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Beyond Improved Retention: Building Value-Added Success on a Broad Foundation

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Abstract

Many have documented the positive benefits of Living and Learning Communities (LLCs), but creating an environment that truly integrates living and learning across campus can be a challenge. In this paper we chronicle an LLC program that was intentionally built upon a broad foundation. By including faculty, staff, and student leader representation from across the campus - from admissions and academic affairs to student engagement, residence life, and enrollment management - Cabrini College has created a program that has gone beyond the numerical targets of increased retention and increased academic success. We believe the program has created transformational experiences for many student participants, and that these experiences are the result of the LLC's integrated design. After providing a history of the program and its unique institutional structure, and offering suggestions for other institutions designing LLCs, we present both quantitative and qualitative measures of success.

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Introduction

Beyond improving retention, beyond the reports from numbers and statistics, what are the value-added successes a Living and Learning Community (LLC) program can offer to its students—and what strategies can help set them in place? A closer look at one effective program addresses just these questions. Cabrini College's LLC program provides incoming, first-year students the opportunity to apply into one of seven interdisciplinary living and learning communities, each with its own thematic culture. Though these LLCs have contributed to higher fall-to-fall retention rates, a broader and deeper story can be told by individual student successes observed across campus and over time. The impact felt by students via their LLC experience leads to increased levels of comfort approaching and working with faculty, staff, and administrators—these relational ties point to the LLCs' wider effects. High expectations set by LLC faculty contribute significantly to students' academic progress. At the same time, students are consistently meeting the challenges faculty and staff set to embrace diversity and embody inclusivity—all in the process of building community. Each of these value-added benefits of the LLC experience contribute to individual growth; furthermore, the benefits accrue as students' confidence rises and they seek out new opportunities and new communities beyond the first-year, ultimately showcasing their leadership skills.

While the results of any program come from the energy and dedication of the faculty, staff, and students who participate in it, we assert that the success of our program would not be possible without the mutual, intentional, and ongoing efforts of a broad, cross-campus collaboration, the foundation upon which our effective LLC program has been built. We sketch here a short history of Cabrini's LLC program and then turn to the institutional structures we created—specifically, the promotion of a Director of the First-Year Experience responsible for the coordination of the college's Living and Learning Community program and the development of a Living and Learning Community Council—to unite faculty, staff and students to share their energy, vision, and enthusiastic engagement. While providing key indicators of success that document how the program has resulted in increased retention and academic success, we also highlight a student story and faculty reflection that illustrate growth and success not easily captured in numerical measures. These stories of individuals' growth illustrate the real success of the program.

A History of LLCs at Cabrini: Building a Cross-Campus Foundation

Over the past six years, Cabrini College's Living and Learning Community (LLC) program has grown markedly: in the number of communities offered, the

number of first-year students applying to and enrolling in LLCs, and the number of faculty teaching within these communities. Building this LLC program has become a cross-campus effort noteworthy for its reliance on both full and part-time faculty as well as key staff and administrators from the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Center for Student Engagement and Leadership, Enrollment Management, the Admissions Office, Marketing and Communication, the Office of the First-Year Experience, and Residence Life. A seamless marketing and communication plan and a quick and easy application process have led to an increased number of student applicants. Dedicated faculty and staff and several student leadership roles within the LLC structure—including Resident Assistants, Master Learners, Orientation Leaders, Peer Mentors, and Classroom Coaches—have contributed markedly both to campus-specific successes (from deep learning outcomes to strong retention numbers for Cabrini College’s LLC students) and to external successes: Cabrini College has hosted visits from campuses across the region and nation.

In the fall of 2007 Cabrini College, via funding from a Title III Grant, launched its first official LLC, *Voices of Justice* (VOJ), an initiative that began as a direct effort to increase fall-to-fall, first-year retention. This LLC housed 21 students in a first-year residence hall and engaged these students in a linked curriculum that spanned five courses across the entire year. In six years, Cabrini College’s LLC program has expanded to seven LLCs, each with a different thematic culture, that house approximately 125 of our first-year students (one-third of our incoming class); each offers an integrative curriculum spanning at least four courses.

