel comfortable enough to detail their own experiences and to expand upon the experiences of others in the group.

On the other hand, even open-ended questions served to guide the discussion to the major topics under study, namely the personal experiences of both students and faculty in the learning community environment. As Ponsford and Masters noted, "The topics should be presented in the form of open-ended questions that help guide the discussion" (p. 6). Answers to these questions ranged from initial impressions to the learning community, on the part of the students, to a growing sense of interrelatedness and reliance upon each other for academic and personal support and guidance. For the faculty, answers ranged from detailed descriptions of course preparation in partnership with their cohort fellows, to candid admissions of surprise and dismay when courses did not develop as initially planned.

This type of discussion was new to me, as this study was my first foray into higher education research on the experimental level. However, I found that I was served well by my experience in a previous graduate program. I have training and field experience in pastoral counseling, which required me to develop listening skills that could also be applied to higher education research. As Ponsford and Masters (1998) pointed out, "A good moderator is a good listener, one who can keep people talking with

responsive words, but does not 'lead' the participants" (p. 4). With both students and faculty, I was able to maintain a friendly attitude combined with active listening, which allowed the participants to share their experiences in a comfortable setting.

Types of Questions

According to Patton (2002), there are six kinds of questions that can be directed to people. These types of questions are: experience and behavior questions, opinion and value questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, and background or demographic questions. These questions are designed to elicit a range of answers, from memories of behaviors and actions, to emotional reactions, or opinions or beliefs about the structure of the community or the ultimate meaning or value of the experience.

The questionnaires for this study consisted primarily of experience questions, value or opinion questions, and feeling questions. These questions go to the heart of the original purpose of the study: an examination of these new learning communities, which would yield valuable data on the mindsets and experiences of those who design and enroll in these programs. The qualitative data which was gathered in interviews and focus groups served to amplify and explicate data from previous qualitative and quantitative studies of learning communities, to build a better and fuller picture of how and why learning communities function.

Ordinarily, background data would be elicited to begin a study and to place the participants in relation to each other and the outside world. As summarized by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "All interviews contain questions that refer to the particular demographics (age, income, education, number of years on the job, and so on) of the

person being interviewed as relevant to the research study" (p. 118). In the case of the student participants of the study, however, much of the basic background was already available. All the students were first-year students and of traditional college age. Some details of family background did emerge during general discussion, but personal background before college was not the focus of the questionnaire. Rather, discussion questions focused on the feelings and reactions experienced by the students during the semester as participants in the learning community. Bonding with each other and their subsequent academic success was central to the inquiry, although lack of academic preparation before college did emerge as a minor theme in some discussions.

In contrast to the students, work experience and training was a factor in evaluating the faculty participants of the study. Were any of them teaching novices, and would that impact the design or implementation of the learning communities? To test this, I began my first faculty questionnaire with the question, "How long have you been teaching on the college level? At this institution? " (Appendix F, Q. 1). Answers to this question varied widely, as participating faculty ran the range from junior assistant professor to senior full professor and chair of a program. However, none of the faculty had less than five years of teaching experience, and relative lack of experience did not prove to be related to the success, or lack of it, or any of the learning communities.

The remaining questions in the faculty questionnaires consisted of experience or behavior questions, and opinion or value questions. Experience or behavior questions, as defined by Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2015) are those questions that "focus on what a respondent is currently doing or has done in the past. Their intent is to elicit descriptions of experience, behaviors, or activities that could have been observed" (p. 251). For the

faculty, experience with the learning community began when they were recruited for the project by their colleagues. Therefore, my second question for the first interview was always, "How did you first hear about the learning community initiative?" (Appendix F, Q. 2). Most faculty participants were part of the initial team who proposed the project to the provost, with the remaining faculty being recruited soon afterwards.

Further experience questions included inquiries regarding the amount of time spent on preparing lesson plans and how much time was spent with faculty peers in the theme-linked course blocks (Appendix F, Q. 5 and Q. 8). The goal was to differentiate between the effort expended on regular coursework, and that expended on designing and supporting the learning community. Preparatory design time and partnership work varied widely among the three faculty teams. Group A spent hours together over the course of several weeks during the summer, planning crossover lessons and fine-tuning their partnership. Two members of Group A had to significantly redesign existing courses, while the third member was piloting a new course in the schedule. Group B spent minimal time together over the summer and had a minimum number of instances of crossover lessons that connected the three courses thematically. Group C, like Group A, coordinated early and often, dovetailing lessons and planning several events which connected the interdisciplinary themes of the courses.

Follow-up questions were also key to examining the full experience of both faculty and students. As mentioned above, each group was interviewed twice a semester, once near the beginning of the semester and once near the end. For the faculty, my second interview began with a standard experience question, "What has changed since the last time we talked? A) What has stayed the same? B) How and Why?" (Appendix G,

Q. 1). Obviously, this question connected the follow-up interview with our previous discussion and caused the faculty member to reminisce regarding the second half of the semester. For the most part, faculty members saw the second half of the semester as fulfilling expectations from the first half. For Group B, which struggled with student engagement and retention, the second half was a time for regrouping and reimagining of the courses and partnerships. Group C, which had different faculty but shared several students with Group A, saw a culmination of a year's worth of community building and student interactions.

The remaining questions for both faculty questionnaires tended to be opinion or value questions. These questions, as defined by Patton (2002), consist of "Questions aimed at understanding the cognitive and interpretive processes of people ask about opinions, judgments, and values" (p. 350). For the faculty members, their values and opinions had shaped their early thoughts and designs for the program. To try to touch upon these early thoughts and values, I asked each faculty member, "What aspects of the program initially interested you the most?" (Appendix F, Q. 3). Without asking directly, this open-ended question was meant to lead faculty members to discuss their level of engagement with the program during the early planning stages.

As the program progressed, faculty members were able to reflect upon their experiences and comment on the value these experiences had for their course preparation and their plans for future courses. One aspect of the learning community which I predicted was that faculty partners would begin to experience the program as a faculty learning community, as well as instructors for the student learning community. To touch upon this, I asked, "Has participating in the learning community changed your perception

of your course material in any way? A) Have you learned anything new as a result? B) Has it changed your delivery of familiar material?" (Appendix F, Q. 9). Most faculty members saw some changes in perception from their interdisciplinary partnerships, which will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

Open-ended value questions were also asked regarding the future plans of each faculty member and for the program as a whole. The final question of the first interview was always, "Are you planning to teach in any learning communities in the future? A) Why or why not? B) Would it be the same course theme, or a new one? Why?" (Appendix F, Q. 10). Plans for future learning communities would also indicate the value that the instructor placed upon the experience, and their opinion regarding the ultimate worth of the program for both students and faculty.

For the final faculty interview, I concluded the interview with two opinion or value questions. First, I asked, "What is your final take-away from this experience? A) Would you recommend it to friends and colleagues? B) Is there one thing that you did, as an instructor, that you would say…And make sure that you do this…. It really helps" (Appendix G, Q. 9). The goal here was to obtain information on the ultimate value judgment that the faculty members held regarding the learning community. Ultimately, did they feel that the effort was worth all the trouble? Would they do it again? And would they recommend the program to others?

The second question was more open-ended: "And what would you recommend be changed for future sections?" (Appendix G, Q. 10). For each of the faculty members, some aspects of the initiative had worked, and some aspects held fewer signs of success. This question was an opportunity for faculty members to reflect upon how their own

opinions and values had changed over the course of the semester. Even if they did choose to teach the same courses or themes in future semesters, their delivery of the material would change based upon their experiences with the courses in the past semester. How would that change future course planning and design? What had they learned from each other and from the joint planning and teaching process?

For the student questionnaires, I focused more on experience and feelings since I wanted to understand the total experience of participating in a learning community. While the age and educational background demographics of the student groups were already determined by their first-year status, I was curious to find out if any of the students had elected to join the learning community voluntarily. Over the summer, the dean's office had sent out a welcome letter with a flyer for the learning community, and the faculty had originally hoped that the learning community would consist of students who had elected to be part of the program. Due to low registration, other students were placed in the program so that the courses would still be held.

Consequently, my first question to students was an experience question, "Did you request a learning community, or was one assigned to you?" (Appendix A, Q. 1). As it turned out, none of the students who participated in my focus group had elected to be part of the program, which lead directly to my second question: "How do you feel about being part of a learning community? A) Is it what you expected? B) What would you suggest changing?" (Appendix A, Q. 2).

According to Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2015), "Feeling questions concern how respondents *feel* about things. They are directed at people's emotional responses to their experiences" (p. 452). I wanted to check if there was a sense of resentment toward

the administration and faculty for placing the students in a learning community. Earlier in the semester, the faculty for Group B had suggested that the lack of bonding in their group was a direct result of the lack of prior knowledge or consent that their group experienced. The faculty interpreted lack of engagement as sullenness and resentment, and they themselves then resented the process by which their classes had been filled.

Interestingly, the Group A students did not feel resentment toward the administration or the learning community. On the contrary, some of them attributed new academic success to their participation in the program and argued that they would not have understood the meaning of a learning community before they themselves became involved in one. The students also attributed their contentment in the program to the faculty's argument that they were learning more while working less in the program. Two classes combined a final research paper assignment, which was jointly graded by both faculty members. Students were happy with this partnership and pointed out that their faculty modeled partnership for them.

I also questioned the feelings and opinions of Group B. Did they, as their faculty insisted, feel resentment for being placed in the program? So my first question during their follow-up interviews was to ask, "How did you learn that you were a member of a learning community? A) Did you already know what a learning community was? B) What would you suggest changing?" (Appendix C, Q. 1). After my discussions with Group A, I felt it was imperative to ask how the learning community was pitched to the students by the faculty, as well as their personal responses to the experience.

Contrary to faculty expectations, the Group B students did not report resentment for being placed in a learning community, and even expressed regret that their group did

not bond or participate fully in the learning community experience. Overall, they felt that they had missed an opportunity to do more with the program, but they lacked knowledge as to how or why the program had gone awry for them.

Further questions for both Group A and Group B consisted of experience and opinion questions. I asked both groups about the time they spent with others in the learning community: "How often did you spend time with your learning community peers outside the classroom? A) What sorts of activities did you do? B) How much of it is class-oriented (reading, studying, coursework, and/or review?" (Appendix A, Q. 4; Appendix C, Q. 6). For both groups, I wanted to have a better understanding of their experience outside of the classroom, and if the learning community continued to shape their college life through friendships and study partnerships. Predictably, Group A reported many interactions outside the classroom, while Group B reported next to none.

Opinion questions were also key to the questionnaire and to the process of understanding the full learning community experience. Both groups were asked, "How do you think participating in a learning community has impacted your first-year experience? A) Has it increased your breadth or depth of knowledge? B) Has it changed the way you think or speak in any way?" (Appendix A, Q. 8; Appendix C, Q. 8). Ultimately, I wanted to know if the students themselves valued their experience and felt that it helped them adjust to the college lifestyle.

The follow-up, end- of- the- semester questionnaire for Group A focused more on feelings and opinions, although some experience questions were repeated for contrast and comparison. The focus group opened with a feelings question: "How do you feel about being part of a learning community (now that it's almost over)? A) Has anything

changed since the last time we met? B) what would you suggest changing?" (Appendix B, Q. 1). The intent here was to capture how the feeling of the learning community had changed over the course of the semester. Did the students feel closer to each other? Did they still see the learning community as a transformative experience?

Because Group C proved to be a subset of Group A, I was able to follow up on questions that I had asked during the first semester. Primary among these was the opinion question on choice, so I began my focus group with the question, "What is it like to be in a learning community that you chose?" (Appendix D, Q. 1). Although Group A had been supportive of the process of putting students in learning communities, I wanted to know if the experience changed when it was something that they chose for themselves. Ultimately, Group C argued that students should be placed in learning communities regardless of prior knowledge or consent, because they felt that the experience was so enriching.

Sometimes, experience and opinion dovetailed in the same question. When doing the final interview for Group C, I asked: "How has the second learning community been different from the first? What has been (mostly) the same?" (Appendix F, Q. 2). This open-ended question was designed to generate discussion of their experience, but also their opinion of their second learning community and its contrast with the first semester. I thought it was critical, at the end of their experience, to get them to reflect on the overall program and its implications.

Value and opinion questions dominated the final interview, since reflection was the primary purpose of the end of the Spring semester focus group. I wanted them to consider how they had changed and if they valued the changes that had occurred during

the program. One critical question was, "How has your worldview changed since you came to [college]? How much of that was due to the learning community?" (Appendix F, Q. 6). Broadening worldview was a major emphasis of the interdisciplinary program and I wanted to know if the students viewed that aspect as successful.

Analysis

As mentioned earlier, the study was designed as primarily qualitative for two reasons: first the research on learning communities skewed to quantitative research and I sought to fill a research gap; second, that qualitative research is used "to obtain a more holistic impression of teaching and learning" (Fraenkel et al., 2015, p. 423). Early research on learning communities focused on NSSE data, as NSSE identified learning communities as a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008). Even studies that expanded past NSSE data still remained overwhelmingly quantitative. According to Ward and Commander (2011), "The majority of studies rely heavily on quantitative data, such as grade point average, retention figures, and graduation rates, to document effectiveness" (p. 64). This quantitative focus seemed limiting to me and failed to capture the full experience of students and faculty participating in learning communities.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, offered deeper insight into the inner mechanisms of learning communities, possibly even offering answers to questions of how and why learning communities function, or why they did not. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). Consequently, I opted for a qualitative study with inductive analysis of the data.

The emphasis on qualitative study led to my use of interviews and focus groups as the principle method of data collection. As Patton pointed out, "The purpose of interviewing, then is to allow us to enter the other person's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (p. 341). The interview design was crafted to be a naturalistic inquiry, in which "The phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally in that it has no predetermined course established by and for the researcher…. Observations take place in real-world settings and people are interviewed with open-ended questions in places and under conditions that are comfortable for and familiar to them" (Patton, 2002, p. 39). The result of this technique was a wealth of qualitative data, delivered through open-ended interviews in which the faculty felt at ease and responded to questions with candor.

