Learning Communities: Past, Present, and Future

Abstract
The authors of this article examine the history and philosophy of learning communities, the current research on the impact of these learning environments on students' academic achievement and retention rates, and conclude with the authors recommendations for creating or improving similar initiatives.

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INTRODUCTION

Integrating student affairs and academic affairs is a hot topic in the field of higher education. Many professionals believe that an institution's mission can be better achieved by combining these two functional areas. Some institutions have already integrated the two areas into a single division (Altizer et. al, 1996). Other institutions have attempted different methods to integrate the curricular and co-curricular experience for students. One method is implementing academic learning communities in residence halls. In these communities, students live with other students in their academic discipline and provided academic resources in the living environment (Rowe, 1981). Research has shown that this atmosphere indirectly increases students' academic success and persistence rates, as well as student satisfaction (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1981). This article will examine the history and philosophy of learning communities and current research on the impact of learning communities on academic success and retention rates and conclude with the authors' recommendations for the future of learning communities on college and university campuses.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The earliest models of American higher education reflect the ideals of living and learning environments (Schroeder and Mable, 1994). English institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge, the models for American higher education, involved faculty members in almost every aspect of the collegiate experience. While faculty taught as well as ate with and socialized with the students, porters and other staff members managed discipline and other areas of student supervision. Early institutions of American higher education, such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, attempted to imitate this English model. However, these institutions did not have the resources to build facilities in which faculty would be interested in living. In addition, faculty in America had responsibility for all aspects of the student experience, including student supervision and discipline. This left few boundaries between the role of educator and authority figure (Schroeder and Mable, 1994).

American institutions, founded in the second half of the nineteenth century looked to German models of higher education (Schroeder and Mable, 1994). German universities focused almost entirely on teaching and research. Large research universities in America adopted this model and also viewed in-class education and research as completely separate from extracurricular activities and living arrangements. The German model was also adopted by the large land grant institutions that emerged from the Morrill Act of 1862 and the second Morrill Act of 1890 (Schroeder and Mable, 1994).

Descriptions of the German model rarely include the word "learning." This lack of focus on student outcomes has been a recent criticism of American education at all levels. Recently, politicians, researchers, and educators have criticized the quality of undergraduate education in the United States (Cross, 1993). While separating student affairs from academic affairs helped make higher education more efficient at handling increased numbers of students, institutions now realize that it was not, in fact, the best for all students (Schroeder and Mable, 1994). Research increasingly illustrates the "importance of peer culture,

active student involvement, the seamless nature of student experiences, and the need for new partnerships between academic and student affairs" (Schroeder and Mable, 1994, p. 12).

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The research on the effectiveness of a traditional residence hall experience in contributing to academic success is inconclusive. As a result, residence hall staff have attempted to structure the living environment to effectively increase students' academic success (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994).

Learning communities have varied purposes and structures. Rowe (1981) outlined six basic structures for such environments: special interest units, like-major units, units with noncredit classes and programming, units offering regularly scheduled classes, units with unique or experimental programs, and residential colleges. At the most basic level, special interest units group students according to a particular extra-curricular interest, usually involving a faculty advisor with expertise in that area. Special interest units might focus on astronomy, athletics, arts, etc. Administrators organize like-major units more formally than the special interest units. Like-major units group students with the same major to increase peer academic support and structured assistance from the university in a concentrated academic area. Noncredit classes and programming units require a commitment from the student to be involved in a course or formal program, some noncredit classes or programming units might include: music ensembles, leadership studies, and wellness development. These programs range from grouping students to requiring formal participation in structured learning activities. Units offering regularly scheduled classes organize students to add an additional aspect to the course. Faculty usually become highly involved in the programming and living aspects of the program, sometimes to the extent of living in the residence hall with students. Some programs involve unique course offerings or experimental programs that require a residential aspect in order to be successful. Examples might include: community service/volunteerism units, language floors, or intense academic endeavors such as dramatic arts, writing, and theater production. The final method of structuring a learning community exists in the form of a residential college. Structured to resemble the Oxford residential model, residential colleges attempt to create an environment closest to a "mini-college." Residential colleges not only house students with similar interests, they also add a faculty involvement component, study groups and programs, extra-curricular activities, and tutorial programs (Rowe 1981).

In 1967, learning communities emerged in the modern era of higher education (Centra 1967). At that time most residence halls consisted of separate male and female quarters with a commons area, which included: dining, recreation, laboratory, offices, etc. Administrators attempted to make residence halls academic environments, rather than merely hotels on campus. However, evaluation attempts at the time showed no statistically significant impact of the programs on student perceptions of an intellectual or cohesive environment (Centra, 1967).

By the early 1970s learning communities of all kinds, including residential colleges, began to emerge all over the country. Many of these programs developed to personalize the educational experience of students attending universities with swelling student populations (Schein & Bowers, 1992). In 1971, Taylor and Hanson looked at the impact of grouping engineering students together in a homogeneous living environment. The results of the study showed a significant cumulative increase in the achievement of the students in the program. The initial success of this initiative encouraged other practitioners to proceed with similar programs.

