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Lessons from a Scale-Up of Residentially Linked Courses

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Lessons from a Scale-Up of Residentially Linked Courses

Abstract

One form of learning community involves students taking a shared academic course while living together. At Elon University between 2011 and 2015, in a partnership between academic and student life portions of the university, this form of learning community was scaled up to include more than half of first-year students in the fall semester. Each cohort of students lived in a residential neighborhood together and took one of two required four-credit general education courses, COR 110 (an interdisciplinary seminar) or ENG 110 (a writing course). Lessons learned across the five years include the importance of building with faculty guidance, linking to neighborhoods (not halls), integrating faculty development (and not adding it, whenever possible), being attentive to building design and management, rewarding faculty and staff leadership, and assessing and experimenting rigorously.

Keywords

learning community, general education, high impact practices, residential linkage, seminar

Introduction

There have been numerous calls to increase the number of students involved in learning communities based on evidence that they facilitate student engagement and better outcomes (Kuh, 2008; Lenning et al., 2013; Rocconi, 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Positive outcomes associated with learning communities have included a better transition to college (Huerta & Bray, 2013; Inkelas et al., 2007), higher persistence and graduation rates (Buch & Spaulding, 2008; Huerta & Bray, 2013; Maltby et al., 2016), an enriching educational environment (Inkelas et al., 2007; Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010), civic engagement (Inkelas et al., 2007), higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011; Zhao & Kuh 2004), better interactions with others (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Inkelas et al., 2007; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011; Zhao and Kuh 2004), and others. Interestingly, learning community participation is often indirectly, not directly, related to educational gains through the mediator of student engagement (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011; Rocconi, 2011).

One institution that has embraced learning communities is Elon University, a comprehensive institution in North Carolina with around 6,000 undergraduates. The campus includes 59% females/41% males and ethnic diversity of 18%. Students come from across the country and world, but most are from the eastern United States (top states are NC, MA, NJ, CT, and MD). Most Elon first-year students make the transition to college in traditional residence halls, which are located in four themed “neighborhoods” of several hundred students each. In recent years, each neighborhood has adopted an annual theme such as global citizenship, sustainability, leadership, wellness, or institutional history.

At Elon, several different types of learning communities are utilized in the first year. One type involves students taking a four-credit course in the Elon Core Curriculum while also living together in a residential neighborhood. Over a five-year period from 2011 and 2015, Elon transitioned from having very few students in these “residentially linked” courses to the involvement of more than half of each first-year class (Figure 1).

Most linkages involved a required interdisciplinary course called “The Global Experience” (COR 110) taught by faculty from across campus. Other linkages involved another required course called “Writing: Argument and Inquiry” (ENG 110) taught primarily by English faculty, as well as a handful of other introductory courses in the arts and sciences. Students were placed into each course and housed together in one of four residential

neighborhoods. Whenever possible, classes were held in classrooms within each residential neighborhood.