Interviews are a standard research technique for qualitative research, offering opportunities for participants to share comments and observations regarding their opinions and observations on the program under study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "Interviewing is also the best technique to use when conducting intensive case studies of a few selected individuals" (p. 108). This was especially the case for studying the faculty, since the entire survey pool consisted of only 9 individuals. Using interviews, I kept the emphasis on the depth of information offered by participants, rather than a multitude of answers from a broader range of interviewees.

Focus groups were used for the students to put the participants at ease and to investigate the group dynamics of the program. As Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2015) commented, "The object [of a focus group] is to get at what people really think about an

issue or issues in a social context where the participants can hear the views of others and consider their own views accordingly" (p. 455). For both Group A and Group C, the students chatted comfortably with each other, expanding upon each other's ideas and commenting on points made by their peers. Again, the level of comfort among the participants led to a depth of information that illuminated the experience of the program and offered insight into the thoughts and perceptions of the student participants.

Finally, Group B was handled through follow-up interviews, as they failed to attend any of the focus groups and generally showed no interest in the study or the learning community program. As Ponsford and Masters (1998) noted, "Some members of the sampling frame may have already self-selected out of program participation, leading them to decline participation without comment. This, however, may still need to be explored" (p.6). Ironically, once I was able to reach some of the Group B students, they were comfortable in the interview and answered my questions with openness and candor.

Analysis Process

All interviews and focus groups were recorded via cellphone, and the recordings were then saved in my password-protected student One-Drive account. Interview and focus group recordings were first transcribed, while I took notes as to emerging themes and connecting concepts. These themes and concepts were then expanded and refined while transcribing later interviews and focus groups, providing a double-check to the emerging categories. As Patton (2002) summarized, "The strategy of inductive designs is to allow the important analysis dimensions to emerge from patterns found in the cases under study without presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be" (p.

56). Using these categories, which emerged from close study of the transcripts, I then coded the material according to these themes and concepts.

Coding

According to Patton (2002), "Content analysis…involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data. This essentially means analyzing the core content of the interviews…to determine what's significant" (p. 463). First, I began by slowly and carefully transcribing the tapes of all of my interviews. Once I had a full set of transcriptions, I began to compare early and late semester interviews and interviews from different groups. Through listening to the tapes and close reading of the transcripts, I identified five major themes among the faculty interviews, and seven major themes among the student focus groups and interviews.

Once I had identified major themes in both student and faculty interviews, I went back through the transcripts and pulled pertinent quotations that supported and illustrated each them. I copied and pasted these into a separate document, divided into student and faculty themes. Once I had assembled all the related material from the interviews, I was ready to further analyze and expand upon the individual themes.

Triangulation

One type of comparison, which is critical for the validity of qualitative analysis, is triangulation of sources and/or forms of data analysis. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "Triangulation using multiple sources of *data* means comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people" (p. 245). I designed this study with triangulation in

mind, as it compared multiple learning community groups of students and faculty and utilized a mixed methods approach to data analysis. As Patton (2002) explained, "The logic of triangulation is based on the premise that no single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival explanations. Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of data collection and analysis provide more grist for the research mill" (pp. 555-556).

Analysis occurs when the researcher asks questions of the data, both the same questions of multiple types of data and multiple questions of the same data. Soklaridis (2009) suggested the following questions while coding data: "Are there similarities/differences between transcripts? Are there similar ideas that cut across each of the transcripts? When are the ideas similar/different" (p. 729)? These differences were particularly acute because of the vast differences in experience between Group A and Group B. What had occurred to make them so different? Why did one group almost instantly begin to bond, and the other was characterized with indifference and resentment? The stark difference between the two groups also raised a further question: Were the groups, from the beginning, equivalent to each other?

According to Patton (2002), one particularly useful form of triangulation is "comparing the perspectives of people from different points of view, for example, in an evaluation, triangulating staff views, client views, funder views, and views expressed by people outside the program" (p. 559). In my study, I compared data from the faculty to data from the students, as well as comparing data from one group to another. Were the three student groups roughly comparable in terms of intellectual and academic ability? How were the faculty groups the same or different?

One significant difference between Group A and Group B was the amount of preparatory time spent before the beginning of the semester. Group A met several times over the course of the summer, and spent hours together comparing syllabi and deliberately constructing moments of connection and interaction among the three courses. Group B, in contrast, did not meet before the beginning of the semester and had fewer instances of interaction planned and executed among the individual courses.

Another form of triangulation, which was also recommended by Patton (2002), was "comparing for the consistency of what people say about the same thing over time" (p. 559). Again, I built comparison into the study in the form of follow-up interviews. All faculty members were interviewed in the middle of the semester, and then again towards the end. Faculty were even asked, "What has changed since the last time we talked? A) What has stayed the same? B) How and why?" (Appendix G, Q. 1). In general, follow-up interviews lead to a nostalgic mood and a tendency to reflect upon what had gone right and what had gone awry. Faculty were also encouraged to compare their learning community students to non-learning community students (Appendix G, Q. 4), and asked to reflect on whether the learning community had changed their professional practice in any way (Appendix G, Q. 8).

Because of low response from Group B, I was only able to collect follow-up interviews at the beginning of the next semester. However, both Group A and Group C were questioned in the middle of the semester and then again at the end. For Group C, as a subgroup of Group A, they were asked to reflect both upon changes in their experiences from one semester to the other, and from early in the semester to the end of the semester. To check for consistency in answers, Group A was asked several the same questions in

the second focus group as they were asked in the first (Appendix B, Qs. 2-4). Originally, these questions from Group A were meant to be repeated with a totally different group in the second semester. When students from Group A elected to continue their learning community experience in Group C, some changes in questionnaires were required. However, two questions from the first semester were repeated, for additional verification of consistency (Appendix D, Qs. 5-6). One of these questions was repeated one final time in the concluding focus group of the second semester (Appendix G, Q. 4). Responses to these questions were generally in agreement with previous answers, indicating a high level of credibility among the respondents.

Grounded Theory

The method of analysis used in this study was grounded theory, which begins with "*basic description*, moves to *conceptual ordering*…and then *theorizing*" (Patton, 2002, p. 490). As Charmaz (2015) summarized, "Coding generates ideas to explore and expand. Grounded theorists derive their ideas from specific codes or a tentative category that their codes indicate" (p. 1617). Basic concepts emerge from the original data during the transcription process and then are sharpened during coding. Further concepts and higher theory come from comparing the data from multiple sources, to see what emerges organically from the data when viewed from different perspectives.

Comparison is a key aspect of grounded theory, as explained by Linguard, Albert, and Levinson (2008): "The central principle of data analysis in grounded theory research is constant comparison. As issues of interest are noted in the data, they are compared with other examples for similarities and differences" (p. 459). Constant comparison yields analytical categories, which in turn generate theory. Yet theory can only emerge when

the researcher remains open to suggestions from the data. As Walsh et al. (2015) argued, "The principle of emergence necessitates that the researcher remains open to what is discovered empirically in the area under study, free of preconceived ideas based on personal or professional research interests or theoretical frameworks drawn from extant theory" (p. 586). Again, my training in pastoral counseling stood me in good stead, because I focused on non-judgmental listening and remained open to the ebb and flow of conversation in both interviews and focus groups.

Grounded theory is a process of transcription and close listening by which a researcher can generate theoretical categories in which the data are then grouped, ultimately yielding emerging theory. The phrase grounded theory, as Walsh et al. (2015) pointed out,

> itself leads to misunderstanding. It describes at the same time both the research process and the end result—namely, a new theory that is empirically grounded in data. …the purpose of this process is to identify a 'core' category that also emerges from the researcher's data as explaining this main concern" (p. 582).

Or, as Linguard, Albert and Levinson (2008) explained, "Its main thrust is to generate theories regarding social phenomena: that is, to develop higher level understanding that is 'grounded' in, or derived from, a systematic analysis of data" (459).

For this study, I followed the process described by Soklaridis (2009), in which a "story" evolved from coding the data, and then "three themes emerged: (a) the organizational structure…(macro level), (b) communication and day-to-day interactions . . . (meso level), and (c) personal/professional attitudes and knowledge…(micro level)"

(p. 730-1). In my case, the micro level was represented by the social interactions and bonding experiences of both students and faculty. Even for Group B, the faculty admitted that they had observed new teaching techniques from their peers, and that their professional practice had changed as a result. Students expressed regret that they had not bonded as a group, but still found value in the individual classes and, to some extent, the experience.

The meso level, or "communications and day-to-day interactions" (Soklaridis, 2009), p. 730), were described at length by both students and faculty. Students supported each other through in-person study groups and social media support in suggestions for assignments and encouraging messaging. Faculty members interacted through advanced planning and extensive follow-up through the meetings, emails, and brief exchanges in the hallway. Interactions also occurred between students and faculty, both in the classroom and through individual meetings both after class and in faculty office hours.

On the macro level, the organization structure was represented by the intentional design crafted by the faculty before and during the semester, and lived through the experiences of the students. Group A in particular was distinguished by the intensive effort that the faculty displayed in preparation before the semester and in their interactions throughout the semester. Group B demonstrated a general lack of preparation before the semester, but the structure of the interrelated courses was maintained through emails and planned joint discussions organized during the semester. Group C faculty coordinated before the semester and also benefited from the camaraderie established among the students in the earlier semester. Joint events that united the students and faculty were planned at intervals during the semester.

Conclusion

Data for this study was were primarily qualitative, collected through focus groups and follow-up interviews with students and one-on-one interviews with faculty. Interviews and focus groups were scheduled toward the beginning and end of each semester, so that participants could reflect upon their progress in the communities and preliminary answers could be compared with end-of-the semester conclusions from students and faculty.

Students in Groups A and C were happy to engage with their coursework, interactions with faculty, and with this research project. Students in Group B were withdrawn and reluctant to engage in their learning community or this research. Eventually, I was able to collect data on Group B through follow-up interviews during the second semester, when students were more willing to reflect upon their shared experience. Students in Groups A and B were placed in the learning communities as part of the regular incoming, first-year student registration process. Group C self-selected as a subgroup of Group A, as some students wished to continue the learning community experience in the second semester.

Faculty members from all three groups were happy to meet with me and discuss their pedagogy and their engagement with their students and their peer faculty. Faculty were drawn from three schools within the university, and represented a broad range of training and experience. All of the faculty who participated were volunteers and were among the original organizers of the pilot project. However, some peer groups were close friends before the start of the project, which may be reflected in the ease with which they interacted as pedagogical partners.

I then coded qualitative data using close listening and close reading of transcriptions, through which I identified major themes. These themes were then analyzed using grounded theory, on the micro-level (social interactions and bonding experiences), meso-level (day-to-day interactions), and macro-level (organizational structure). Triangulation, which helps to validate the study, was built into the study through the comparison of different learning communities, comparison between student and faculty experiences, and comparisons between data gathered early in the semester vs. data gathered at the end of the semester. Through the broad variety of data gathered over the course of an academic year, a fuller picture of first-year learning communities emerged, yielding further insight into the high-impact practice and informing future program design.

Chapter Four: Analysis

Introduction

By using both quantitative and qualitative data analysis, I have contributed further understanding of the learning communities in this study and that of learning community experience in general. Quantitative analysis focused on issues of equity between Groups A and B, with additional information and insight offered by data from Group C. At issue was whether the groups were roughly equivalent before, during, and after the learning community experience. Quantitative data were gathered from high school GPA and ACT scores, and from the engagement question on the student evaluation surveys routinely administered at the end of all courses at the private, Midwestern university.

Qualitative analysis was based on interviews with faculty and focus groups with student participants of the learning communities. Questions ranged from how the individuals joined the learning community project, to fostering integrative learning, to whether or not the learning community worked for students and faculty as a method of teaching and learning. In-depth analysis yielded further qualitative data, which were then divided, using grounded theory, into major themes and concepts.

Quantitative Analysis

Because of the different rates of social bonding and engagement between Group A and Group B, the question inevitably arose as to whether the groups were comparable at the beginning of the project. This point was even raised by one of the faculty members in Group B: “I wonder if this is a reflection that undecideds generally have a really poor track record in terms of retention and graduation rates. I’d like to compare their ACT scores with the others who are doing better” This seemed to me to be a valid question, so

while I was amending my institutional review board request to include follow-up interviews for Group B, I included a request that I could examine the high school grade point averages and ACT scores for both groups of students. Consequently, I requested grade point average and ACT scores from the Office in Institutional Research. These data allowed me to test whether or not there was a profound difference between the two groups before the beginning of the pilot project.

Null hypothesis 1: There is a difference between the high school GPAs of Groups A and B.

I conducted a *t*-test for difference of two means to see if the students in Group A had higher high school GPAs than the students in Group B. A preliminary test of variances revealed that the variances were equal. The analysis revealed that the GPA scores for Group A students (M = 3.22, SD = 0.37) were not significantly higher than those of the group B students (M = 3.26, SD = 0.40); $t(19) = -0.23$, $p = .823$. I therefore failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the group A students did not have higher GPAs than the group B students.

Null hypothesis 2: There is a difference between the average ACT scores of students in Groups A and B.

I conducted a *t*-test for difference of two means to see if the students in Group A had higher ACT scores than the students in Group B. A preliminary test of variances revealed that the variances were equal. The analysis revealed that the average ACT scores for group A students (M =23.2, SD = 2.02) were not significantly higher than those of Group B students (M = 22.16, SD = 3.65); $t(17) = 0.779$, $p = .458$. I therefore failed to

reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the group A students did not have higher ACT scores than the group B students.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no difference in the student evaluation scores for Q4 between faculty in groups A. B, and C.

I conducted an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to determine whether or not the student evaluation scores for Q4, which measured student engagement for the courses, for the three groups were equal. The analysis revealed no difference between the means of the three groups. I failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the evaluation scores for Q4s were the same for all three groups.

