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Inventing and Implementing LLCs at an HBCU in One Year: Lessons Learned

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Inventing and Implementing LLCs at an HBCU in One Year: Lessons Learned

Abstract

Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) have proven to be a successful high impact practice at institutions across the nation. Norfolk State University (NSU), a Historically Black University, recently established a formal LLC program as a part of the University's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). Through a strong partnership with Academic and Student Affairs, NSU implemented and invented LLCs all within one academic year. Similar to the collaborative nature of LLCs, this paper examines the lessons learned from various perspectives (LLC director, teaching dean, faculty liaison, faculty) during the rapid inventing and implementing of LLCs.

Keywords

HBCU, Inventing, Implementing

Introduction

Founded in 1935, Norfolk State University (NSU) in Virginia is one of the nation's Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs). With an enrollment of over 5,000, the University has a residential population of approximately 2,000 students. More than one-third of NSU students are first-generation college students, and more than 90 percent receive financial aid to assist with college costs. Given the vibrancy and diversity of its student body, Norfolk has responded creatively to the problem of retention by drawing on the community's strengths and by innovating in the implementation of LLC's. Engstrom (2008) asserts that if higher educational institutions do not make program changes to meet underprepared students' learning styles and needs, these students will fail. One strategy to address this challenge is the development of LLCs. In 2012, NSU made the decision to implement LLCs in order to enhance its freshmen retention rate, instill a culture of critical inquiry among its students, and increase its graduation rates. An additional goal was to shift the culture of the residence halls by expanding learning beyond the classroom. We hoped that the collaborative nature of LLCs would create a fully engaged campus culture of academic excellence and social inclusiveness among students, staff, faculty, and administrators. The LLC Advisory Committee established to accomplish this mission was (and is) committed to creating LLCs that provided intensive and intentional academic and personal support to students who desire to take advantage of the unique learning experiences these communities provide. These factors are especially valuable considerations in an HBCU with such a high percentage of first generation college students.

In January 2013, the University signaled its commitment to LLCs by hiring the inaugural director of the program. In this new role, the LLC director worked collaboratively with faculty and student affairs professionals to create a formal LLC program at NSU. At the same time, the administration designated funding to support the development, invention, and implementation of LLCs within a limited timeframe of eight months, with the pilot LLCs targeted to start in the Fall of the 2013-2014 academic year. As the program took shape, so did the role of different stakeholders. For instance, the Advisory Committee emerged in a leadership position, with some its members advising the administration about issues and interests in student affairs, enrollment management, and academic affairs. (All academic colleges were included.) Ultimately, two groups of LLCs were developed and implemented during this timeframe. The pilot group of LLCs included two honors college-related LLCs. The second group of LLCs encompassed additional schools and colleges on campus. One LLC within the second group, EMPOWER (with an emphasis on social and economic justice), is highlighted here because of its unique position as a sophomore LLC in the School

of Social Work, where it demonstrates the power of a discipline-specific theme.

In what follows, we describe the lessons learned during this swift implementation period. Much like the collaborations in the development of an LLC, this article reflects the cooperative nature and the perspectives of the individuals involved in the successful implementation of the NSU LLCs.

Lesson Learned: Match University Needs

LLCs at NSU are tied to our accreditation. As we discussed how to launch an LLC program, we realized that it had a natural fit with the university's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP),¹ which is designed to enhance critical thinking skills in all aspects of curricular and co-curricular experiences for undergraduate students. The establishment of a structured LLC program at NSU reflects the university's efforts to further develop structured co- and extra-curricular activities designed to reinforce cognitive complexity and learning in the classroom. For example, advancing human rights and social and economic justice is a central component to social work practice. This content theme was natural for the development of the Social and Economic Justice LLC, EMPOWER. EMPOWER encourages students to explore empowerment in the context of individual responsibility to local, regional, and global communities. As such, EMPOWER fits well with the pedagogic aims of LLCs.

Another starting point for the development of LLCs was the use of previous successful campus programs as models. Several ongoing programs possessed different components of a successful LLC, such as mentors, common residential areas, existing integrative curriculum, and community projects/partnerships. For example, because the Honors College already shared the ethos of community-based learning, it easily incorporated the new vocabulary and ideas of an LLC, such as paired courses. Another advantage of working with the Honors College was that most of its students already lived in a common location: Midrise Residential Honors College. Midrise also offered group-meeting spaces amenable to LLC activities.