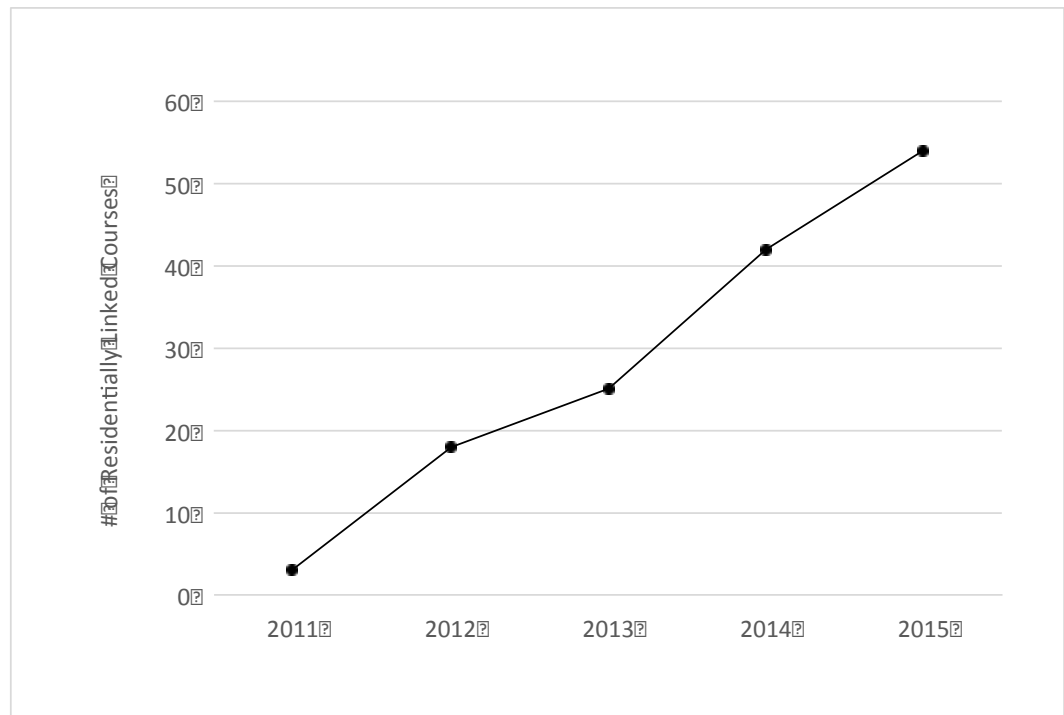


Figure 1. Scale-up of residually linked courses in the Elon Core Curriculum over five years.

One might suspect that an initiative of this scale occurred through administrative mandate, but that was not the case. For example, a 10-year Residential Campus Plan released in 2010 made no mention of residually linked courses. The origins of the scale-up are better explained by collaborative discussions between the academic and student life sides of the university about how learning communities could be better utilized across campus. Elon had been offering a small number of residually linked courses and employing other types of learning communities for many years, leading to questions about their effectiveness and utilization.

During the 2010-11 academic year, an experiment was arranged (led by Dr. Nancy Harris and Dr. Janet Warman) to better understand the impacts of different types of learning communities at Elon. The experiment included courses linked to another course, courses linked to a residence area, and courses linked to a themed residential hall. Results from all learning communities were positive; students reported more comfort working with

others in class, more time talking about academic ideas out of class, help transitioning into college, etc. The courses linked to a residence area were especially positive. For example, 97% of students recommended linkages with a residence area for all first-year students. The implications of the study and the larger literature on learning communities were discussed on campus the next year.

The subsequent scale-up that took place over the subsequent five years offers a number of lessons for other campuses interested in similar initiatives. Based on the variability in effectiveness of learning communities across institutions (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011), it seems clear that subtle implementation details can substantially impact outcomes.

Lessons Learned

Build with Faculty Guidance

The implementation of residentially linked courses at Elon was guided by faculty working in close partnership with student life and advising offices. It was unlikely to have worked otherwise since new pedagogy can only function with the collaboration and good will of the practitioners of the pedagogy.

In 2011, a few community-minded faculty were recruited by faculty directors (the authors, who coordinate the relevant courses) to teach residentially linked courses, model the program's pedagogical vision, and provide feedback on if/how such linkages should be utilized more broadly. Throughout that year, the faculty shared their experiences through both informal conversations and pre-arranged faculty development events. Simultaneously, assessment data, such as student surveys and verbal feedback from students and faculty, were gathered and shared. These were not publicity stunts to gather momentum for a widespread scale-up, but instead authentic and organic community interactions to improve teaching and learning. The teaching community controlled its own direction. Individual faculty made decisions about how to utilize the residential linkages in their courses (or not). As it turned out, student feedback was very positive and the faculty had energizing teaching experiences that led them to act as ambassadors for residential linkages with other faculty.

When a call was issued for faculty who wished to teach residential linkages for the following year, there was no shortage of volunteers. A positive feedback loop similar to the year before ensued, after which the teaching community reached a tipping point where there was widespread

support for making residential linkages standard practice. By the third year of scale-up, there was no need for a call for volunteers—residential linkages were just built into the standard scheduling process for COR 110 and ENG 110 wherever possible. Faculty new to those courses were integrated into a system where residential linkages were the norm.

Faculty certainly did not support everything that stemmed from the early vision of what residential linkages could/should look like. Faculty debated the implications for courses and questioned priorities that included helping with the social transition into the university. The practice of using student mentors in the classroom (Residential Learning Assistants) as a bridge between classrooms and residence halls found little support beyond a few faculty and was eventually dropped. Likewise, faculty reviews of the themes and programming developed by residential neighborhoods were mixed, leading to variation in the extent to which classes were intellectually integrated with residence areas. These were healthy campus deliberations that led to improvements over time.