Table 1

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	0.8622995	2	0.4311	1.165	0.3206	3.191
Within Groups	17.765152	48	0.37011			
Total	18.627451	50				

Null Hypothesis 4: GPAs for Group A would not be different in the semester following the learning community.

For Group A, I ran a dependent sample *t*-test for difference in means to see if the GPA scores were different in the semester following the learning community. The results showed that the increases in scores (M = -0.13, SD = 0.77) were not significant; $t(9) = -0.532$, $p = .3482$. I failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the GPAs were not different in the semester following the learning community.

Null Hypothesis 5. GPAs for Group B would not be different in the semester following the learning community.

For Group B, I ran a dependent sample *t*-test for difference in means to see if the GPA scores were different in the semester following the learning community. The results showed that the increases in scores (M = -0.42, SD = 0.41) were significant; $t(9) = -3.246$, $p = 0.0101$. I rejected the null hypothesis and concluded that the GPAs significantly decreased in the semester following the learning community.

Null Hypothesis 6: The retention rates for Groups A and B will be the same for the Spring 2018 semester.

I conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if the retention rates for Groups A and B were different for the Spring 2018 semester. The analysis revealed that the retention rate of students enrolled in Group A (n = 12, 91.7%) was not significantly different from that of Group B (n = 13, 84.6. %); $z = 0.546$, $p = .0585$. I failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates of the two groups were the same.

Null Hypothesis 7: The retention rates for Groups A and B will be the same for the Fall 2018 semester.

I conducted a two-sample test for difference of proportions to determine if the retention rates for Groups A and B were different for the Fall 2018 semester. The analysis revealed that the retention rate of students enrolled in Group A (n = 12, 83.3%) was not significantly different from that of Group B (n = 13, 46.2. %); $z = 1.931$, $p = .0535$. I failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rates for the two groups were the same. Nevertheless, the marked difference between Group A's 83.3%

and Group B's 46.2% retention rate indicates Group A did make a profound difference in the retention of its students, even if the small numbers meant that the difference was not statistically significant.

Qualitative Analysis

From the start, this study was envisioned as primarily qualitative in nature. Therefore, research focused on interviews and focus groups of both the student and faculty members involved in the learning community (LC) initiative. As stated above, the purpose of this study was to investigate how students and faculty experienced their participation in a learning community pilot project housed in the School of Humanities of a private, Midwestern university. I wanted to know why students and faculty would engage in learning communities. How do students and faculty perceive their engagement? Do they find learning communities to be academically helpful or socially engaging? Do the learning communities yield any positive results? In short, I wanted to know how it felt to be a participant in a learning community, and if the participants felt that the experience had value for them.

Focus groups and interviews generated data on a number of topics, but through close listening, transcription, and coding, I identified several major themes. For the students, these themes were: community and bonding, integrative learning, participation and impact, and academic achievement. All the student answered questions with a high degree of candor and were explicit in their interests and opinions. Even Group B, which generally did not show much interest in engaging with the learning community or the study, proved to be forthcoming when asked their genuine opinions on the theories and practices that had gone into the design and execution of the learning communities.

For faculty, the challenges of designing and piloting the learning communities brought up different but equally interesting issues. Though no faculty member was directly asked why they joined a learning community, this developed as a major theme in faculty interviews. Other themes found in the interviews included: expectations vs. experience, faculty community learning, preparation and sustaining the partnership, and encouraging engagement. Again, I felt that my prior relationships with most of the participating faculty lead to surprising levels of honesty and outspokenness. All nine faculty members involved in the pilot project also participated in the study, and answers to interview questions were straightforward and forthcoming.

Students Theme I: Community and Bonding

Social bonding is an important aspect for learning communities in general, and the growing sense of community developed as a major theme in discussions with both Group A and Group C. This theme mapped, for the students, to Research Question 2: How do the learning communities function (socially, professionally, and academically) for students and faculty? Students felt themselves drawn into a caring community of students and faculty, which aided them in their adjustment to new living and learning situations.

One student in Group A commented, “my roommate sits in a room all day and does nothing. And that’s because she says she doesn’t talk to people in her classes…. If I didn’t have people to talk to, I would just drop out.” Another student expressed wholehearted agreement: “I am not on a sports team and I do not live on campus…. I honestly feel, if I were not in this community, I would go through depression.” For both students, social bonding through the learning community went beyond simply forming

friendships with fellow students and became a sustaining aspect of their wellbeing and social welfare.

The transformative impact of community also helped students adjust to college life and the wide range of new ideas with which they were bombarded in their first semester. One student reported, "I come from a very small town and a very sheltered family life. Community learning helped me adjust to all of the diversity I was being hit with. It made me so much easier with adjusting." Because of community support, students felt enabled to accept new concepts and more easily adapt to the college life. One student commented, "we've bonded more—we're closer. We can actually goof around with each other, because we know each other." Another student agreed: "We're like a family now."

Group B, on the other hand, reported that they struggled with community building, even though they were together for the majority of their college classes. One student noted, "it was sort of a mixed bag, because some of the people wanted to be there, and some didn't." Another spoke of the bonding from playing sports on a team, but did not experience the same camaraderie with fellow students in the learning community. A third student even reported prior acquaintanceship from high school with members of the learning community, but still did not spend significant amounts of time outside of class with them or other members of the community.

Some members of Group B expressed regret that the learning community did not lead to increased bonding among the members. One student commented, "As far as participation goes, I think that's a key role in this. There are four or five people who already knew each other because they went to the same high school, but they still didn't

talk to each other." Another student pointed out overall confusion as to the purpose of the learning community: "We don't think the learning community things work for this class…. Unclear goal: was it supposed to make [the students] closer to each other? Or to be able to connect all of the subjects together?"

Follow-up interviews for Group B meant that students could look back upon the experience with regret. One student noted that he made friends in the second semester because he had a class which encouraged interactions among students. Another student commented that he had made friends as part of the learning community, but that they transferred for the second semester. Lack of social bonding may have had a negative effect upon retention for the students in Group B.

Group C, which was a subset of Group A who elected to continue the learning community experience, felt that the social bonding only continued to grow stronger in the second semester. Students particularly noted that their confidence in encountering new ideas and sharing their ideas with each other. One student remarked, "I'm comfortable saying anything around these people because the community we've created." Another student expanded this idea: "We actually engage with each other…. The whole purpose is to get involved and create some kind of a relationship with everybody." Still another student explained, "[because of] our smaller numbers, we get to interact more and contribute more." Everyone in the learning community seemed to see progress in their own worldview and felt comfortable exploring new ideas with their peers.

Students in Group C also expected these relationships to last into the next year and beyond. One student asserted confidently, "In the next year, we'll still talk to each other. I get that feeling, and it's a good feeling." Another student agreed, "I want to keep

these friendships together. That's what I'm going to be bringing with me into next year." Social bonding was no longer merely for the sake of interacting within the community. Students were inspired to retain their friendships and the relationships which they had built within the community, taking them forward into the rest of their college experience.

Students Theme II: Integrative Learning

Students in Group A were highly aware of the interactive relationship between the disciplines which constituted their learning community. Generally, they were thankful for the integrative nature of the learning community, which they saw as enlightening, broadening their worldview and informing their perceptions well outside the classroom. This theme answers Research Question 3: How do students and faculty perceive their experiences in the learning communities? In particular, do they see integrative learning? Overlapping and interacting subject matters, taught by faculty who closely interacted on a social and professional level, lead to a high level of integrative learning for Groups A and C.

One Group A student remarked, "Going into this community learning, it has broadened my horizons about how big the …topic is and how it applies to so much." Another student confirmed, "I think the community has broadened me." One more student commented, "One thing that I've learned from class is that it's necessary, for human interaction, for us to categorize…. I can't help but see what I've learned. This class is making me more open-minded." The broadening perspective of integrative learning was embraced and celebrated in the community.

Integrative learning was also seen as furthering student success in the learning community. One Group A student noted, "The fact that all of these classes intertwine

around the same concept makes it a whole lot easier to remember stuff we learn, and apply it to the real world." Another student concurred, "Assignments in general are easier, because our assignments in one class blur over into another." Only one student expressed any negative feelings toward the integrative experience: "I almost hated it, because I'd be walking down the street and I'd see someone wearing something and I would think, 'Huh, you know why that is? It's because of this'…. It made me so angry at myself." But even that experience was seen as beneficial, since it led to a broader perspective and a wider worldview.

The faculty of Group B did not intentionally overlap their courses as much as Group A or Group C, but they planned several joint classes in which they debated various aspects of the same text and invited more senior students from other classes to join the class and model interactive discussion for the first-year students. Group B students remember these discussion classes as the highlights of their experiences in the learning community. One student remarked, "There were two or three times when we were all together. And we talked over things and it all worked out." A little later, the same student expanded upon his recollection, "There were [a few] instances where all three teachers would meet for a combined class, where you could see the connections between the three classes…. Those were the times when I felt like what they wanted to accomplish, they accomplished the best." Another student agreed, "We think how the joint discussions, that's how class should be all the time." Interactive experiences between students and the various disciplines did occur with this group, but in general they regretted that integrative learning did not happen for them more often.

Group C continued to see integrative learning as an important aspect of the learning community, although the newness of the experience began to pall for some of them. One student commented, "Having the theme helps, but can also be very repetitive…. It's from different perspectives, of course, but I feel it's still repetitive. But it helped me learn that [the theme] is everywhere." However, the transformative nature of integrative learning for broadening perspectives was still a powerful experience. One student was amazed at how much the learning community could expand a worldview: "I was really shook [by new, diverse perspectives]. The learning community] has totally changed my [world] view." Another student expanded upon this idea, "I can see [my classmates] seeing things from different perspectives…. I think I should see things from different angles, and then come to an understanding."

Like Group A, Group C found the integrative experience coloring their perspective outside of the classroom and even beyond the academic experience. One student noted, "The idea that everything collectively comes together, and you can use what you learn [in other places]."]." Another student found that the broadened perspective led to a deepening relationship with the faculty of the learning community: "I talk to [the faculty] about something that's not [the core subject], but something in the real world."," However, a broadened perspective is still based upon a willingness to interact and integrate ideas. One student concluded, "You have to be willing to cooperate, not just with each other, but with the teachers, and with the material you learn in class. Be willing to take it, whatever it is, and mix it together." Having already experienced a learning community in the first semester, Group C may have been more open to integrative learning and may have dealt well with the plurality of experiences

which they expressed to each other because they had developed trust and understanding amongst themselves.

Students Theme III: Why Are We in Community Learning?

Several questions emerged from the student interviews as they discussed participation in and the impact of the learning community experience. Frequently, the students wondered how and why they were selected to be part of the learning community pilot project. This led to their next question, which was what they were doing or how was the learning community working for them. This theme also connects to Research Question 2: How do the learning communities function (socially, professionally, academically) for students and faculty? Students were aware that their participation had an impact on their ability to study, socialize, and learn.

In general, students praised the cooperative nature of the learning community, and felt that it added to their first-year experience. Even Group B expressed some approval of the courses and the faculty, although they wished for more of a community bonding experience.

Building on the discussion of why these students were selected for the learning community experience was a related question of how the learning community was articulated or explained to them by the faculty. In part, this was a discussion of how and why general education courses worked for them in the broader context of a liberal arts curriculum. However, for the learning community students, this also became a discussion of how community learning would affect their overall learning and boost social interactions and academic success.

Finally, Groups A and C attributed much of their success in forming community and bonding socially to the simple fact that they connected via social media as well as in their classrooms. Group A spontaneously formed a Snapchat group which allowed them to form study groups and appeal to each other for help, social support, and academic assistance. Group C, as a subset of Group A, continued to use the same Snapchat, which continued to assist them in social bonding and academic support. Group B lacked this method of social bonding and failed to connect to each other as a group or even as individuals.

A number of Group A students expressed surprise that they were placed in a learning community, although most of them enjoyed the experience once they found themselves there. One student mentioned, "I didn't even know I was in it until the first day." Another student agreed, "Yeah, I have no idea how I got there. I didn't even get to pick my classes. So, I just kind of showed up and was like, 'Here I am'." Yet another student expressed some anxiety over initially discovering the learning community: "I thought there was some expectation, and I didn't want to disappoint, if there was something, I didn't know I was supposed to do." Faculty members were reassuring on this point, and students agreed to participate in the pilot project.

Group A students also praised the program and expressed their gratitude for being placed in it. One student was effusive on the subject: "I feel like this class is a blessing for me. It literally is a community. Now that I know this is possible, I want to do it again." Another student agreed, "I finally have people to talk to about the subjects I like." No one in Group A expressed any displeasure regarding their membership in the

community, although students who did not participate in the focus groups may have had reservations.

Students in Group B were generally in favor of the general education courses which made up the learning community, although they admitted that they experienced less of the social bonding which usually characterized learning communities. One student commented, "I'm glad that I took those classes, I think it was a good experience. But I'm not sure, just the fact that it was a learning community helped." However, another student noted metacognition from the experience: "I'm more self-conscious about how I'm learning and what I'm learning." One more student remarked, "I learned a lot about myself…. I learned to think logically." Mixed feelings were common for Group B, but they agreed that the learning community furthered their educational goals.

On the other hand, Group B felt that the communal learning aspects of the experience were not as available for them. One student was apathetic about the learning community: "The community in general, I didn't feel any way towards it. I didn't like it any more than my other classes." Another Group B student expressed regret that the community did not come together as a community, "After they explained it, I sort of expected that it would be more connected than it turned out to be. There were times when things we learned in one class helped in another class, but for the most part it felt like they were three different classes." This sentiment was reiterated by a third student in Group B: "The teachers were a good way to transition from high school to college. I don't know how much the community itself helped, as opposed to just the teachers." Group B regretted that the experience was not more transformative for them and for the classes which made up the project, but in general they did not regret taking part in the

pilot. One student noted wistfully, "I think it's a good opportunity, if everyone wants to be there, and if everyone is willing to put in the work." For all of Group B, there was a sense of opportunity lost, as if something had slipped just beyond their reach.