In 1974, DeCoster and Mable outlined what they called the "purpose and process" of residence education. They called for more than just providing a physical environment for students, but an educational environment as well. By designing a variety of structured environments to meet the diverse needs of students, institutions can better encourage holistic growth (DeCoster and Mable, 1974). Historically, residence hall staff members have claimed that merely by living in residence halls, students would experience more success. Housing departments now refer to their facilities as "residence halls" rather than "dorms" to emphasize that these facilities provide more than just places to eat and sleep. Housing facilities

ideally have developed into learning environments. Many practitioners in higher education have attempted to verify the benefit of residence halls as educational tools by demonstrating their influence on a students' academic success as well as on retention and persistence. However, studies have lead to inconclusive results in support of this hypothesis (Astin, 1973; Blimling, 1989; & Pascarella et al, 1993).

Magnarella (1975) conducted an evaluation of a similar learning community after its first year in existence at the University of Vermont. Magnarella through discussions and a questionnaire discovered that program students indicated a more positive experience in the areas of intellectual atmosphere, educational opportunities, extracurricular opportunities, and community spirit than did non-program students (Magnarella, 1975). In every aspect investigated, the program showed positive impacts. After four years, Magnarella returned to the program at the University of Vermont to re-examine the impacts of the program. The living arrangement continued to have a positive impact on the academic and intellectual quality of the student experience. This unique environment and faculty involvement added to the richness of the experience for the students (Magnarella, 1979).

In 1976, Madson, Kuder, Hartanov, and McKelfresh examined the impact of a learning community on student satisfaction. The program grouped students into living environments by their majors in the College of Forestry and Natural Resources at Colorado State University. Madson et al found students to be more satisfied with the educational benefits of their environment and more positive about their student colleagues. In addition, the students became more aware of activities and organizations within their field and exhibited a higher level of participation in the out-of-class activities than other students (Madson et.al, 1976). In a similar program at Auburn University, Schroeder and Griffin (1976) examined the grouping of engineering students. Researchers found evidence that the program had a positive impact on persistence rates in engineering, renewal rate to the residence halls, and academic achievement (Schroeder and Griffin, 1976).

Following the earlier success of the program with the College of Forestry and Natural Resources, Colorado State University created a similar program housing engineering students (McKelfresh, 1980). While the program did not show a statistically significant impact on grade point averages, students showed greater increases in satisfaction with their environment, the services and facilities provided by the University, and the connection to the College of Engineering than did similar students not involved in the program (McKelfresh, 1980).

With evidence growing in support of learning communities, critics began to emerge in the late 1970s. Some critics claimed that brighter and more talented students would be more likely to be involved in learning communities thus impacting the validity of the research. In response to this criticism, Blimling and Hample (1979) studied the impact of living environments on grade point average across the spectrum of ability level, while controlling for the impact variance from ACT scores, gender, and previous grade point average. The programs showed a statistically significant positive impact on grade point average, even taking into account pre-existing factors. The evidence indicated that the program alone increased student grade point average between .05 and .20 points for the quarter studied (Blimling & Hample, 1979).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1981) examined why learning communities seemed to increase student performance and satisfaction in a number of areas. Their research indicated that the structured learning environment did not directly influence students. However, the environments indirectly impacted students by increasing both the quantity and quality of interaction between students and faculty (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1981). Interactions between faculty and students directly impacted student academic success and satisfaction with their living environments (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1981).

In 1988, Clarke, Miser, and Roberts studied the impact of three different factors of student success and satisfaction: structure of the learning environment, faculty involvement, and academic themes. They found similar results to previous studies; they found that students indicated higher levels of satisfaction with their facilities and program of study than students in traditional residential environments. For those students involved in the learning community, involvement in outside areas increased across the board, from study groups to attendance at parties (Clarke et al, 1988).

After the initial research showing the benefits of academic living units conducted between 1966 and 1978 (DeCoster, 1966; Madson et al, 1976; Ebbers and Stoner, 1972; Pounder, 1973; and Schelhas, 1978), investigators attempted to revisit the research and re-examine the benefits of such programs. This time focusing on women, Golden and Smith (1983) found the same positive benefits: academic atmosphere and intellectuality, involvement, emotional support, independence, order and organization. In addition, the researchers found a decreased level of academic competition within the academic living unit and an increased level of academic cooperation compared to other living units. A similar decrease in social orientation also appeared for the learning community students; students not involved in a structured living environment seemed to "party" more. Research showed that less restrictive peer groups led to this finding (Golden and Smith, 1983).

Despite these studies, Schein and Bowers (1992) declared that the impact of learning environments on academic performance and retention remained unclear, due to a lack of control for pre-existing factors. This parallels the difficulties researchers had in determining the impact of residence halls in general.