Overall, the process was evolutionary in nature, during which the teaching and learning community voted with its feet on what worked and what did not.

Link Courses to Neighborhoods, Not Halls

Building a healthy first-year experience means depends on creating a series of nested experiences for students that fosters a sense of community. Ideally, every student will feel like a part of intimate, small-group communities (residence halls, small classes, etc.), medium-sized communities (buildings, organizations, etc.), and larger communities (the whole campus, the surrounding community, etc.). Striking the right balance means encouraging small-group bonding, without putting so much pressure on a particular small group that students tire of it or fail to connect with other groups.

In linking general education courses to residence areas, we found that linking a course of 18-25 students to a residential neighborhood of 80-400 students is effective (80-200 is probably ideal), as opposed to linking a course to a hall. Within these larger cohorts, students were able to build relationships, have meaningful intellectual conversations outside of class, and find each other easily to work in groups. At the same time, faculty reported nothing negative about these linkages in terms of social issues from residence areas creeping into classrooms. Finally, at a practical level, building student schedules with these broader linkages is far easier than linking one class to one hall.

Other authors have encouraged course linkages with individual residence halls (Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010), which may be preferable in some situations such as when students select their learning community. In our institutional context, however, faculty felt that linking courses to halls caused roommate and hall issues to flow too freely into class and classroom management issues to increase overall. Students also complained at times about having fewer opportunities to intermix with other students. As is the case on many campuses, scaling up a one class to one hall model was not an option for us because of varying residence hall designs and other logistical factors. However, we were also mindful that at the other extreme, when a course is linked to a residential area that is too big, the positive impacts of linkages can fade away as out-of-class interactions with classmates became diffuse. Linking courses to neighborhoods, not halls, worked on our campus.

Integrate Faculty Development

In Core Curriculum courses at Elon, like at many schools, faculty will embrace change when it is proven to be both effective and time efficient. In other words, change requires that faculty perceive an educational benefit and that any required or related faculty development is built into their current commitments.

Both of the relevant courses, COR 110 and ENG 110, had pre-existing faculty development opportunities including lunches during the semester and a summer retreat. Early attempts at faculty development related to residentially linked courses involved a mix of opportunities, some built into these pre-existing faculty development structures and some add-ons facilitated by faculty and administrative leaders within the residential campus. For the most part, efforts integrated into pre-existing structures were highly successful while most add-on meetings were poorly attended and thus ineffective. Extra meetings scheduled in the spring also excluded ENG 110 adjunct faculty who taught on year-to-year contracts and who had not yet been hired for the next year.

Integrating learning community pedagogy into “normal” faculty activities (as opposed to just adding more commitments) sent messages of importance, integration, and long-term sustainability, and it worked for us. For example, through an integrative approach, ENG 110 faculty created a list of best practices for teaching writing in linked courses and a learning outcome for the linked writing courses.

Be Attentive to Nuances of Building Design and Management

Few educators spend their time thinking about doors. But doors and other building nuances made a huge difference in the success or failure of classes offered within residential neighborhoods.

The first class that was offered in a residence hall during the linked-course initiative encountered all sorts of problems. The design for Elon's newer residence halls included a classroom on the ground floor of each building. However, when the first pilot class was scheduled, the students on that floor felt intruded upon. The professor routinely showed up for class and found the room in disarray, furniture having been moved around by protesting student residents. That initial building also had two design flaws. First, a study room was accessible only by walking through the classroom, leading several student residents to walk through the class. Second, security card swipes had been placed on exterior doors and only allowed entry by residents. Students in the class who lived in neighboring buildings knocked on the exterior doors and woke up residents early in the morning to get into their class. A month into the semester, the whole fiasco appeared on the front page of the student newspaper. It took a team of people from several offices and the patience and time of an outstanding professor to work through it.

That first class in a residence hall taught many lessons that informed hundreds of future classes and millions of dollars of building construction. Card swipes that only allowed the entry of residents were moved to interior doors, allowing entrance into classrooms by students from other buildings. The entrance to study rooms was moved to an adjacent hallway. Classroom technology and furniture evolved to be more appropriately dual-use by classes and residents. Most importantly, the campus culture shifted over time so integrating classes into the residential campus became normal.