In contrast, Group C was deeply thankful to be part of the community learning project, even beyond their experiences in the first semester with Group A. Social support was a critical element of the experience, with one student commenting, "It just helps so much sitting down with somebody [when struggling with the subject]."]." Another student concurred, "This semester has been [personally] rough, and if I didn't have this group…I would probably have dropped out."." One more student summarized, "If you don't talk to each other, it's just going to be hell." Academically, several of the students struggled, but they found that the community helped them to weather the storm.

Student Theme IV: What Are We Doing?

Students in the learning communities also expressed a lively curiosity for how their participation functioned in the project. What were they doing and how were they impacting the learning community and, more importantly, how did the learning community impact their learning and college experience? One Group A student commented, "it helped me learn better cooperation with people and teamwork, because I'm usually not a team person." Another student praised the interactions between the three classes and how that fostered learning: "The fact that all of these classes intertwine around the same concept makes it a whole lot easier to remember the stuff we learn, and to apply it to the real world." Yet another student focused on the social support aspect of the community:

> It's really good, as a freshman, to have this learning community, because it stops you from getting overwhelmed. You have all these different things for all your different classes, but none of your professors know each other, so they don't know that they've all given you tests for the same week. Being in the community helps from that perspective, but also you have people to lean on when you do start feeling overwhelmed.

Group A saw the experience as a positive force in their learning process. As one student concluded, "It makes it easier to want to go to class. And you're motivated by your other community peers." For Group A, participation was a two-way street; their contributions to the community were paid back in the sense of camaraderie which they experienced, which in turn boosted academic achievement.

Some students in Group B saw the courses in a positive light, but were unsure of their role in the community or its overall impact in their learning. One student commented, "I'm glad that I took those classes, I think it was a good experience. But I'm not sure that the fact that it was a learning community helped." Another Group B peer was more slightly disapproving of the process which placed students in the learning community: "I think that people should want to be placed in a learning community. I was just placed in it. I didn't really know that I was going to be in it, but I was supportive of it because it sounded like a cool idea."

Group C, as the only group which self-selected a community, was highly aware of the impact of the community them and even upon their faculty. One student pointed out, "It's better for us personally [to be in a community that we selected] because we get to be more engaged. We actually want to engage in the subject and build relationships with

our teachers." Prior knowledge of their peer students and of community life were also identified by the students. One student commented, "We know each other's personalities and we're more comfortable together." The comfort level in the community was also seen as furthering their goals: "[It] helped me be more open to people, and I have a chance to have people be more open to me." As with Group A, the impact is seen as going both ways: the students build the community, and then the community helps them shape the experience for themselves and for others.

Students in the Group C community also noted that a partnership had built up among the faculty, and how that impacted both instruction techniques and the broadening of ideas among students and faculty. One student noted, "Teachers understand what you're going through, because they talk to the other teachers." Community building was seen as impacting all participants, both students and faculty, and benefiting the overall learning process. Another student focused on the differences between faculty, although they were still able to work as a team: "You get all three professors in the same room, and they all come with a different angle." Differences were praised because they broadened the teaching experience and ultimately had a positive impact upon the community.

Student Theme V: Explanation/Articulation of Purpose

When and how participation in the learning community was explained to the students was another persistent theme for all three groups of students. Interestingly, I did not ask Group A or Group C how or whether the learning community was explained to them, although I did ask Group A if they had chosen the learning community (Appendix A, Q. 1), and Group C was asked what it was like to be in a learning community which

they had chosen for themselves (Appendix D, Q. 1). Faculty members for Group B suggested that some students felt resentment for being placed in the learning community, so I asked the students how they learned that they were in a learning community and how it was explained to them (Appendix C, Q. 1).

Group A participants were ruefully amused that they were in an experimental pilot project. One student noted, "Yeah, they told us that we would kind of see if this would work for other people." Another student quickly added, "Yeah, we're the guinea pigs." A third student then pitched in, "And it's working." General approval of the pilot project soon followed. "Yeah, I want to do the learning community next semester," said one student. "Yeah, half my class is going to be in the community learning again in the Spring," replied another student. In fact, both Group A and Group C felt that knowing about the learning community was immaterial to the project. They enjoyed the experience and thought that other students should likewise be added to the courses without prior consent to the project.

Group B acknowledged that they were well informed regarding the project, at least once it was started and they were part of it. One student explained, "I was just told that it was three classes that would connect across the course of the semester…. I was good with it." Another student agreed with the first, "The first day of class, they talked about it…They said it was a new thing they were trying, to try to get students acclimated to college, the same group of students were in three classes which were sort of on the same topic." A third student expanded upon this, "[It was explained to us] that the course materials would overlap, and we would meet four or five times altogether…. I was OK with it—I didn't see any particular issue." Group B students showed hesitation in

engaging with the learning community, but they themselves confirmed that they were given all the facts about the project.

Group B faculty were evidently also expansive on the need for general education (GE) courses. One student noted, "[They explained that GE courses] were to create well-rounded students. [One LC instructor] mentioned that employers were noticing that even college graduates were not very good at reading and writing, and that was the importance of having humanities and general education." Another student agreed on this principle, "There was a lot of philosophy behind general education and explaining why learning was important…. It was driven in us in class that you get what you put in. It was up to us to decide how to pursue our education, but I think a number of them didn't take advantage of that." Again, Group B was aware that they had missed out on a fuller experience in the learning community project.

Group C expanded upon the idea that they favored being assigned to the learning community before fully understanding the pilot project. One student commented, "I think that you should randomly put people in it, until it's a known thing. I would not have known about this if I wasn't in it. And if I wasn't in it [last semester], then I probably wouldn't be in it now." This idea was reiterated by another student in the next focus group, "[The learning community] definitely helped me, and I don't know that I would have chosen it for myself." For this group of students, engagement occurred before fully understanding the project, so they advocated placing students into the learning communities whether or not they had chosen one.

Group C reiterated that the learning community helped them build social bonds and academic achievement. One student noted, "The smaller group makes people join [in

the conversation].”].” Another student spoke more generally about the project, “It seems like an obvious thing—it’s only going to help you. Why not take advantage of it?” It was unfortunate that Group B students did not attend the focus groups, because this would have been a very interesting topic of discussion to pursue with them in concert.

Student Theme VI: Social Media

One major difference between learning communities was the role of social media in the social bonding process. Group A spontaneously formed a Snapchat group on the first day, which they utilized to contact and bond with each other for organizing study groups and encouraging struggling members of the group. Group C, as a subgroup of Group A, was able to utilize the same Snapchat group for similar purposes. Group B, in spite of suggestions by the faculty, never exchanged phone numbers or formed any kind of group on social media.

For Group A and Group C, however, social media was an inherent part of the learning community endeavor and they were happy to talk about it. One student described organizing the Snapchat group: “I was not going to go into this without a group chat. It was the second day hit, and I just turned to everyone and said, ‘What are your Snapchats? We’re going to get this done.’ We organized it, and it was such a blessing.” Another student clarified, “It’s much easier to Snapchat someone than it is to email someone. And the person you email, a professor, probably won’t give you the answer that you want. So, you text your people instead.” A third student added, “And, because we’re Millennials, everyone is on their phone, so they answer really quickly. Unlike professors.” Social media became a core facet of the learning community group, not just to connect socially but also to offer academic support.

According to the Group A students, academic support soon yielded academic success. One student explained,

> Every time there's an assignment, since we all made a group chat to help each other out more—I have over 100s in most of my classes. I don't know how it happened. They'll randomly text me, 'Are you doing something now? OK, then go do this extra credit thing with me for 30 minutes.' And I'll get extra credit. So, we all help each other out. I'm super thankful.

Other students agreed that the Snapchat had been very instrumental in their current academic success. One student commented, "I don't think we'd be doing as well if we didn't have a group chat." Still another student concurred, "One of the most important things was the group chat."

Group C students reiterated the importance of social media as a support to social bonding and academic success. One student repeated her experience from the first learning community: "For our first [learning community], I just immediately stood up and said, 'We're all getting a group Snapchat. Thanks!" Another student was inspired to repeat the group chat practice with another class: "In a [non-LC class], we started a group-chat, and that's got me meeting new people." Social media served as an important bonding mechanism both within and outside of the learning community experience.

Students Theme VII: Academic Achievement

Another topic which emerged in the interviews and focus groups was the increased success that the students experienced through participation in the learning community. This theme connects back to Research Question 1: Do the learning

communities boost engagement and retention? Academic success is generally thought to be increased by engagement, and academic achievement in turn increases retention. Only Group B, which was significantly lacking in engagement, had students drop out of the program or earn absent fails (AF) for chronic lack of attendance. Students in Group A and C specifically attributed their academic success to their engagement in the course work and social engagement with students and faculty.

Group A reported increased academic success, sometimes much to their surprise or the disbelief in their parents. One student gave direct credit to the learning community for their academic achievement: "It's crazy how my grades are so different. In a good way—in my community learning classes. In my other classes, they're not." A second student reported, "Community learning made me feel a lot better about college. My dad was really worried about me, just because of the kind of student I am. He called me today and he was crying because he saw my grades and he was really happy. He didn't think I would be doing this well." Other students concurred that their grades and general academic success had also been improved by participation in the learning community.

Dependence on their peers in the learning community was identified by Group A as the primary mechanism by which study habits had improved, boosting their overall success. One student commented, "I realize that learning community is good for me, because I can use these people to help me study for finals. In my other classes, I don't talk to anybody, so I don't think I would ask anybody to study with me." Another student agreed, "Study-wise, it really helps that we have the community to lean on, because I'm not a good test taker and I never really studied, so this has pushed me to start studying." Another student added jovially, "I try to make friends with the smart people

in the class. So, if I do have an issue, they usually know. They are a reliable source." Community bonding was a key component in success, which the students were happy to confirm.

Group B also reported some academic success, although they did not attribute it to participation in the learning community. One student praised the results of his general education courses in the learning community: "It's taught me how to analyze an argument and writing—how to form it." Another student also praised the general education received at the university: "When you say that you come from a certain institution, people know it means more than adding a few numbers together." However, none of the students in Group B spoke of the social bonding and receiving academic support from their student peers.

Group C repeated their praise of the learning community in general and their surprise at the concomitant academic success. One student burst out, "I'm getting an A in [X subject] and I'm really surprised." A second student contrasted this success with their original expectations for college, "I'm super-glad I'm in this, because otherwise I'd be failing all my classes." A third student exclaimed, "I got on the Dean's List!" For most of the students, academic success came as an unanticipated bonus to the overall positive experience of participating in a learning community.

Again, students in Group C connected their academic success to the close bonding which occurred in the learning community. One student explained, "If you want your parents to be impressed with your grades, take [the learning community]."]." Another student agreed, "[Being in a learning community] helped me both socially and academically…. It made the whole first year easier and more comfortable." The evidence

again confirmed that Social bonding was the mechanism behind academic achievement in the learning community.

Faculty Theme I: Why Teach in a Learning Community

I gained faculty perspectives by individual interviews with all three faculty members in each of the three learning communities. One question which I never asked directly but emerged as a theme in faculty discussions was - why teach in a learning community? This theme connects to Research Hypothesis 2: Faculty participation in learning communities will increase: engagement and professional satisfaction. All three groups of faculty listed greater connection and engagement with their faculty partners, socially and professionally, to be a compelling reason for why they decided to teach in a learning community. These partnerships lead to greater professional satisfaction with teaching and innovative pedagogy inspired by their faculty partners.

For Group A, a primary motivating factor was bonding with faculty colleagues through the learning community preparation and teaching experience. One faculty member commented, “I was interested in working with my colleagues, because they’re amazing, interesting people. I was hoping to share with them, gain insights from them.” One of the peer faculty noted, “Being a professor can be isolating…. There’s not a lot of opportunity for collaboration. But I really enjoy that. I want more interdepartmental and inter-school cooperation.” Enthusiasm for partnership was a key aspect of Group A, which showed clearly from the very beginning.

The faculty intended to boost integrative learning by encouraging the students to working in community. One of the leading organizers for the project reflected, “I really liked the idea of a place where freshmen can create a community. It happens here…but if

a community is around an academic experience, it will be interesting to see what happens." Other faculty peers spoke more explicitly about the integrative nature of the endeavor. One faculty member noted, "increasing the interdisciplinary understanding of students [was what] interested me most." Another colleague agreed, "I want the students to have that insight—that moment when they realize all of this is connected. I think we have to work together to bring them to that incredible discovery." Partnership to produce interdisciplinary and integrative learning was a core concept for Group A.

Faculty from Group B likewise emphasized community and interdisciplinary learning. One faculty member explained, "I thought that the real strength was that you look at the same thing from different perspectives…. I'm not naïve enough to think that it was going to revolutionize anything…but this was something that would [make critical thinking] happen." Another faculty peer noted, "The freshman learning communities are theoretically a great way for them to build community and retention, starting off by putting them in contact with a cohort, that they can move up through their classes with." The third member of the group confirmed the dedication to community: "I love the idea. The other schools I've been at have this…. Develops a nice communal ethos." Group B faculty felt that the community building of their group never quite came together, but they formed the cohort with the intention that community would follow.

Group C also focused in the interdisciplinary nature of the learning community project. One faculty member clarified, "the idea of having several different disciplines all approaching a theme in some form or another as a way to let students see disciplinary rigidity, but also how ideas can cross between them all at once, was interesting and something I wanted to try." A second faculty peer spoke of the benefits to the faculty: "I

was interested in doing a themed…class. Those are always more motivating and fun for the teacher, to try and do something a little bit different." Connection to the theme and encouraging cross-over to different disciplines was a major theme for Group C, which they found lead to increased interest by the students.

Closer connection to both students and faculty was also an important facet for Group C. One faculty member explained their motivation as wanting "to be able to work with other teachers, and to see how those fields all connect." Another faculty member highlighted their desire for greater relationship with students: "The opportunity to develop closer relationships with students, as they moved through a related set of material. It seemed like a great opportunity to be involved much more intensely in shaping their intellectual outlook." That closer connection among students and between students and faculty yielded a better learning environment for Group C. One faculty member pointed out, "They never have that look of 'I don't want to be here." Another faculty member agreed, "It's a smaller class, so you can do more interesting things." Because Group C students were a subset of Group A students, Group C faculty found that they benefited from the sense of community already established among the students.