In one of the most recent studies of learning communities, Pike, Schroeder, and Berry (1997) examined the impact of a freshman interest group, a learning community including a first-year seminar. Their study found that the residential learning communities "did not improve students' academic achievement and persistence directly, but did indirectly improve students' success by enhancing their incorporation into college" (Pike, et al, 1997, abstract). Their study found a significant positive impact in faculty-student interaction, social integration, and institutional commitment, while the academic achievement intercept was lower for the students in the program. The program had positively impacted students in three out of four critical factors in Tinto's conceptual model (Pike et. al, 1997). According to Tinto (1993), the student will look to their academic and social integration, and if they are satisfied with both, the student will likely stay at the institution. Learning communities aim to integrate students socially and academically in all areas of the collegiate experience (Tinto, 1993). Researchers concluded that the program had an indirect impact on significantly higher levels of academic achievement and persistence (Pike et. al, 1997).

AUTHOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on current research available on learning communities as well as Tinto's conceptual model of retention, the authors have three major recommendations for improving the quality and impact of learning communities. The authors recommend increasing interaction between faculty and students, strategically grouping students, and involving student assistants and mentors.

By creating classroom spaces in residence halls, either by building new facilities or reassigning existing space, colleges and universities can increase student and faculty interaction (Tinto, 1993). Students would then have a concrete means of associating their living environment with a learning environment. For example, a lounge could be reassigned as a classroom space, equipped with a white board, computer access, etc. While creating a functional classroom space, the importance of maintaining the informal environment that a lounge provides should not be overlooked. In such an environment, students tend to be more relaxed and comfortable, and in turn, they are more engaged in learning (Strange, 1994).

Colleges and universities can increase faculty and student interaction by housing interested faculty in apartments within the residence halls. This increases the faculty's accessibility to the students at the times during which students actually study, evenings and nights, increasing the informal student-faculty relationship. For example, the night before a mid-term exam, the faculty member could very easily attend a study session in the residence halls. Faculty could also eat their meals with students in the residence halls, join them for social events, and engage in discussions outside of the classroom environment. The research discussed that increasing student-faculty interaction, both formally and informally, positively influences student persistence (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1981; and Pike et. al, 1997).

The authors' second recommendation for improving learning communities involves strategically group students, either by academic area or extracurricular interests. The authors would prefer that students be

assigned by area of study or major in order to allow for the distribution of academic information and resources to one single place. A first-year student who moves onto a floor consisting of students from the same major will immediately have something in common with other members of his/her floor community. In this environment, social connections will likely develop quickly. Administrators may place students into the same introductory class sections for their majors. As a result, they live with the same students with whom they have some of their classes. Therefore, students can simultaneously develop social and academic connections. When there is a test in one of these common classes, students can easily access classmates with whom they can study. The social pressure to perform academically will likely encourage more students to study, and as a result, grades will improve. Programs such as these have been successful at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (J. Battista, personal communication, April 5, 1999).

While the authors clearly prefer grouping students by academic interest, they also recognize the importance of providing extracurricular interest groupings for students looking for a broader experience, engaging with students outside of their academic program of study. Students could request environments such as health and wellness, alcohol free, or language floors. Depending on the extracurricular interest grouping, having live-in faculty might still be warranted. In situations that do not lend themselves to faculty liaisons, developing a relationship with a university staff member with expertise in this area could be considered.

Finally, the authors recommend more student assistants and mentors in learning communities, in addition to Resident Assistants. Unlike a Resident Assistant, the focus of a student mentor would be solely academic. Upper-class mentors could reside on the floor, serve as teaching assistants in one of the common classes, and serve as academic aids to learning community students. Student assistants could hold study sessions before major exams and serve as general tutors to students in the living environment. The academic mentors would be available during those times that the student study.

The Resident Assistants on these floors could focus on integrating academics into the co-curricular aspects of the learning community. For example, floor social programs could bring professionals in the students' area of study to eat meals with the students. Floors could take excursions to places related to the students' major. For example, a floor of pre-med majors could take a trip to the morgue. This would be beneficial because it increases the integration of the students' academic and social experiences (Tinto, 1993).

In the learning communities of the future, other types of student assistants could help students with a variety of issues such as information technology, research, and writing. Students proficient with computers could become Information Technology Assistants and assist students with computer issues. These student assistants could live in the residence halls and serve the residents who live in that hall. This would be beneficial for all involved; a resident gets prompt assistance from a peer who lives in their residence hall, and the student who provides the assistance gains consulting experience.

CONCLUSION

By taking a brief look at the history of higher education, the authors of this article feel that learning communities have developed from a philosophy prevalent early in American higher education. Today, universities are returning to this philosophy in an effort to create a holistic academic and co-curricular experience for students. In examining the data on learning communities, it has become clear that these environments have at least an indirect relationship with student academic success and faculty interaction. Based on this information, the authors have made recommendations for university administrators. Whether universities are creating new learning communities or looking to make existing programs more effective, the authors recommend increasing interaction between students and faculty members, strategically grouping students, and providing peer mentors and other student assistants.

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