Director’s Role in Creating Connections: Marketing and Recruitment

At the start of the third year of the Title III Grant, as the LLC program slowly grew, the college recognized the need to create a director position to oversee the initiative. This role has proved to be a lynchpin for the program’s integration and growth. The Director of the First-Year Experience oversees the LLC Program and worked diligently to establish a plan for marketing and communication—a collaboration that brought together the areas of Enrollment Management, Admissions, Marketing and Communications, and the Office of the First-Year Experience (FYE). Creating an explicit, interconnected relationship among these four areas of the college led to a straightforward and accessible application process, a formative step that has resulted in incoming first-year students being highly informed of the opportunities LLCs offer on campus.

The accessible application process began with the creation of an interactive campus [website](#). The Director of FYE’s relationship with Marketing and Communication, specifically the college’s Webmaster, led to a website that

speaks to prospective students about each of the college's LLCs, offers "Student Spotlights" highlighting the experience of both current and past LLC students, and allows students to apply for their preferred LLC via an [online application](#).

The collaboration between the Office of the First-Year Experience and Marketing and Communication continued in the form of a detailed LLC brochure (see appendix), a booklet that is mailed to all prospective students when they receive their acceptance package. Because Enrollment Management is responsible for sending out any and all communication materials to prospective students, their involvement has also been essential in the LLC recruitment process.

The college's effort, specifically in the area of Admissions, to use the LLC program as a means to attract prospective first-year students led to a spotlight of the LLC program. In April of each year, all prospective students invited to Accepted Student Day are scheduled to attend a presentation led by a team of faculty and student leaders—representing multiple LLCs—that speaks to all facets of the college's LLC program. This gathering allows students and families to ask questions pertaining to the program and its application process. We have found this chance to present the LLC program to all prospective students serves as an essential recruitment opportunity, complementing the College's LLC web presence and brochure.

Fostering Faculty Involvement

In addition to collaborating with staff across the campus to improve student recruitment and increase the number of LLC applicants, the Director of the First-Year Experience also used various platforms to recruit strong faculty motivated to propose ideas, create interdisciplinary curricula, and use their engaged pedagogies in the LLC program. New Faculty Orientations and faculty development workshops have proven key among these efforts. In fall of 2007 Cabrini's LLC program consisted of only three full-time faculty members. In six years' time, it has grown to 16 full-time faculty (20.8% of the college's full-time faculty) and three part-time faculty (two are full-time staff), all committed to collaborating across all sectors of the campus—a worldview that has proven central to the success of our LLC program. As well, LLC work has become a highly valued service to the college and a recognized contribution for tenure and promotion.

As our LLC program has continued to grow, we have drawn upon strategies from other colleges and universities, gathering much wisdom and practical assistance from the Washington Center in the summer of 2008. Borrowing on a model developed by the College of Charleston in South Carolina, a fellow institution participating in the 2008 National Summer Institute on Learning Communities, we decided our campus would benefit from developing and implementing an LLC Council. This council consists of all LLC Faculty Directors

and key staff members including the Director of the First-Year Experience, Director of Residence Life, Assistant Director of the Center for Student Engagement and Leadership, and Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning—all offices closely involved with the LLC program.

Throughout its existence, the LLC Council has taken the initiative to develop and revise important documents related to the growth of the college's LLC program. For example, each LLC at Cabrini College is comprised of a faculty team typically made up of a Faculty Director and two Faculty Fellows. The LLC Council developed a "Guidelines and Expectations" document to define and distinguish the difference between the roles of the LLC Faculty Director and the LLC Faculty Fellows. The process of clarifying these roles increased faculty ownership of the LLC program, in addition to articulating important expectations.

Understanding the importance of assessment and wanting to improve upon the LLC experience for our first-year students, the LLC Council charged itself with creating an assessment tool to be administered to both LLC and non-LLC first-year students for comparative purposes. This assessment tool is currently administered at the conclusion of the fall and spring semester to monitor the impact of the LLC at the close of one semester as compared to a full academic year. Undertaking this process challenged our LLC Council to review and revise the LLC program's learning outcomes to ensure we were appropriately assessing them. Our shared goal for this assessment process was for all constituents connected with our LLC program to develop shared understanding about the ways students are influenced by their LLC experience in regard to their academic endeavors and their wider engagement with the campus community.