Faculty Theme II: Expectations and Experience

For all the faculty in the learning community project, teaching in a learning community was a novel experience. In all cases, some expectations proved to be correct and some expectations had to be changed and adapted to emerging circumstances. This theme answers Research Question 3: How do students and faculty perceive their experience in the learning communities? Faculty openly admitted that not everything

went according to plan in the learning communities, although Groups A and C saw their communities as successful in fostering social and academic success.

How those expectations shaped the initial experience and how those expectations changed over time proved to be another major theme in the faculty interviews. Unlike the first theme, I addressed faculty expectations directly within the interviews. After asking about basic faculty background and how each member heard about the learning community, I asked, "What did you expect from the learning community experience when you first signed on? A) How much of that has proven to be correct." Both expectations and the resulting experiences varied widely among faculty, although a few key concepts emerged.

Initial Expectations

Expectations for Group A centered on community building for students and faculty. One faculty member explained, "I thought it would be an opportunity to work with other colleagues. I always enjoy that." Both faculty peers, however, focused on the community built by the students themselves. One faculty member noted, "I thought that we would have some good energy in the classroom and a lot of points where we would have shared activities." A second faculty member elaborated, "For [the students], I think it's worked. They've become very close with each other…. They seem a lot more comfortable with each other and a lot more open to each other." Again, community was a central concept for Group A throughout the pilot project.

Some Group A expectations, however, had to be quickly adapted for the circumstances of the learning community. Chief among these was the maturity level of the students involved, since the project focused on first-year students. One faculty

member commented, “Having all freshmen is a really different feel from our other survey courses.” A peer faculty member concurred, “The freshmen are very young, and I have to slow things down sometimes.” Another faculty member pointed out the lack of preparation for a learning community experienced by the students: “Some of these students didn’t know that they were going to be in a learning community. We just got really lucky that we ended with some motivated students who didn’t resent getting into a class that they didn’t necessarily pick.” Expected or not, the Group A community came together as a cohort and proved to be excellent subjects for the pilot project.

Group B generally expected more camaraderie from both students and faculty peers and found that they had to adjust expectations early on in the semester. One faculty member explained, “I was expecting [the students], even if it didn’t happen in the first month…that they would have started to socially engage more, and that doesn’t seem to be the case.” Another faculty member agreed, “I expected a lot more esprit de corps…. I was looking for larger classes and more of a mix [of students].”].” The third faculty peer acknowledged similar feelings, “It was [meant to be] an exposure to different epistemologies, and I had really hoped that it would develop exactly what it said—a community of learning.” At the same time, lack of community emerged among the faculty. One faculty member complained, “I was asking, at the beginning of the semester, if you want me to focus on something from your other classes…. I got no feedback. And that’s the big problem with this all, there was no feedback or interaction at all.” Lack of community was, unfortunately, the predominant theme for Group B, in stark contrast to both Group A and Group C.

Community building continued to be a theme among Group C faculty, as well as the students. One faculty member remarked, "I expected that I would be working closely with a couple of other instructors, that we'd develop a theme, figure out a couple of ways to connect our classes to each other." A faculty colleague emphasized the connection to the students, "Being able to be flexible and make connection to what's going on in their lives in the present day in a way that you wouldn't necessarily be able to, absent the kind of relationship you have developed in learning communities." The third faculty member expressed some trepidation as to whether the sense of community would emerge as expected: "If it were a random assortment of [instructors], who just happen to have sort of similar courses, it might not work. But if you have the right three, who are willing to work together…I would recommend it." Fortunately for Group C, the faculty did mesh well, which further encouraged the student community bonding.

Experience vs. Expectation

Overall, Group A expressed approval of the learning success which the faculty observed from the students, albeit with some setbacks. One faculty member commented, "The material that they're doing in the classroom, their comments and reactions, for the most part are pretty good…. They are such terrific kids, and most of them are above average." A faculty colleague agreed, "The learning community students seem to be more responsible than my other students. Their attendance is better. They seem to be doing the readings more and seem more excited about the material." The third colleague pointed to the social bonding as a support to student success, "The students have become really close to each other and they seem to have really great relationships with each

other." Students were not the only members of Group A who noticed the close correspondence between social bonding and academic success.

However, Group A still exhibited its share of problems. One faculty member observed, "The one thing that hasn't quite met my expectations yet is that I don't see the students putting it all together as much as I would like…. I think we need more shared assignments, shared activities, shared readings." First-year students continued to present extra problems to the instructors. One teacher noted, "[The students] did not come in with great study skills. One of the things that I've learned is that I need to provide more context." Continuous course redesign, required for a pilot project tailored to incoming students, also continued to take its toll. Another colleague opined, "If I have any reservations, it's that, to do it well requires a lot of time and a lot of preparation…. It's hard. It does take a lot of time and effort." Yet Group A faculty felt that the pilot project was a success and universally declared that they would repeat the experience in future semesters.

Group B faculty struggled with student engagement throughout the pilot project. When reflecting on how their experiences varied widely from their expectations, they focused on two aspects: the fact that all the students were freshmen, as opposed to other survey classes which usually have upperclassmen, and the fact that this cohort did not self-select to be in the learning community. One faculty member pointed out, "This is the first time that I can think of that there are only freshmen…. They're much more timid; they're still adjusting, and usually you have upperclassmen to elevate the discussion and build community." A faculty peer concurred, "I think the biggest weakness for this…is that they're all freshmen. While that's not a problem for me, it is a problem for the other

two…. If they have juniors and seniors in the class with freshmen, it pulls the discussion up." However, the initiators of the program, some of whom taught in the project, envisioned the learning communities as pilot projects for incoming, first-year students, and instructors should have accounted for first-year students in the course design.

Lack of choice was a recurring theme for Group B, in sharp contrast to the enthusiastic participation from Group A students. One Group B faculty member noted, "I tend to think that they resent being placed into [the community]. Because they're in a cluster, and I don't think they wanted to take all of them…. I don't think they really appreciated having to take all three of them." A faculty colleague agreed, "Initial expectations were, 'I can ignite anybody.'… [But, when] The students are there because they're forced to be there…. It is really difficult to pull them into the college ethos." A little later in the same interview, the faculty member opined, "I've never had two students in a class drop like this. I've had two of the students from the cluster just drop my class….And that just kills me…. That's been a huge blow to me." Especially for the second half of the semester, the lack of engagement severely impacted student and faculty morale.

More introspection lead the Group B faculty to further regret the lack of bonding among their students. One professor observed, "They didn't galvanize at the beginning of the term, and seek out…companionship and friendship in the class. And I still go back to [the faculty] saying quite bluntly that it's because we told them that they had to." One of their colleagues stated, "As far as the students were concerned, it was a failure." The third faculty peer concluded, "We put all of our eggs into the basket of the students having community…. When that got jerked out, we were like, 'Oh, God. What do we

do?' It was really all about the community." Like Group A, Group B realized that social bonding was necessary for engagement and academic success to occur.

Finally, the Group B faculty circled back to concerns about course design and the need for more partnership and integration among the courses to foster interdisciplinary learning. One faculty member mused, "I think we need to clearly articulate the goals as to what's the purpose of this course. I don't think we did that ourselves very well." One of their peers agreed, "Perhaps coming up with a more comprehensive game plan as to how things would work together…. Trying to see the overlap of how one would illustrate the other, I think we failed to do." Some success in interdisciplinary learning did come from joint discussion groups, where the faculty all met together and modeled dialogue between the disciplines. One faculty member recommended that group sessions should have been planned: "I would really recommend doing these joint discussions several times a semester. Where you come in and discuss the same piece from different perspectives." Sadly, these joint meetings did not lead to increased discussion within the individual classrooms. As one faculty member noted, "I cannot get [my students] to open up and speak." Difficulty in persuading students to engage in or out of class was a consistent theme for Group B.

Surprisingly, even though Group C consisted of second-semester freshmen, the youth and inexperience of the students was still an issue. One instructor noted, "Because they don't have a couple of juniors or seniors in the class, who really know how to do college…they're missing that perspective and that person who can pull up the level of discourse." Another peer noticed that teaching techniques had to be adapted for the freshmen: "It was a unique experience to have a class that was composed entirely of

freshmen…. You have to approach it with a different mindset…. The classroom dynamics were different. The way they wanted to engage the materials was different." As the first faculty member concluded, "There's a certain immaturity in the group, but I think it's because they're freshmen, not because of the learning community. Because they're not seeing the juniors and seniors, and what they're capable of doing." Faculty members felt that they had to adjust and adapt because of the relative youth of the students, but Group C found that the learning community still resulted in academic success.

Perhaps because of the immaturity of the students, Group C faculty found that they struggled to get truly integrative learning to happen, beyond the classroom as well as within the learning community. One faculty member commented, "So far, it has not been as easy to get that engagement level going in terms of making connections to their lives, and making any discernable impact on their way of viewing the world." Another colleague found the students lacking in content knowledge or the ability to apply that knowledge outside the classroom. However, they were more hopeful of the overall academic growth of the students: "I'm not sure if it's as good an experience for them in terms of specific knowledge…. In terms of the bigger picture,… I'm much more confident about this group than any other group that I've had." Another faculty member wondered if interdisciplinary learning could have been made more explicit: "I would have liked to have done more to make clear connections between our courses." Still, Group C faculty perceived their students as making significant strides in their learning, at least compared to those of other freshmen.

On the other hand, Group C faculty found that they were impressed with the level of commitment which the students brought to the coursework; something which they attributed to the choice of the second semester and the experience of the students in the first community. One faculty member noted, "[The students] are very comfortable with each other, so participation has been a breeze. These are some of the better discussions I've even had…. They started off ready to talk and it's just continued." A faculty peer pointed to the freedom that a small, engaged class gives to try new pedagogies: "I'm getting more ideas of how to approach these topics. When I have to present to a small group of very engaged students, it helps me to try and figure out issues of timing and focusing on individual students." A third colleague agreed on the ease of discussion which came with this learning community: "instead of spending time building a classroom community, that came front-loaded and it was more a case of figuring out how I was going to fit into those dynamics." All three faculty members acknowledged that their teaching was easier because it built upon the previous foundation of the Group A learning community.

Faculty Theme III: Faculty Community Learning

In addition to partnerships formed within the student community, all three faculty groups acknowledged some benefit to their own teaching styles from working in the learning community. This theme connected to Research Hypothesis 2: Faculty participation in learning communities will increase: engagement and professional satisfaction. All three sets of faculty members found an increased social and professional bond to their peer faculty, and found broadened and deepened insights into interdisciplinary discourse.

Group A faculty were very open to working in partnership, and their pedagogy reflected their partnership. One faculty member commented, "seeing the types of assignments that my colleagues use in their classes and hearing how they would approach a certain research topic has been helpful for getting ideas of how I might use new assignments or how I might approach a reading." However, new approaches to material had their own consequences to the preparation and delivery of the coursework. One professor noted, "I had to completely reconfigure how I was going to teach this class." Later, the same faculty member admitted that the same partnership had caused growth in their approach and viewpoint: "As colleagues, we all work in our little bubble and we mostly do our own thing. It's been interesting to see up close and first-hand how other people approach putting together their syllabus and their grading." Another peer member summarized, "If the whole mission is to form a community, one way to show community formation is to mirror that with your colleagues." Group A was particularly successful in demonstrating partnership among the faculty, which may in turn have inspired their students to increase social engagement.

Two faculty members in Group A chose to combine research assignments into one research paper and both of them jointly graded the assignment. This project led to them working very closely together, which again brought challenges and increased benefits. One faculty member remarked, "Working with [my colleague] on this joint paper was really hard, because we both have assignments that have worked well over the years. We both didn't want to change much…. That was really interesting." The faculty colleague responded, "What was interesting to me, doing the research project with my colleague, was pointing out to [the students] the materials from the other perspective."

The second faculty member went on to observe, “I included an interview with this class [a technique learned from the other discipline] and I’m going to do that again. It puts a human face on the subject. It was really helpful for my students.” Partnership with faculty colleagues lead to new innovations in teaching techniques, as well as closer social bonding among the faculty.

Group B likewise spoke of learning pedagogical techniques from their peer faculty. They spoke of observing each other’s courses and coming back inspired to their own classrooms. One faculty member was enthusiastic about sharing pedagogical practices: “Please, come and observe my class [and tell me what to do]. After seeing [my colleague] teach, I can understand [what attracts students to them].”].” Another faculty peer spoke with more uncertainty regarding incorporating new techniques: “You know, when you’re in in your classroom, that you’re responsible for encouraging a certain atmosphere of collegiality, interaction, and engagement among the students. The role of how you take that on with other faculty is not really well defined.” The third faculty partner, by contrast, was eager to try new techniques, “I really admired [X colleague’s] teaching technique. I’m going to incorporate some of the things [they do] into my classes…. That by itself made it worth it to me.” Group B struggled to work in partnership with each other, but they did form a faculty learning community in spite of that struggle.

This group was also the team which experimented Group B struggled to work in partnership with each other, but they did form a faculty learning community in spite of that struggle. with joint class discussions, which modeled intellectual exchange and academic argument. Two faculty members found new inspirations from this back and

forth discussion. One faculty member described the interchange, "Yesterday, we had our first group meeting and I loved it—I thought it was fantastic. Where the students watched two professors disagree…. To see us lock horns, in a collegiate way, I hope was beneficial to them." The teammate concurred, "The group discussions [really changed my perspective]…. I liked the way [X colleague] was able to focus on one idea and extrapolate it more into the modern world…[digging] deeper into the text itself…. I'm going to incorporate that into some of my [other] courses. It was beneficial to me." The give and take of ideas happened for faculty, as well as students, in Group B.