Reward Faculty and Staff Leadership

The scale-up process described in this paper required an enormous amount of time and effort by many people. Just organizing the linkages was a substantial challenge because it required coordinating faculty course scheduling (the work of faculty directors), housing placements (the work of student life), student scheduling (the work of the advising office), and classroom placement (the work of the registrar's office). The mid-level managers in each of these areas contributed countless hours over several years to make the scale-up happen. Actually running high-quality linked courses involved another substantial challenge, one that required faculty and staff willingness to experiment, tinker, and teach one another. Nearly

everyone involved, including adjunct faculty, spent time to make pedagogical adjustments.

The reward structure that most permanent faculty are concerned with is the promotion and tenure system. Similarly, staff members want to be valued and promoted in a fair manner. The ENG 110 faculty and coordinator also struggled to determine the appropriate incentive, if any, for having adjunct faculty teach linked courses. Special accolades and awards are appreciated, of course, but they are trivial compared to the standard processes that drive institutional personnel management. Unfortunately, promotion and tenure processes can be very resistant to change, often trailing campus initiatives by many years or ignoring them altogether. Likewise, success within a campus initiative can be damaged by credit tending to flow toward upper administrators.

We include rewarding faculty and staff leaders as a “lesson learned” because it is important for program sustainability, not because our institution is necessarily doing it well. So far, we have seen little evidence of institutional reward structures taking residential linkages into account. Those who contributed the most took on the duties as add-ons, largely out of a desire to contribute to the betterment of the campus. Obviously, such a disconnect between professional activity and reward is not sustainable, leading us to believe that some of Elon’s gains will be lost over time if the issue is not addressed.

Assess and Experiment Rigorously

Assessment is commonly used to evaluate whether existing practices in a learning community are addressing the desired learning outcomes (Brower & Inkela, 2007). Elon’s scale-up certainly utilized assessment in this way to explore whether residential linkages were addressing goals of the respective courses, as well as broader goals of the first-year experience. Data were collected from student work, student surveys, faculty surveys, teaching evaluations, and other sources. These data were shared with faculty and various committees in order to identify strengths and weaknesses, and figure out how to improve. That being said, questions arose during scale-up that required experimentation of a higher order than typical assessment processes. Empirical studies on learning community design are often lacking (Buch, Johnson, Fitzgerald, & Bonilla, 2013) and often have sample biases (Zobac, Spears, & Barker, 2014), leaving many unanswered questions for campuses to work through on their own. We were determined to design an assessment that would help us answer key questions.

One example of our focused experimentation explored whether it would be advantageous to utilize “3-way linkages”—having the same students in a 4-hour academic course (COR 110 or ENG 110), a residential neighborhood, and a 1-hour orientation and advising course (Elon 101). On the surface, 3-way linkages seemed promising, given research on the value of linked courses in the first year (Soria & Mitchell, 2015). The vision was that every first-year student could be a part of a deep, integrative learning community that bridged academics, advising, residential life, and orientation to campus. But it was understood that making this model happen for every student would be time-intensive and would require disruption of programs (including other learning communities) that did not fit the model. An experiment was needed to see whether the benefits justified the costs.

Twelve faculty were recruited to teach two sections of either COR 110 or ENG 110 in the same semester. Each faculty member was given one control section (2-way linkage between the academic course and a residential neighborhood) and one experimental section (3-way linkage between the academic course, a residential neighborhood, and Elon 101). Other variables were arranged so that no obvious differences existed between the control group and experimental group except for the third linkage. By the end of the semester, surveys of all students and faculty in the study, interviews, and teaching evaluations all told a similar story: the benefits did not outweigh the costs. There was evidence that enacting some changes first might improve the outcomes of 3-way linkages, and so future experiments may be worthwhile. In the short term, however, carefully designed program assessment prevented a mistake and showed a clear path forward.

Assessment can be challenging when there is pressure to tell a positive institutional story. Nevertheless, assessing in a way that actively interrogates pedagogical assumptions will lead to better student experiences.

Conclusion

Implementation is always more complex, more nuanced, than theory suggests. The lessons we learned—build the program with faculty guidance, link courses to neighborhoods rather than to halls, integrate faculty development into existing programs, attend to nuances of building design and management, reward faculty and staff leadership, and assess rigorously—helped guide effective program implementation—continue to guide our work. We offer them here with the hope they will be useful to others.

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