Lesson Learned: Provide LLC Awareness

We learned that it is essential to provide thorough LLC awareness to the campus community, community partners, administration, student affairs, faculty, and students. The delivery method for this information is equally important and therefore requires attention to the interests of each constituency:

¹ The QEP Plan includes "R.E.A.S.O.N (Reflect, Evaluate, Argue, Solve, Obtain, and Network): Creating Coherent Pathways to Develop Critical Thinking Skills in Students" (Norfolk State University, 2013).

- Faculty are focused on their own research agendas and want to know how their personal research interests can be tied to an LLC.
- Administrators consider the return on the investment and how the program can impact student success through tangible, measureable outcomes.
- Community partners need to know the benefit to the community.
- Students should be informed about the enhanced experience (extra activities, trips, etc.) to help their academic success.

Responses from all stakeholders indicated that people responded positively to information that was targeted to their circumstances and institutional context. For instance, when we emphasized that participation in an LLC comes with the benefits of built-in support from faculty (both academic and student affairs), fellow LLC participants, and other LLCs, students were motivated to join.

Lesson Learned: Provide LLC Administrative Support

Because LLCs were new to campus, faculty were provided with opportunities to learn about and participate in the initiative. During summer 2013, faculty worked with a training team that included a faculty liaison, the LLC director, and two LLC advisory committee members at the Washington Center National Summer Institute on Learning Communities (NSILC). Upon the team's return, a series of workshops that focused on proposal development were designed to foster transformative learning using theory and practice of adult learning perspectives (McQuiggan, 2012). These workshops provided faculty the opportunity to investigate, experiment, discuss, and collaborate with other faculty as they developed LLCs in an intentionally collaborative environment designed to reflect the expected LLC program atmosphere. Many faculty reported that the proposal development workshops were helpful in understanding the LLC concept and that they appreciated how the format encouraged ongoing discussions. This affirmed the training team's decision to replicate the LLC atmosphere for faculty to augment their understanding, interest, and commitment. This approach also reinforced the fact that teachers are often required to rethink their beliefs and teaching methods during times of change/growth (Lawler, 2003; Gregson & Sturko, 2007) and that the LLCs offered the potential to enhance rather than suppress each faculty member's unique characteristics, including the context of learning and the process used to deliver the education and training (Lawler, 2003).

Lesson Learned: Incorporate and Build on Past Success

Because we developed the pilot LLCs by integrating them into existing programs that included some of the LLC characteristics, we were able to share

funding with already established sources. For EMPOWER sophomore students, existing courses served as the two common foundational courses in the Social Work curriculum: Introduction to Social Work and Human Behavior and the Social Environment I. These two courses are included in the required curriculum approved by the accrediting organization (Council on Social Work Education) and have demonstrated successful outcomes. During these core courses, sophomore students begin to develop a sense of the social work profession and engage in activities (scenario exploration, service learning) that promote awareness of social and economic justice from the perspective of the individual (micro), family (mezzo), and community (macro). Thus, the course content matched the LLC theme of social and economic justice. Student academic programming (creation of flyers, administrative support, refreshments, and presenter fees) was supported by student affairs.

While the honors students needed to attend more events and had additional writing assignments, all of the students in the three LLCs shared certain major projects and activities. For instance, the Service Learning Project—“It Takes a Spartan Village: Fresh Foods and Good Nutrition for our Neighbors”—included raising funds, creating recipes and reports about the nutritional value of the foods, packing boxes, and delivering full Thanksgiving Day meals to over 50 families in the housing area closest to the university. Each of the three LLCs planned and executed some aspect of the project, further demonstrating a collaborative approach between LLCs. Collaboration allowed students to have a broader impact in the community, reaching more families, and permitted each LLC to tailor its contributions to match its strengths: Leadership Academy LLC provided outreach and fundraising to support the event while “Honors” LLC developed the literature to share with families about the nutritional value of the food.

Lesson Learned: Develop Supportive Teams

In the newly established position, the LLC director fostered relationships across divisions and established collaboration as the foundations of a successful program. Beyond fostering support and collaboration, the director identified a core group whose members could ignite interest and excitement in others—administrators, faculty, and students alike. The teams and committees became interlocking and overlapping, forming a network of support and action.