Group C also found that intellectual give and take among the faculty led to pedagogical exchange and innovation. One faculty member noted, "I'm learning a bit from my faculty peers…. We get to learn about things and then we have a roundtable afterwards." A faculty associate commented, "It's made me realize how much of a connection there is between my course material and other disciplines, in a way that made me feel that I would like to do this again with other themes." For Group C, as with the others, faculty exchanges yielded interdisciplinary learning and the transfer of pedagogical ideas.

Faculty Theme IV: Preparation and Sustaining the Partnership

The amount of effort required to form and sustain the course design and faculty partnership was naturally a theme which emerged in the interviews with faculty. These theme mapped to the faculty portion of Research Question 2: How do the learning communities function (socially, professionally, and academically? Preparation for the learning community was an integral part of the success of the project, but all of the groups found that continuing and sustaining the partnership required further effort.

Group A especially emphasized the importance of meeting over the summer and making time for advanced planning for the course overlap in the learning community. One professor explained, "We met maybe three times last spring and two times this fall…probably six or seven hours in total for advance preparation." A peer in the faculty group elaborated, "We met three or four times for a few hours over the summer. I spent several hours reworking my syllabus and finding new readings—maybe 20 hours in all. I reworked lessons, but didn't have to create a new class." The third faculty partner concurred, "[Over the summer] we were able to correlate and connect some of the topics together and give outlines…. We were all sort of on the same page…. Pretty much the entire summer, we've been working on this." All three of the faculty members agreed that they had spent significant time ahead of the course starting, in order to properly design and execute the learning community.

Reflecting on the project at the end of the semester, the faculty repeated the importance of collaboration as a necessary part of the learning community project. This was particularly important because two faculty members combined a final project. One instructor related, "I communicate with one peer fairly regularly, because we united our paper assignments into one paper. With the other colleague, I was only in contact a few times in the second half of the semester." Another colleague painted a less intensive picture of the partnership, "We've been in contact informally, but we haven't actually met altogether. The last time we met was probably in October (6 weeks ago). We text each other and catch as catch can." Their third faculty partner summarized the experience, "Collaborate with the people you're with. Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate. Check in with the students. Keep checking it. That absolutely helps." All

three saw the close partnership which they had established as critical to the success of the pilot project.

Acknowledging that their partnership was not as close as other faculty teams, Group B described a loose confederation of faculty with similar but not overlapping goals for their classes. One faculty member complained about the lack of joint early planning,

> We exchanged emails in early Spring '17, what we were going to do, etc. But we didn't actually meet until the end of Spring. We got the general structure down. My classes are launched in Canvas two weeks before the semester starts, and then they want to meet the week before classes…. Then I shifted everything around. Since then, we've been communicating generally by email. I think some of the issues could have been avoided with more regular communication and planning.

As predicted, the lack of close overlap in their lesson plans reflected this lack of close partnership and ultimately yielded a disjointed experience for the students.

Another faculty colleague confirmed the laissez-faire approach which seemed to characterize their early preparation for team teaching, "We were pretty laid back [about coordinating with each other]. I think we didn't want to infringe upon each other's scheduling. We could have taken an approach where we would say, 'Let's harmonize this as much as possible.'" The third faculty member saw the lack of close partnership as a major failing in the enterprise:

> I think we met twice in person [before the semester started], then we've had a couple of email correspondence. That was a real disappointment with me. [The other two colleagues]…were kind of just doing the same

> [survey that they usually teach], and just linking them together. Neither one of them realized that we were expected to intertwine the material. So that was a real failing on our part…. They should have been more connected.

As the students have already commented, the three classes never quite came together as overlapping, theme-related courses, possibly because of the lack of planning and partnership on behalf of the faculty.

Like Group A, Group C faculty found that they needed intensive amounts of planning before and during the first half of the semester. One faculty member elaborated,

> We did some email conversations, but then we met two or three times in the end of last spring, at the end of fall semester, and within the first week of spring semester. Trying to get things together, because we're trying to do some things outside of the regular class.

A faculty colleague concurred,

> We had a number of meetings along the way, as we were all beginning to think about our syllabi. About what it was going to look like and the different kinds of events we wanted to do. So we probably had three meetings, over the course of the fall semester in person, and a number of email exchanges, which were ongoing as we plan various things.

Once again, a close partnership, formed by multiple interactions over an extended period of time, was necessary to bring the theme-linked course project to fruition.

Intensive work on the project, however, seemed less necessary once the learning community was up and running. One instructor noted, "We haven't been in touch [with

each other recently]. We kind of came up with a game plan before the semester started and we've stuck to it." Another faculty partner confirmed the pattern of concentrated work toward the beginning, establishing the organization of the theme-linked courses and the faculty partnership which sustained it: "We coordinated between the courses a decent bit going in, so we knew that our schedules aligned in some keyways that we had planned. I wouldn't say that, on a day by day, that coordination was required." Once established, intermittent coordination and communication sustained the partnership.

Faculty Theme V: Encouraging Engagement

From the earliest days of planning and discussing the learning communities, the faculty considered increased engagement a critical goal. Research has long linked learning communities to increase student engagement, which is thought to boost academic success (Kuh et al., 2008;; Pike et al., 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). This theme developed as an aspect of Research Question 1: Do the learning communities boost engagement and retention? Some initial engagement was expected simply by the nature of the learning community, in which students were expected to bond over the course of the day through their multiple classes together. However, truly come together as a group required sustained effort at supporting engagement.

Some of the faculty in Group A deliberately designed for student collaboration and engagement. The build integrative overlap, team building, and community building into individual courses and into the structure of the learning community as a whole. Two courses combined one research project into the culminating assignment in each course. The promised the students that they would learn more while doing less homework.

One faculty member explained, “I do something called team-based learning. I break them into groups about every other week…. I break them up into different groups each time.” Another faculty member emphasized interdisciplinary learning and engagement, “I think it’s helpful to ask the students to report on or recap what [they are] learning in their other classes and how it might relate to my class…. I think that’s really important to remind them that these things are connected.” The third colleague, however, was more inclined to credit the students with the success in engagement, “I don’t know if that’s something we did, or just the make-up of the group and their personalities.” All three faculty members agreed that engagement was crucial for the success of the overall community.

Group A also found that working on engagement was less necessary in the second half of the semester, because much of the work of community bonding had already occurred. On the other hand, some course design adaptation was still required to bring the community to a successful conclusion. One instructor noted, “I cut back the readings and gave them more prompts. Less reading, but more follow-up…. They really responded well to that.” Another faculty member reflected on the success of a field trip which had taken place in the middle of the semester: “I thought the field trip was really valuable. Getting them out with all three of us together. It definitely had a real community sense amongst the faculty and the students.” Their third colleague added, “Just allowing those interactions and collaborations to take place. Otherwise, the classes are just three separate courses that sort of tie in together occasionally.” Their point was clear; some engagement could be planned and designed for, but much had to simply occur as part of the regular instruction and discussion process.

Group B always struggled with engagement, although the faculty worked some social bonding exercises into the course design. One faculty member clarified, "We do the group building activities, we talk before class…but still they're not exchanging information. I asked them if they had anyone's phone number or social media from this class, and they answer no." Yet a second faculty peer confessed, "So one thing that I'm afraid to do is group projects—breaking them apart, working two on two. The few times I tried that in the past, it was always a disaster." The third colleague expressed regrets that students did not engage well with the faculty, "I don't know why I couldn't get them into my office. That's never been a problem before." Lack of social bonding among students and between students and faculty were symptomatic of Group B throughout the semester.

However, joint classes with group discussions did seem to boost engagement for students, although there was not a clear connection between engagement and academic success. Describing a special joint class discussion, one instructor reflected, "These students appear engaged. Their comments were not very insightful. But…they're freshmen and they haven't been exposed to this level of conversation." One faculty peer noted, "After the [combined class group discussion], two of them did talk more consistently." Yet the same faculty member lamented, "two of them are going to fail by attendance alone." Upon reflection, one of the faculty members pointed to the lack of connection among the faculty and the theme-linked courses. "If I were to do it again…I would mesh the courses more…. I would make it much more of a cluster, rather than three independent courses." Because course design did not bring the students together,

they lacked the social bonding or academic engagement which are meant to be core experiences of learning communities.

Due to their prior experience in Group A, Group C faculty noticed that engagement seemed to come preloaded for their learning community. One professor explained, "I don't see them, as a group, progressing as quickly as other classes, but the floor is a lot higher because they're engaged and they participate." One faculty peer added, "I'm not sure if it's because of what we're doing, or it it's because the students already know each other." They went on to comment, "They are students who are willing to speak and share their ideas." The third faculty partner confirmed, "It's nice to have that liveliness, and it's nice to have the expectation that the students are going to connect with each other and with me, in that more informal and personal way."

Reflecting at the end of the semester, the level of engagement seemed to have increased beyond the level that with which the students entered the second learning community. One faculty member commented, "Their level of interaction with each other and with me is immensely more." A second colleague concurred, "I've noticed, because it's a really great group of students, how much I can do with them, when they self-select into the class and they're willing to work." The third colleague concluded, "It might be a unique situation…. They were much more comfortable making connections…so it didn't require as much work on a day-to-day basis." Social bonding over the second semester may have intensified because of the students' prior acquaintance, and familiarity boosted engagement as well.

Conclusion

Quantitative data were able to demonstrate that Group A was not originally a more advanced group than Group B, either by comparison of high school GPAs or by ACT scores. However, quantitative data from Question 4 of the student evaluations, which asked if students were engaged by the course material, proved to be statistically even. There was no statistical difference among the scores from Group A, Group B, or Group C. Likewise, there was no significant difference in the GPAs of Groups A, B, or C, for the semester following the learning communities.

Qualitative analysis yielded a much richer pool of data. For the students, close reading and grounded theory generated the major themes of community and bonding, integrative learning, participation and impact, and academic achievement. Students spoke warmly of their shared sense of community and increased bonding as a group. They helped to support each other socially and academically.

As part of their engagement in the theme-linked courses, they saw interactions and cross-pollination across academic fields, which deepened their understanding of the subject matter. Some students questioned why they were participating in a learning community, but most found that the learning community had a positive impact upon them, both emotionally and intellectually. Engagement and social bonding lead to another key goal of learning communities: academic achievement. Many students spoke of increased academic success and attributed it to the support that they found in the community.

For faculty members, discussion centered around their goals for forming learning communities, which included a desire to deepen social and professional connections,

while deepening their pedagogical skills. Other themes which emerged from their interviews included expectations vs. experience, faculty community learning, preparation and sustaining the partnership, and encouraging engagement. The faculty found that the learning communities developed in unforeseen ways, although they all expressed gratitude that they had taken part in the project.

Each faculty team felt inspired to new and different pedagogies, after working with and observing other members of their groups. Starting and maintaining the learning communities required significant preparation, especially those designed to overlap and intertwine in lesson planning and subject presentation. Encouraging engagement, which was one of the stated goals of the learning community pilot project, also required extensive preparation, sustained work, and innovative pedagogy. For most faculty, these sustained efforts produced engaged and intellectually stimulated students, proving the faculty efforts to be well worth while.

Chapter Five

Introduction

Communication and social bonding were key elements of the learning community experience for both students and faculty. For Groups A and C, students communicated in person and via text messaging, encouraging participation, forming spontaneous study groups, and facilitating the completion of assignments. Social bonding occurred during team building class assignments and through group work sessions outside of class. Group B struggled to communicate and to bond socially, although they did praise the special discussion sessions, which all three faculty members had arranged together to model interaction and discourse.

Communication between faculty and students was also an important factor for the learning communities. Faculty for all groups explained the pilot project nature of the learning communities, but the degree of buy-in from the students varied severely between Groups A and B. Group A organized the Snapchat on the first day, in order to simplify communication among individual students and the formation of study groups. Group B refused to exchange contact information, even after their teachers strongly suggested that this would aid in academic success for the learning community.

One regret that I have as a researcher is that my institutional review board (IRB) approval came in slightly after the beginning of the semester, so I was not able to observe the first day of class for either Group A or Group B. My inability to observe these classes means that I do not have any first-hand information on how the faculty introduced the subjects of required general education classes and theme-linked courses composing a learning community to the students. Anecdotally, I know that Group A suggested that the

students would work less but learn more, given the interactive nature of their coursework. Group A students enthusiastically embraced this argument, and then formed the Snapchat to further encourage student success.

In contrast, Group B faculty told their students that social bonding would occur naturally through the linked courses, as the students would see each other three times a day. They did not incorporate added opportunities for academic success as part of the introduction to the pilot program. The faculty told the students that they would and should bond over the course of the semester. They reiterated this point in class several times, to the extent that some students felt pressured to bond and then resisted the bonding process.

Communication among the faculty was crucial, especially during the early planning stages for the courses. Both Group A and Group C arranged to meet and communicated repeatedly via email before the beginning of the semester. For both groups, the faculty planned significant amounts of overlap among the individual courses, with extracurricular outings planned over the course of the semester. Group B emailed a small amount before the semester, but did not meet to coordinate overlap and integration among the courses. Students reported that Group B felt like three separate classes, which only incidentally touched upon the same subject matter, only coming together as a group for the special discussion sessions.

Questions and Hypotheses

Initial questions and hypotheses were formed based upon the prior research into learning communities. Researchers have long considered engagement a central outcome of learning communities (Kilgo et al., 2015; Kuh et al, 2008; Seifert et al, 2014; and Zhao

& Kuh, 2004). Academic achievement, the primary goal of learning community design, is often associated with student engagement (Jaffee, 2007; Andrade, 2007). Engagement in turn proves to be a key element in retention (Schudde, 2011; Millea et al., 2018), a crisis which is affecting most higher education institutions.

Research Question 1:

Do the learning communities boost engagement and retention?

As we saw in the previous chapter, community and social bonding were major themes for the students participating in all three learning communities. Group A felt that the learning community helped their wellbeing and social welfare, sheltering them from the abrupt impact of a new school and new expectations as college students. Group B regretted that they had not bonded over the course of the semester and felt that the learning community had not worked for them. Group C felt that the social bonding among them had deepened from the previous semester, enabling them to be confident when discussing challenging ideas.