In addition to the projects described above, the LLC Council reviews and approves new LLC proposals. Faculty have the opportunity to propose new LLCs in November of each academic year. Subsequently, the LLC Council is charged with reviewing all applications and responding with either an approval or a recommendation for revisions. Once an LLC is approved, an 18-month preparatory period begins to ensure the faculty team is prepared to launch the new LLC. Over this 18-month timeline, the Director of the First-Year Experience in collaboration with the Chair of the LLC Council, members of the LLC Council, and the Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning offer professional development opportunities. These generally occur at the conclusion of each semester, timed to allow all LLC faculty—including those faculty teaching in the newly approved LLC—to reflect on the LLC program and their individual LLC experiences alike, while also allowing time to prepare for future semesters.

Faculty Reflection

The following reflection, which comes from the Faculty Director of Cabrini College's *Realizing Dreams* LLC, speaks to this faculty member's sense of her own development; she discusses how her LLC teaching experience has had a positive impact on her teaching and scholarship. She also acknowledges that the experience in her community wasn't always perfect, yet the struggles that occur ultimately lend themselves to creating a stronger community:

I really appreciate how the LLC experience allows me to create interdisciplinary connections with my colleagues in other departments. While we have a solid foundation of linked assignments and methods for integrating our course content across four classes in writing, literature, psychology, and history, we are constantly working to improve how we weave our course curricula. After creating the LLC, we realized that we have similar research interests and over time we have adjusted our texts, assignments, and even redesigned an entire course, in order to focus more on popular culture as it relates to our original theme of "Realizing Dreams." Through the LLC, I have the opportunity to publish with faculty outside of my discipline and co-teach in innovative ways that are at the core of liberal arts learning.

As my first cohort of LLC students graduates this year, I reflect back on the past four years of the *Realizing Dreams* LLC and remember that it was not always a "dream." While this is a program I believe in wholeheartedly, the LLC experience can bring challenges that sometimes seem insurmountable. One year our students had conflicts that were so destructive and deeply rooted that it impacted every aspect of the students' ability to learn and grow. As a result, I, along with two Faculty Fellows and the Director of the First-Year Experience, had to facilitate small group mediation sessions with the students. While it seemed tedious and trying at the time, it helped the students to learn conflict resolution skills and it forced our LLC faculty to solidify our communication and level of dedication to the community as we dealt with everything from a violent student to students with severe mental health issues. After experiencing a total breakdown of a community, we have learned how to better anticipate interpersonal conflicts and how to proactively teach students about listening, dialoging, apologizing, forgiving, and respecting difference."

It is this opportunity to work together across disciplines that faculty teaching in the LLC Program appreciate and value. While obstacles understandably will arise in particular communities, such obstacles allow students and faculty to experience growth together. This is the real definition of a community.

Success in Numbers: Increased retention and academic success

The dedication of all members of the LLC program stands as a hallmark of its success—a committed, congenial group that other campuses regularly commend, noting our genuine collegiality. In fact, on campus faculty and staff intentionally strive for open communication and emphasize the relationship building that is so important for effective collaboration. Faculty are invested in developing not only the in-class experiences for the students but also the co-curricular programming—and such integrated learning takes much planning and coordinating of logistics. Arguably, it is our concerted commitment to connecting community building to diverse learning contexts that has helped us achieve an 80% retention rate for all LLC first-year students—nearly a 12% average increase when compared to the retention of non-LLC first-year students at Cabrini College over the past four years (Table 1).¹

Academic Year	Size of Freshman Class	# of LLCs	Total # of Students in LLCs (% of Freshman Class)	Fall to Fall Retention of Freshman Class	Fall to Fall Retention of LLC Students	Fall to Fall Retention of Non-LLC Students
2008-2009 AY	503 Students	4 LLCs	105 Students (20.9%)	65.80%	80%	62.10%
2009-2010 AY	357 Students	6 LLCs	129 Students (36.1%)	67.80%	72.10%	65.40%
2010-2011 AY	337 Students	6 LLCs	116 Students (34.4%)	73.30%	80.20%	69.70%
2011-2012 AY	322 Students	7 LLCs	128 Students (39.8%)	73.90%	80.50%	67.70%
2012-2013 AY	384 Students	7 LLCs	123 Students (32.0%)	-	-	-

Figure 1: Comparison of LLC Retention to First-Year Retention

Retention of first-year LLC students compared to the entire first-year class and the population of non-LLC students over four consecutive academic years.