While faculty and student affairs professionals focused on programming and curriculum, the LLC Advisory Committee provided a unique form of leadership. Comprised of various constituents who openly supported the implementation of LLCs, the Advisory committee included faculty from each of the university’s academic colleges and schools, two deans, the assistant vice president for institutional research and planning, the vice provost, representatives from the

Student Success Center, the executive director for housing and residence life, a representative from student affairs, the director for undergraduate admissions and recruitment, the LLC director, and the most important stakeholder of all—students. This group served as the steering committee that would provide guidance as the university sought to expand the programs. The broad participation helped to establish LLCs on campus. It also strengthened the relationships with community partners who embraced the idea of working on campus to promote social and economic justice. For instance, *Virginia Organizing*, a nonprofit organization, welcomed the opportunity to become involved on campus in voter education.

The Advisory Committee also played a crucial role in planning, which began during the implementation of the first pilot LLCs in 2013. To start, the committee developed a formal proposal process for new LLCs, which included provisions for faculty development training. Eventually, seven proposals were submitted, and the LLC Advisory Committee selected four proposals to be initiated during fall 2014. To encourage timely planning for the newly funded LLCs programs, deliverables were required by predetermined deadlines. To support the completion of these items, all LLC faculty teams became part of a larger learning community and attended bi-monthly meetings during the semester as well as a retreat in the summer. The lesson we learned through the feedback from learning community members was that it was valuable to have specific predetermined team meeting times, a well-planned agenda, and community building activities. Learning community members have shared that they enjoyed these team meetings because they were able to refine LLC plans and develop deliverables (syllabi, assessment plan, co-curricular activities, and an article for the NSU R.E.A.S.O.N Journal) while sharing expertise and experiences. We also learned that the interactions within the LLCs were enhanced; members reported increased collaborations with other LLCs, which enlarged the reach of individual courses.

From the start, academic and student affairs built strong teams that became fully integrated as they partnered with academic teaching faculty. While the faculty members remained the instructors of record for each course, their student affairs partners were true co-teachers, taking responsibility for most of the life and study skills taught in Introduction to University Life (IUL), which accounted for roughly half of the curriculum. Students frequently mentioned the value of having multiple perspectives in the classroom, especially for the different areas of content, including time management, career exploration, campus services, and study skills. Our participation in the NSILC contributed substantively to what would blossom into a professional learning community.

We also innovated with Student/Faculty teams. For The EMPOWER LLC, successful upper level students were recruited to act as peer mentors to the

participating EMPOWER sophomore students. These peer mentors received training throughout the academic year in academic assistance and tutoring, relationship consulting, and advising and provided ongoing support in a semi-structured environment. Their work helped to create a supportive environment in the context of enhanced learning experiences and in a community that was committed to the development of discipline-based critical thinking (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Students reported they enjoyed seeing their mentor on campus to talk about “school and life.” Although we knew the students would benefit from the mentors, it was not until LLC participants started asking “will the mentors be there?” that we realized the impact of this relationship, which encompassed and integrated academics with a wide variety of extra-curricular activities such as voter education, stress management, bowling, and study skills. The peer mentoring component also helped to retain minority students (Good, Halpin, & Halpin, 2000).

The EMPOWER LLC demonstrates the power of a cross-divisional approach. The core EMPOWER LLC advisory group included a diverse group of individuals who each contributed unique areas of strength to the development of the LLC. The team included: the Resident Advisor who shared her own insightful experience as a social work sophomore; a student affairs representative from residence who assisted with co-curricular activities; the administrative faculty—the undergraduate program director and master’s program director—who assisted with co-curricular planning; and faculty co-facilitators who focused on academics. Student affairs representative were also involved in our collaborative model. For example, the LLC co-facilitators learned it was more effective to have the younger Resident Advisor notify the participants about upcoming activities because she used text messaging instead of the e-mails typically sent from faculty. In general, we learned to rely on the strengths and community role of advisory members in order to organize, communicate, and connect, both inside and outside of the University.

Lesson Learned: Incorporate Assessment

The pilot year incorporated several assessments but did not represent a comprehensive approach. For instance, we learned that during the first year LLC participation showed an eighty-one percent (81%) retention rate for the LLC cohort in comparison to seventy-four percent (74%) of non-LLC students. This 7% difference in the retention rate is critical during a time when higher education institutions, especially HBCUs, are facing student retention challenges. LLC students also showed an increase in their critical thinking skills, as measured by the University Proficiency Profile test scores.