Engagement proved to be closely related to social and community bonding. Groups A and C engaged with each other through the group Snapchat and engaged with the coursework through spontaneously organized study groups. Comfort with each other led to increased and improved class discussions, ultimately boosting academic achievement. The faculty in Group A found their students highly motivated and very willing to participate in the pilot project. Group C found the students impressively committed to the coursework, which enabled the faculty to be more experimental in their pedagogy.

Group B consistently struggled with engagement, although students and faculty both felt that the special joint discussion groups boosted integrative learning. However, Group B faculty found the students sullen and silent, and actively struggled to achieve any kind of class discussion. Several students dropped at least one of the classes, and one faculty member informed me at the end of the semester that two of his students had earned absence fails (AF) for chronic absenteeism.

Social bonding and engagement certainly boosted retention for Group A. Out of 13 students, seven chose to continue the experience the next semester in Group C. Of those, one was unable to return because of financial reasons. For Group C, all six students enrolled for their sophomore years at the same institution. On the other hand, follow up interviews for Group B proved to be difficult, because several students had already transferred out of the university. One of my interviewees told me that they were also transferring at the end of the year.

Research Question 2:

How do the learning communities function (socially, professionally, and academically) for students and faculty?

For Groups A and C, the learning communities functioned as expected, increasing social bonding, boosting academic success, and generally making it enjoyable and engaging. Students in both groups developed a high level of comfort with each other and willingly spent time outside of the classroom with each other. As we saw above, social bonding facilitated engagement, which in turn boosted academic achievement. Group B reported much less social bonding, even among those who were already acquainted with each other, but still reported some academic success.

Connecting more deeply with another faculty was one factor highlighted by Group A and Group C faculty. Group A collaborated in depth and found that the only downside to their partnership was an increase in preparation time caused by the dovetailing of assignments across the three classes. Nevertheless, they felt that they benefited from the growth in their approach and viewpoint. Group C likewise found that exchanges of information and insight among their peers lead to innovation and increased understanding of their own and other disciplines. Both groups felt that their partnerships led to interdisciplinary learning, and new and improved pedagogical practice.

Faculty members in Group B complained about the lack of feedback from or interaction with their fellow faculty peers. However, even Group B spoke of learning pedagogical practices from their colleagues in the community. Group B organized joint class discussions, where the faculty modeled interactive dialogue and engagement with their peers. The faculty praised the collegial dialogue that emerged in these sessions, and gained new insights into familiar texts from their interchanges with other faculty.

Research Question 3:

How do students and faculty perceive their experiences in the learning communities? In particular, do they see an increase in integrative learning?

As with engagement, researchers frequently touted integrative learning as one of the core goals of learning communities, and one of the reasons why they are classified as high-impact practices. (Mumford et al., 2017; Pike et al., 2011). Students in Group A spoke very positively about the integrative nature of their learning community. Several of them attested to widening their horizons and seeing applications from the integrative learning far outside the classroom. They were aware from the very beginning of the pilot

project that the faculty had designed the theme-linked nature of the three classes to cause integrative learning and the students saw its applications in their daily lives.

Students in Group B spoke of moments of integrative learning while attending the group discussion sessions. Seeing their faculty interact and build upon each other's arguments helped them to see where the different disciplines overlapped and interacted. They remembered these instances fondly and wished that more integrated learning had occurred in their regular classes. For the most part, Group B students saw the three courses as separate and distinct, rarely overlapping or bridging the disciplines.

For Group C, as a subset of Group A, integrative learning was an integral part of the learning community experience. In fact, they expressed some frustration with the ongoing integrative learning; both because they found it repetitive when several courses contained closely related content, and because they found the course material affecting their perceptions of reality outside the classroom. They no longer saw academic disciplines as esoteric, and several students commented that their worldviews had expanded to include new and diverse perspectives.

Faculty in Group A deliberately planned integrative learning as a core goal of the learning community initiative. They spent the longest time preparing their courses before the beginning of the semester, insuring multiple instances of overlap and interaction among the disciplines. Even so, they wished that they had designed more joint assignments and shared activities. The faculty saw integrative learning in the students, but wished for more and deeper understanding of the interstices that connect the different disciplines.

Group B faculty expected their students to make more connections than generally occurred for this cohort. One faculty member specifically commented that the interdisciplinarity was the principle motivation for taking part in the project. Over the course of the semester, Group B began to realize that they should have put more time into preparation and deliberate design of integration and overlap. However, their special joint sessions offered new insights to both students and faculty, although the faculty did not observe that interdisciplinarity emerging in their individual classes.

The faculty in Group C were also interested in the interdisciplinary design of the pilot project. Like Group A, they planned for cross-over in their classes and also fostered integrative learning through extracurricular activities like movies and even a joint dinner together. At times, the faculty expressed frustration that more integrative learning did not happen outside the classroom, although the students themselves reported that integrative learning did affect their worldview and their outside perceptions. However, faculty in Group C found the learning community to be successful in terms of academic achievement, and put any lack of integrative learning down to the immaturity of freshmen.

Research Hypothesis 1:

Student participation in learning communities will increase:
engagement, integrative learning, and retention.

Faculty and students of Group A observed a high level of engagement throughout the semester. Faculty noted that the students showed increased attendance and showed enthusiasm for the readings and class discussions. Students commented that the social

support from the community made it easier to attend class and made them more motivated to tackle coursework.

As we have seen above, Group B struggled with engagement throughout the semester. Students and faculty expressed frustration that the students never bonded as a community. Faculty reported that students hesitated to take part in group discussion and overall seemed to lack insight into the various disciplines. Lack of engagement lead to low morale for both students and faculty, causing further negative impact in the project.

Faculty in Group C praised the level of commitment which they found in their students. Because the students were already well acquainted, discussion was lively, and students were prepared and ready to engage with each other and the subject material. Seeing active engagement inspired the faculty to try new and innovative pedagogical techniques, since they trusted the students to participate enthusiastically, creating a positive feedback loop.

Group A was highly successful in fostering integrative learning among their students. From the beginning, the students were aware of the connections among the three separate disciplines and reported that they experienced a widening of their worldview. They also commented on their increased academic success, which they saw in part as stemming from the interconnections between the classes and the ease with which they could apply their learning outside their classwork.

Faculty in Group B were disappointed in the lack of integrative learning from their cohort, but the students found that the special joint discussion sessions lead them to see connections among the separate courses. Seeing their faculty members model

discourse on the same reading helped the students integrate theories and implications from multiple perspectives.

Students in Group C saw integrative learning as a core aspect of the learning community experience. Faculty members had identified interdisciplinary learning as a primary goal for the project and had planned multiple instances of overlap and interconnectedness over the course of the semester. Faculty praised the students for their engagement with the course contents, although they perceived the students to be missing some aspects of the material due to immaturity.

Only Group B experienced significant problems with retention. Two students dropped one class, one student dropped a different class, and two students failed a class for excessive absences. Several more transferred from the university after the first or second semester of their freshman year. In contrast, more than half of Group A selected participation in the second semester of the learning community, although one was unable to return for financial reasons. All six members of Group C returned in the fall for their sophomore year and will be entering their senior year at the institutions for the 2010-21 academic year.

Research Hypothesis 2:

Faculty participation in learning communities will increase: engagement and professional satisfaction.

Faculty for all three learning communities acknowledged that their partnerships with other faculty had expanded their own knowledge and their pedagogical practice. Group A was particularly good at modeling engagement with each other as people and with the interacting subject matter of the other disciplines. While this interaction

increased their satisfaction with the learning community and their experience with the faculty partnership, they confessed that the close connections which they designed through their interactive coursework had been the cause of additional work and multiple hours of preparation.

Group B faculty also found that they had acquired new pedagogical knowledge from the observation and interaction with their peers. One faculty colleague was unsure of how to demonstrate interaction and engagement with peer faculty. However, two faculty members confirmed that they had learned new practices. One went so far as to say that the new teaching techniques acquired through this partnership made the pilot project worthwhile in their estimation.

Faculty from Group C likewise found that interchanges with their peers lead to new pedagogical innovation and offered new insights into how their own disciplines interacted with related disciplines. As with Group A, Group C found that the partnership required extra time in preparation and in course design. Emails and meetings began before the semester started and continued into the semester. Because their students were in their second semester of the learning community experience, Group C acknowledged that their task was easier than other learning communities. Nevertheless, they felt that they came together as a team and were more than satisfied with the results of the endeavor.

New Hypothesis 1:

Groups A and B will be statistically different in high school GPAs and ACT scores.

I did not include this hypothesis in the initial plans for the research; rather it came out of discussions with the faculty about the differences between Groups A and B. Faculty in Group A commented repeatedly that they were fortunate in the students who were assigned to their learning community. They found these students to be bright, attentive, and willing to engage with each other and with the course material.

Group B, on the other hand, felt that they had somehow gotten a less desirable group, possibly because of the high number of students who had not yet decided upon a major. One faculty member suggested that high school grade point averages and ACT scores would be different between the two groups.

Statistical comparison, however, showed the two groups to be comparable both in grade point average and in test scores. For both sets of numbers, I conducted a *t*-test of two means to see if Group A was academically superior to Group B. In both cases, a preliminary test of variances revealed that the variances were equal. Therefore, I was able to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that Group A students were not superior to Group B students in either grade point average or test scores. Given that Group B faculty admitted that they had failed to design sufficient interaction and overlap among the three courses and had not modeled social bonding through their faculty partnerships, I believe that the difference in success between the two learning communities was due to differences in the course design and implementation of the pilot project.

Study Limitations

The first and most obvious limitation of this study is the small sample size of both students and faculty members. Group A consisted of 12 students, Group B contained 13 students, and Group C had only six6 students. The faculty sample was similarly small,

with each learning community consisting of three faculty members, for a total of nine participating faculty across the entire pilot project. As a result of these small numbers, none of the sample sizes were statistically significant.

Because the School of Humanities initially proposed the pilot project, most students were either humanities majors or still undecided. The high concentration of humanities students may have caused the students to be more open to engaging with subject matter, which was predominantly humanities-based in nature. The School of Arts, Media, and Communications housed one faculty member, with a second faculty member coming from the School of Sciences.

As a first-year program, freshmen made up the learning communities and all of the students were traditional students between the ages of 18 and 20. However, this may not be the severe limitation which it appears to be. According to the research, most learning communities are first-year programs (Jaffee, 2007, Schneider, 2010, Fink & Inkelas, 2015). First-year programs are traditionally focused on retention, since the cost of attrition to higher education institutions is estimated to be over $16 billion per year (Raisman, 2013, p. 4).

Finally, one major limitation is that the study took place on only one campus of a Midwestern, private university. Experiences in other regions or public institutions are therefore automatically excluded. The study also ran for only one year, further limiting the data gathered from this single institution.

Recommendations for Future Research

At the Home Institution

Because pilot programs frequently start small, this research project did not contain numbers of students or faculty large enough for statistical significance. For future research, studies should include increased numbers, either in terms of larger classes or more and different learning communities in the study. The learning community initiative in this Midwestern, private university is still planning and organizing learning communities for the Fall 2020 semester. These cohorts could be studied and compared to these earlier cohorts, to add to the overall knowledge of learning communities at the institution.

A follow up study could also be done with the students from the first learning communities studied here. These students are now entering their senior year at the institution, and could be interviewed again to see how the initial learning community experience influenced their lives at the institution for the remainder of their college careers. Further longitudinal study could include their entry into the workforce or graduate school, in the next academic year.

Broadening the Study

The home institution of the current study is located in a major metropolitan area with multiple other institutions of higher learning. A comparison study could easily be set up by investigating learning communities at universities, both public and private. Even this, however, would continue to limit the study geographically to one portion of the Midwest. To broaden the study even further, a coalition of researchers could investigate institutions across the country, eliminating any local bias.

Another method for broadening the study would be to incorporate more and different types of data to the study. Since all three of the learning communities studied

here had involved some version of Composition as one of the three theme-linked courses, I had intended to incorporate samples of student writing into the study. Unfortunately, the Composition courses varied too widely and had no unifying theme for the student assignments. Consequently, the student writing assignments were too different and could not be compared for similar data.

Recommendations to Departments

The most universal complaint from all nine of the faculty was that they, at least on occasion, found the first-year students to be immature and lacking in seasoned insight. Incoming students frequently take general education courses in the first two years of the undergraduate career, but some students still are finishing general education requirements in the junior or senior year. The presence of upperclassmen in these introductory surveys provides the course with a "seeding" of more mature students who can model inquiry and discussion for the rest.

Granted, the reason that learning communities are frequently first-year programs is the necessity that most higher education institutions feel to boost retention from the freshman to the sophomore year. However, a cohort of 20 first-year students could be enrolled in a smaller Composition class and then enrolled in larger classes of 25 to 30 students in the other general education courses. The additional seats in the non-composition courses could then be filled with juniors or seniors, who could provide a model of more seasoned college students to the first-year students. If some of the upperclassmen were transfer students, they might find common ground with the first-year students in adjustments to their new college home.

Another aspect of crafting better learning communities would be to expand upon existing partnerships among the faculty, rather than forming teams who had never worked together before. Group A was composed of two friends from the School of Humanities whose offices were around the corner from each other. Their third faculty colleague, although from another school, carpooled with one of the humanities faculty members. All three were friends before the learning community, but became closer over the course of the semester. Communication flowed freely among them, often taking place in informal conversations in the hall or the car.

The example of Group A faculty could develop into a pattern for faculty partnerships, leveraging existing friendships and long acquaintanceship into stronger learning community faculty teams. Close communication of faculty can model camaraderie for students, helping to consolidate the cohort into a functioning community. Already existing relationships can help facilitate this communication and represent a model for cooperation and joint efforts towards mutual goals.

Careful selection of faculty colleagues for learning community design and implementation could prove to be the difference between success and failure. This research highlights several relevant questions that might help guide the selection process: What are the goals of the individual faculty members? How open are they to sharing course or program design with fellow faculty members? Are they willing to commit to the extra time and effort needed to accomplish a successful learning community? These are conversations which school or department administration should have with interested faculty members before they begin the learning community process.