But the success extends beyond retention. The relationships LLC students develop with faculty in their first year point to an increased level of academic preparedness. Our students report striving to reach and exceed the level of expectations that LLC faculty have set for the community. This connection stands

¹ The Director of Institutional Research at Cabrini College assisted in the compiling of this data. It’s important to note that following the 2008-2009 Academic Year, the college made the strategic decision to significantly decrease the size of the first-year class.

out when we assess the difference in academic progress (defined as achieving a 2.0 or higher at the end of the first and the second semester of the first-year) between full-time first-year students who participated in our LLCs compared to those first-year students who did not. LLC students are more likely to make academic progress than non-LLC students leading to a strongly significant relationship between the LLC experience and academic progress ($\chi^2(1) = 7.453$, $p = .006$); in this assessment the type of LLC is independent of academic progress ($\chi^2(4) = 4.951$, $p = .292$). Value added indeed.

Success Beyond the Numbers: Student Transformation and Leadership

Academic persistence and success are certainly important measures for any LLC program, but the whole notion of ‘living and learning’ points to broader possibilities for student transformation. We support this broader transformation through LLC coursework, which is designed to help students gain confidence to engage across campus, seeking out niches beyond their LLC, while maintaining the possibilities for staying connected to their thematic LLC as student leaders in subsequent terms.

Cabrini College’s curriculum is infused with a commitment to social justice—a disposition we hope to transmit to all students. In our LLCs we introduce this approach through a course called *Engagements with the Common Good*, a first-year seminar that combines the rigor of writing, critical thinking, compassionate action and responsible research with theories of social justice. LLC faculty take seriously the college’s mission as a Catholic institution that welcomes learners of all faiths, cultures and backgrounds, and seeks to prepare them to become engaged citizens of the world. Our LLC classes are often a critical entry point in helping to shape or shift students’ understanding of “diversity” from something like “tolerance” towards a broader disposition that embraces the spirit of Catholic social justice teaching and an engaged stance in the world. The intentional collaboration between Student Development and Academic Affairs facilitates this form of integrative, developmental learning through activities that link exploration and action and through modeling perspectives that embody pluralism and inclusivity, both curricular and co-curricular. Granted, the work of forming and embodying a disposition is ongoing—a lifetime commitment. But the seeds for such a disposition, such an outlook, are planted during the students’ first-year experience.

One compelling example of developmental transformation growing out of the broad-based nature of our LLC program comes from a student in the inaugural *Voices of Justice* (VOJ) LLC. Barbara’s story (the name of this student is a pseudonym) speaks volumes about the depth and breadth of change possible in first-year students’ lives; in fact, the Voj faculty see this student’s story as

foregrounding the college's emphasis on relational ways of knowing that exist across our campus:

Barbara entered the learning community with strong convictions that rested in her evangelical Protestant upbringing. She struggled with the content in the fall *Faith and Justice* class because the course challenged her to explore views beyond those she had encountered as she grew up within her faith tradition....Although the first semester proved difficult for Barbara, through intense work in interfaith dialogue and relational ways of knowing, Barbara emerged from our first-year learning community experience with a more open-minded attitude...Throughout the rest of her college career, Barbara employed these skills, engaging across the campus with her peers in diverse efforts and initiatives....At the height of her engagement, Barbara was the president of the College's Black Student Union and La Raza (the Latino student organization). The college deemed Barbara a diversity leader and, in that role, she provided tours as a campus ambassador, served on two diversity task forces, and sat on the Campus Culture Committee of the Board of Trustees. She also spearheaded efforts to establish a soul food lunch, gospel choir concerts, and spoken word/poetry slams on campus....Through the learning community experience [Barbara] developed the skills—and disposition—that allowed her to maintain her principles while working tirelessly on efforts that opened up spaces for all campus constituents to express themselves and their unique perspectives. (Watterson, Rademacher, & Mace, 2012)

Clearly, Barbara's story offers a portrait of widening horizons, of deepening realizations. And it is a story that goes far beyond mere retention statistics. It underscores the confidence that students gain through their LLC experience, and has come to typify the kind of transformation possible through the LLC program. Cast succinctly, Barbara's peers, across our Living and Learning Communities, grow into leaders ready to explore new areas of the college—as Master Learners, Peer Mentors, Resident Assistants, Classroom Coaches, Catholic Relief Service Ambassadors, Orientation Leaders, Peer Tutors, Student Government Representatives—the list goes on.