The overwhelming support expressed by students to develop LLCs contributed to the decision to implement (Fall 2013) and expand (Fall 2014)

LLCs. The Housing & Dining Master Plan Study conducted in spring 2013 explored redefining the Spartan residential experience to include living and learning communities. The results showed that eighty-seven percent (87%) of students expressed interest in participating in an LLC regardless of their classification (n=498). Additionally, the administration reviewed and observed the benefits to the LLC participants and decided to build on these successes with the expansion of LLCs in different colleges and populations.

Finally, we learned from the initial LLCs implemented in Fall 2013 the need to incorporate individual LLC assessments. For the new group of LLCs implemented in Fall 2014, one of the required deliverables was a formal assessment component. Since the initial LLCs incorporated minimal general assessment (as mentioned above), it was important for funding sources, knowledge gain, and potential evaluations to closely examine individual learning community items related directly to the type of program. We learned the newer individual LLCs (2014) should measure specific relevant content related to teaching/learning, service learning, mentoring relationships, community impact or other unique areas related to the LLC. LLCs were expected to incorporate specific assessment plans that related directly to the goals for the individual LLC. For example, since LLC students participating in the EMPOWER LLC were expected to increase their civic engagement, the LLC needed an assessment to measure their direct participation in those activities. The EMPOWER assessment plan also included using reflective journals to measure students' growth in comprehension of vital social and economic justice concepts such as oppression and discrimination. Inclusion of well-developed assessments helped guide future LLCs.

Implications and Conclusion

Finding the time required to implement LLCs at Norfolk State University was a challenge for all involved, but the promise of successful student learning outcomes made the time commitment worthwhile. This success is demonstrated in the fall-to-fall retention rate of the initial LLC cohort, which was 7% higher than non-LLC participants. LLCs show an increase in retention. Developing and implementing an LLC in a short time frame was an additional challenge to the success of the project. But we learned that planning and implementing several LLCs in a short time frame can be done. This journey is shared to highlight some considerations for the effective development and implementation of LLCs when there are time constraints:

- *matching the university needs* as a strategy for garnering support from the university community. Because we matched existing needs at the university (goals and curriculum) and worked towards improvement, the

university administration was strongly supportive.

- *generating additional support by establishing an LLC awareness* across the campus community. Once we informed people about the benefits of LLCs and the valuable contributions LLCs can make to the university community and individual students, campus members and individual students wanted to participate.
- *providing LLC administrative support* to those determined to commit to the implementation of LLCs. Supportive administration was essential for the successful development of the LLCs at NSU.
- *incorporating and building on past success*. Using existing successful foundational courses as a basis for the LLCs curriculum made the implementation easier and more effective from the beginning.
- *developing supportive teams*. As a result of our focus on an overall supportive environment and a positive experience for those involved with the LLCs, students enjoyed having both student affairs and academic affairs perspectives in the classroom, faculty found the learning communities to offer valuable experiences planning time, and the leadership team offered a strong foundation to the campus LLCs.
- *completing assessments* in support of requests for funding and to advance the research-based development of LLCs.

As important as all of these elements are, one overarching concept influenced all of the lessons learned. As Lenning, Hill, Saunders, Solan, & Stokes (2013) observe, “There must be a strong and intricate collaborative partnership between academic affairs and student affairs for such LCs to succeed” (p.264). Ericksen and Walker (2015) have similarly found that collaboration is a key element in the success of LLCs at HBCUs. At NSU, collaboration was critical. Through collaboration and the incorporation of many different perspectives and lessons, we were able to implement formal LLCs at an HBCU within a one year time frame. More importantly, the collaborative partnerships between many different individuals and groups—administration, academic and student affairs faculty, LLC team members, and community partners—enhanced working relationships and contributed to the success of the LLCs themselves. Smith and Williams (2007) explain that the benefit of collaborative partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs is that they can “create new common ground for learning” (p.1). Just as the ideal development of LLCs mirrors the elements necessary to ensure an effective, ongoing community of learners, our LLCs provided encouragement for academic faculty and student affairs professionals to explore innovative ideas to increase retention and support student learning.

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