Recommendations for Schools and Universities

As has become readily apparent from the results, this pilot project lacked any unified understanding of how to design the learning communities or even how the faculty members should approach the process. Although the pilot project resulted from a proposal to the Provost, the initial proposers did not create a founding document with goals or an outline of deliberate steps to accomplish those goals. Now that the program has produced results, one next step would be to utilize the successful teaching partnerships to train upcoming faculty members undertaking future learning communities. A formal conference or series of training sessions would do much to prepare faculty members for the complications which learning communities entail.

Another policy which could be instituted is a required planning period over the summer before the fall semester begins. Both Group A and Group C began the planning process significantly in advance of the beginning of the semester and constructed courses which closely dovetailed in multiple instances of overlap and cooperation. New faculty teams would do well to emulate this pattern and begin the design process well before the start of the semester. Faculty should expect to set aside several days for meetings with their peers, closely comparing syllabi and mapping the interchanges between separate disciplines. Once the initial design is complete, faculty should continue to email or call with details or future design ideas which might improve or enliven the courses and the overall community.

Faculty and administrators should also be more forthcoming with information for the students enrolled in the learning communities. While Group A adjusted well to the surprise of being enrolled in a community, Group B felt some confusion and resentment at their enrollment in a pilot project. Both groups would have benefited from preliminary

information before the start of the semester; both in describing what was entailed in a learning community and how students might benefit from such a program. This introductory material might include a short summary of existing research on learning communities as high impact practices, and could also contain testimonials from previous semesters of successful students who were enrolled in the program.

One more aspect which proved exceptionally helpful for the successful learning communities was the use of social media for facilitating communication and the formation of student groups and study sessions. For Group A, and consequently also Group C, the Snapchat was an initiative which the students in the learning community proposed and instituted. However, institutions interested in improving learning communities could set up a social media group on any number of different platforms. The important point is to improve communication among the students and make it easier for them to reach out to each other for help. Improved communication both within and outside of the classroom could only benefit such community building processes.

Conclusion

Researchers have, for some time, assumed that learning communities function primarily through engagement (Kilgo et al., 2015; Pike et al., 2011). This study confirms that assertion, in that the principle difference between the successful groups, Groups A and C, and the least successful group, Group B, was the wide difference in the degree to which students engaged with each other, the course materials, and the faculty. Group B was highly frustrated and disappointed that their learning community never quite came together as a fully functioning and supportive community. On the other hand, students in Groups A and C were highly satisfied with their experience and openly said that they

would recommend the learning community program to other, incoming students. Group A even went so far as to advocate that students be placed in the program, as they were, with no preparation or advance warning. Instead, they believed that students would come to love the program once they had experienced and understood the advantages which the program brought to them.

As the qualitative date strongly demonstrated, social bonding was a key element in the engagement process for the communities. Groups A and C came together both in and outside of class, in person and virtually via technology. They built understanding and trust with each other while organizing study groups and working on group projects. In contrast, Group B never communicated outside of class and never came together as a community. Despite the urgings of their faculty, they remained apart from each other. Even students who had been previously acquainted or had attended the same high school failed to communicate and bond together. More qualitative studies are therefore necessary to further explore this dynamic among learning communities and seek other mechanisms which may also boost engagement and consequently academic success and retention.

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Appendix A

Questions for Students in 1st Focus Group of Fall Semester

(October 11, 2017)

1) Did you request a learning community, or was one assigned to you?
2) How do you feel about being part of a learning community?
    a) Is it what you expected?
    b) What would you suggest changing?
3) Have you made many friends yet here?
    a) How did you meet them?
    b) Are they all from the learning community?
    c) If not, how did you meet them?
    d) Do your LC friends and your non-LC friends interact?
4) How often do you spend time with your learning community peers outside the classroom?
    a) What sorts of activities do you do?
    b) How much of it is class-oriented (reading, studying, coursework, and/or review)?
5) Do you play any sports or have you joined any clubs?
    a) What kind?
    b) Have any of your LC peers joined with you?
6) Have you interacted with any faculty members outside of class?
    a) How often would you say that faculty members outside of class?
    b) Were these LC instructors or non-LC instructors?
    c) Would you say that the faculty were helpful? How so?

7) When you arrived here, did you feel ready for college?
8) How do you think participating in a learning community has impacted your first-year experience?
    a) Has it increased your breadth or depth of knowledge?
    b) Has it changed the way you think or speak in any way?
9) If you have the opportunity to enroll in another learning community, would you do so?
    a) Why or why not?
10) Would you recommend enrolling in a first-year learning community to a younger sibling or friend?
    a) Why or why not?

Appendix B

Questions for Students in 2nd Focus Group of Fall Semester

(November 29, 2017)

1) How do you feel about being part of a learning community (now that it's almost over)?
    a) Has anything changed since the last time we met?
    b) What would you suggest changing?
2) How often do you spend time with your learning community peers outside the classroom?
    a) What sorts of activities do you do?
    b) How much of it is class-oriented (reading, studying, coursework, and/or review)?
    c) And has that increased or decreased since we last talked?
3) Do you play any sports or have you joined any clubs?
    a) What kind?
    b) Have any of your LC peers joined with you?
4) Have you interacted with any faculty members outside of class?
    a) How often would you see that faculty members outside of class?
    b) Were these LC instructors or non-LC instructors?
    c) Would you say that the faculty were helpful? How so?
5) Do you feel prepared for your next semester in college?
    a) Has the community helped or hindered in that process?
6) If we were to expand this program to include non-first-years, would you want to do it again?

a) Why or why not?

7) Did you recommend either SP 18 LC to anyone who was not already in the community?

a) Why or why not?

8) Would you recommend enrolling in a first-year learning community to a younger sibling or friend?

9) Why or why not?

10) How do you think participating in a learning community has impacted your first-year experience?

a) Has it increased your breadth or depth of knowledge?

b) Has it changed the way you think or speak in any way?

c) How has it shaped your perception of college?

d) Would you do it again if you could?

Appendix C

Questions for Group B Follow-Up Interviews

(Various dates during Spring 2018 semester)

1) How did you learn that you were a member of a learning community?
    a) Did you already know what a learning community was?
    b) How was it explained to you?
2) How do you feel about being part of a learning community?
    a) Is it what you expected?
    b) What would you suggest changing?
3) Did you take any non-LC general education courses last semester?
    a) If so, how were they chosen?
    b) Did you ask for any of them to be changed?
    c) How many are you taking this semester and how were they chosen?
4) Did any of your instructors (LC or non-LC) explain the purpose of general education requirements?
    a) Why did you think you were taking them?
    b) What do you think of general education requirements in general? Do you think you learn anything useful in them?
    c) Now that you're in different courses this semester, are you using anything you learned last semester?
5) Have you made many friends yet here?
    a) How did you meet them?
    b) Were any of them from the learning community?

c) If not, how did you meet them?

6) How often did you spend time with your learning community peers outside the classroom?
   a) What sorts of activities did you do?
   b) How much of it is class-oriented (reading, studying, coursework, and/or review)?
7) Have you interacted with any faculty members outside of class?
   a) How often would you say that faculty members outside of class?
   b) Were these LC instructors or non-LC instructors?
   c) Would you say that the faculty were helpful? How so?
8) How do you think participating in a learning community has impacted your first-year experience?
   a) Has it increased your breadth or depth of knowledge?
   b) Has it changed the way you think or speak in any way?

Appendix D

Questions for Students for 1st Focus Group of Spring Semester

(February 21, 2018)

1) What is it like to be in a learning community that you chose?
    a) Is it what you expected?
    b) What is the same and what is different?
2) How are your non-LC classes?
    a) Is there any synergy or overlap between the LC courses and the non-LC courses?
    b) Are you still using any of the materials you used last semester?
3) How is the new learning community working for you?
    a) Anything that surprised you?
    b) Anything you wish was different?
4) What is it like to be a 2nd semester LC student?
    a) Have you gotten even closer?
    b) Do you still see your LC friends from last semester?
    c) Have you made any new friends this semester?
    d) Do your LC friends and your non-LC friends interact?
5) How often do you spend time with your learning community peers outside the classroom?
    a) What sorts of activities do you do?
    b) How much of it is class-oriented (reading, studying, coursework, and/or review)?
6) Have you interacted with any faculty members outside of class?
    a) How often would you say that faculty members outside of class?

b) Were these LC instructors or non-LC instructors?

c) Would you say that the faculty were helpful? How so?

7) How do you think participating in a learning community has impacted your first-year experience?

a) Has it increased your breadth or depth of knowledge?

b) Has it changed the way you think or speak in any way?

8) Would you recommend enrolling in a first-year learning community to a younger sibling or friend?

a) Why or why not?

9) Do you wish there were Sophomore communities?

a) Why or why not?

Appendix E

Questions for Students for 2nd Focus Group of Spring Semester

(April 17, 2018)

1) How do you feel about being part of a learning community (now that it's almost over)?
    a) Has anything changed since the last time we met?
    b) What would you suggest changing?
2) How has the second learning community been different from the first?
    What has been (mostly) the same?
3) Other than course subject matter, what has the learning community taught you? What have you learned about yourself?
4) Have you interacted with any faculty members outside of class?
    a) Were these LC instructors or non-LC instructors?
    b) Are you comfortable going to them? Do they seem comfortable with you?
    c) Would you say that the faculty were helpful? How so?
5) How do you feel about going into next year without a learning community? What do you think will change?
6) How has your worldview changed since you came here? How much of that was due to the learning community?
7) If we were to expand this program to include non-first-years, would you want to do it again? Why or why not?
8) Would you recommend enrolling in a first-year learning community to a younger sibling or friend?

   a) Why or why not?
   b) What if it were a different (less successful) one? What would you say to those students?

9) What advice would you give your faculty members if/when they teach the learning community again? What would you say to the new students? Are you aware of anything you did to make it work better?
10) How do you think participating in a learning community has impacted your first-year experience?
   a) Has it increased your breadth or depth of knowledge?
   b) Has it changed the way you think or speak in any way?
   c) How has it shaped your perception of college?
   d) Where do you go from here?

Appendix F

Questions for 1st Faculty Interviews

(Various dates during Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 semesters)

1) How long have you been teaching on the college level? At this institution?
2) How did you first hear about the learning community initiative at this institution?
3) What aspects of the program initially interested you the most?
4) What did you expect from the learning community experience when you first signed on?
    a) How much of that has proven to be correct?
5) How much time did you spend preparing for the course, before the semester started?
    a) Is that more of less than you would spend on a non-LC course?
6) Does weekly course prep during the semester take more or less time than that of non-LC-classes?
7) Do you see any differences between your learning community students and your non-LC students?
    a) If so, how are they different?
    b) Why do you think they are different?
8) While preparing for the learning community, how much did you communicate with your faculty peers in the theme-linked course block?
    a) How much do you communicate with them during the semester?
9) Has participating in the learning community changed your perception of your course material in any way?
    a) Have you learned anything new as a result?

b) Has it changed your delivery of familiar material?

10) Are you planning to teach in any learning communities in the future?

a) Why or why not?

b) Would it be the same course theme, or a new one? Why?

Appendix G

Faculty End of Semester Interviews

(Both semesters)

1) What has changed since the last time we talked?
    a) What has stayed the same?
    b) How and why?
2) Does weekly course prep during the semester take more or less time than that of non-LC-classes?
    a) Has that changed in any way since the beginning of the semester?
    b) How and why?
3) Is prep for the LC different from prep for your non-LC courses?
    a) If so, how.
4) Do you see any differences between your learning community students and your non-LC students?
    a) If so, how are they different?
    b) Why do you think they are different?
5) On average, how many times a week do you communicate with your faculty peers? Has it increased or decreased over the course of the semester?
6) How often do you interact with your LC students outside of class?
    a) Is that more or less than you interact with non-LC students?
    b) If so, why do you think that is the case?
7) Has participating in the learning community changed your perception of your course material in any way?

   a) Have you learned anything new as a result?

   b) Has it changed your delivery of familiar material?

8) Has participating changed your future non-LC practice? Are you going to change anything in the future, based upon something you've learned this semester?

9) What is your final take-away from this experience?

   a) Would you recommend it to friends and colleagues?

   b) Is there one thing that you did, as an instructor, that you would say…"And make sure you do this…. It really helps."

10) And what would you recommend be changed for future sections?

Appendix H

Letter from Group A to Future LC Students

Dear Learning Community Students:

Welcome to our Learning Community! We hope that you'll use this learning experience to make [the university] Like No Other. This is an opportunity that not many students have. We wish you the best of luck this semester, and we hope you like this as much as we did. Here's some of our advice to make this a great semester:

- Make a group chat (Snapchat)
- Helps your overall grade
- Good for collaboration
- Stay connected: hang out together, have lunch together
- Everything stays in the classroom, don't let arguments in class impact your relationship in the group outside of class
- If you're struggling, ask for help in the group chat, or ask your teacher
- Have an open mind
- You're not going to like it unless you contribute to it—be willing to participate!
- Get to know your professors
- Feel free to contribute your own ideas
- Don't judge others' ideas
- No curve, don't ask for it (even a modified curve)
- Take all opportunities for extra credit (get a better grade, makes you look good too)
- Do the reading, come prepared to class

- DO NOT PROCRASTINATE. Do everything a week ahead.
- Always ask questions.

You may not realize this at first, but these people will become your best friends this semester and you'll come to rely on them more than anyone else in your other classes.

Sincerely,

Vitae

Elaine M. Ragland

Elaine Ragland has worked in higher education administration for thirty years and is currently the Office Coordinator for the School of Humanities at Lindenwood University. She has taught humanities courses at Benedictine University and City College of New York, and GED classes in Harlem. She holds an M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary and an M.Phil. in medieval history from the City University of New York Graduate Center. She serves as president of Alpha Chi Pi (Missouri) for 2020-2021 and is a member of the student advisory committee for the School of Education at Lindenwood.