Fostering a strong network of student leaders in each of our Living and Learning Communities allows first-year LLC students to connect with potential mentors who, as “veterans,” have a common experience. Learning from Middlebury College in Vermont and their Commons Residential Advisors, each of the LLCs at Cabrini College has a Master Learner—an upper-class student who

lives on the residence hall (in addition to the Resident Assistant) and serves as a mentor and tutor to first-year LLC students. Master Learners have typically been a part of the LLC experience in their first year and now share their experience and their curricular success with incoming first-year students to ensure their academic and social successes, too.

Each of the College's Master Learners undergoes a comprehensive training through the Center for Student Engagement and Leadership (SEaL) and the Office of the First-Year Experience to prepare for this leadership role. In order to develop strong relationships with their first-year students on the day of their arrival, Master Learners serve as Orientation Leaders during New Student Orientation. The decision to carve out such a role arose from collaborative efforts between the Director of the Center for Student Engagement and Leadership (SEaL) and the Director of the First-Year Experience. In addition to connecting with the area of Student Development, Master Learners work directly alongside LLC faculty, meeting regularly with all constituents to collaboratively develop new initiatives aimed at enhancing Cabrini College's LLC program, and more importantly, mentor their peers during the first-year—deepening the campus culture of community-building.

The Master Learner role serves as the focal leadership role in the LLC Program at Cabrini College; however, a team of student leaders works collectively to enhance the first-year experience for LLC students. Upper-class student leaders who are past LLC students may serve as either Peer Mentors or Classroom Coaches in specific LLC courses. Peer Mentors team with a faculty member in a one-credit College Success Seminar to co-facilitate dialogue pertaining to course topics that include academic honesty, the college's *Justice Matters* curriculum, financial literacy, etc. This role differs from that of Classroom Coaches who function as in-class peer tutors, assisting students with the curriculum in specific LLC courses. This team of student leaders—Master Learners, Classroom Coaches, and Peer Mentors—along with the Resident Assistant, work together to offer strong relationships and support systems to ensure student success in the first-year.

The relationships students build across the LLC are significant; they provide students with a sense of confidence that carries over to other dimensions of their first-year experience. This confidence, while hard to measure, is enacted across campus, through daily interactions with faculty, staff, and fellow students, from semester to semester.

Conclusions: Importance of a Strong Foundation

Cabrini College's LLC program may have begun as a retention initiative funded through a Title III Grant, but it is now woven throughout the fabric of the

campus culture. We continue to grow and continue to explore together; currently we are experimenting with different cohorts—developmental learners, honors students, major-specific communities—as we assess various LLC and learning community models to further build on our initial successes. What we have come to know is that LLCs at Cabrini College contribute value to our first-year students' college experience, leading them to be more active in the campus and surrounding communities.

Building a cross-campus foundation that includes academics, student development, enrollment management, and marketing and communications is crucial to the success of an LLC program. Understanding the importance of having a Director of the First-Year Experience to initiate and foster these cross-campus relationships and the role of an LLC Council in establishing grounds for faculty input in the continual improvement of this program have proven essential to building the broad foundation of Cabrini College's LLCs. Financial support from the college—a programming budget and faculty stipends for both Faculty Directors and Faculty Fellows—demonstrably values the time and work that faculty dedicate to this initiative. Only when all constituents, across campus, participate in creating, delivering, and implementing the first-year students' experience can an LLC program reach its maximum potential. Offering students the opportunity to be part of a community, providing an optimal student-to-faculty ratio that allows for relationship building, and including student leaders as support systems in various capacities, are all key elements within our LLC model. All these components, taken together, create a positive living environment and contribute to the value-added successes.

Alongside individual contributions, it is the broad institutional support—the intentional and concerted setting in place of structural components—that strengthens, empowers, and ultimately sustains the program. The collegiality and collaboration of our campus-wide team undergird the value-added successes. Working together, the LLC program continues to engage in a process of building for the common good, refining our LLCs developmentally, year by year.

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