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Transfer student success: Yet more support for learning communities

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Abstract

Transfer students face an array of difficulties upon entering colleges and universities. As a result, many institutions have begun creating learning communities in order to help transfer students integrate and cope with the changes that come with the transfer process associated with enrolling in college or university. This paper describes the development and examines the efficacy of learning communities for transfer students entering a university. This article presents descriptive, demographic, academic and social outcomes from data gathered from the participants in the Criminal Justice Learning Community (CJLC) at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte as well as those of non-participants over the same 10-year period. These data reveal that students who participate in learning communities have better academic outcomes—better overall grades and increased graduation rates—than their peers who did not participate in the CJLC.

Keywords

transfer students, learning communities, transfer student success

Cover Page Footnote

Note: The authors would like to thank Mr. Wayne Stone; The Director of Institutional Research at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for supplying some of the data about Criminal Justices students: both participants and non- participants.

Learning communities have been used widely in higher education. The versatile application of learning communities within higher education spans many fields. In recent years, learning communities have found their place in the context of medical school (Tackett, Wright, Colbert-Getz, & Shochet, 2018; Baños, Noah, & Harada, 2019), dental education (Schoonheim-Klein, Wesselink, & Vervoorn, 2012), social sciences education (Parker, 2009), and education within STEM fields (Scott, Thigpin, & Bentz, 2017). In addition to this, learning communities have been utilized across the levels of higher education, ranging from first year undergraduates (Rocconi, 2010) to general undergraduate education (Nye, 2015; Rocconi, 2010; Scott et al., 2017; Coston, Lord, & Monell, 2013) to doctoral students (Parker, 2009; Romsdahl & Hill, 2012). Learning communities have begun to find their place amid transfer students (Scott et al., 2017; Coston et al., 2013), as is the focus of this study. As demonstrated by this wide application of learning communities, it becomes clear that learning communities aim to provide an avenue through which students from all educational populations may exercise and grow their academic abilities.

Participation in learning communities has been linked to many academic and social benefits. Students within these learning communities have been found to display a better retention of the topics they are studying than their non-participant peers (Scott et al., 2017) and have similarly shown a better understanding of the topics studied as a group within their learning communities than those who are apart from this collaborative process (Romsdahl & Hill, 2012). This improvement in understanding is especially observable when the subject being studied is one of particular difficulty. Participation within learning communities has been found to aid in understanding of these particularly complex or otherwise difficult topics (Parker, 2009).

One of the oft-cited positive components of learning community involvement is the peer review process (Parker, 2009). Related to this is the development of greater empathy amongst learning community participants (Tackett et al., 2018). It is possible that the process of working within a group helps nurture this empathetic growth.

Learning communities serve as a gentle introduction to the world of group work. Participation within learning communities helps individuals learn how to better interact with peers in collaborative working environments and has been found to help foster better teamwork abilities (Schoonheim-Klein et al, 2012; Romsdahl & Hill, 2012; Parker, 2009). A better understanding of how to coexist within a group environment is a vital skill to aid in introduction to the workplace for many fields, and, as such, is an invaluable skill with which those within learning communities may become familiar (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, & Adkison, 2011). Learning communities have been shown to aid in increasing effort and time spent working with peers and faculty among those who participate in them (Rocconi, 2010).

In addition to these benefits, learning communities have been reported to foster better learning environments (Tackett et al., 2018) and have been rated as highly valued among the students who participate in them (Nye, 2015). Student perceptions of the positives of learning communities, therefore, are rated highly.

The relationship between learning communities and positive outcomes, however, has been found to be mediated by the individual's level of engagement in the learning community. If individuals find themselves unengaged in the learning community, they will often fail to reap the benefits the community may otherwise offer (Rocconi, 2010). Similarly, it has been found that when individuals are greatly invested in the learning community, one is likely to see the benefits of their avid participation within the community. This, however, does depend on the nature of the learning community. This relationship has been observed within the context of a learning

community which has recently become formally, rather than informally, instituted (Baños et al., 2019).

A major predictor of perceived institutional aid in educational development that is often observed in the relationship of learning communities and success is relatedness. When relatedness, or a sense of belonging and connection to others, is present, learning communities are seen as being a greater contribution to the student's overall academic growth. Learning communities help to nurture a sense of relatedness between students and faculty, which in turn helps the student feel as though the institution is contributing more to their academic progress (Beachboard et al., 2011).

Although learning communities offer great potential, they do come with a set of unique problems. For example, research suggests that learning communities struggle under administrative restrictions. Learning communities cannot function without monetary support and sponsorship from their parent institutions (Lord, Coston, Blowers, Davis, & Johannes, 2012; Coston et al., 2010). As a result, the implementation is limited by budgetary constraints, and these communities may not be established in institutions with a deficit of funding.

Within learning communities, there are more problems that may be found. Tackett et al. (2018) reported that those who participated in the learning community struggled to connect with faculty beyond their learning communities and, as a result, struggled to find mentors other than the learning community faculty members with whom they interacted. In some learning communities, participants have reported anxiety surrounding the peer review process (Parker, 2009), which may limit the individuals' perceptions of ability to interact with their peers. In addition to this, it has been observed that the relationship between positive outcomes and learning communities is mediated by effort and engagement. As a result, when effort and engagement levels are low in those participating in learning communities, so too is the efficacy of the learning community program (Rocconi, 2010; Baños et al., 2019). In addition to this, students within learning communities may not perceive that they are improving (Parker, 2009) or may not perceive as many gains from their involvement in learning communities as their non-involved peers (Rocconi, 2010). Future research will have to examine whether these perceptions of progress impact students' levels of engagement in learning communities.

Research collected on learning communities, too, has its shortcomings. The literature shows a deficit of longitudinal studies, as mentioned by Nye (2015) in her examination of the implementation of online learning communities for undergraduate students. In addition to this, learning communities research suffers from a lack of random selection (Beachboard et al., 2011), and those participating are often surveyed only once per year (Baños et al., 2019), therefore potentially limiting the ability to examine progress as it occurs. In instances where multiple batteries of surveys are administered, there is often observed an attrition in responses over time (Schoonheim-Klein et al., 2012). Surveys offered tend to rely on self-reporting (Baños et al., 2019; Beachboard et al., 2011) rather than the more objective measure of grade improvement or time of graduation. Research conducted on learning communities is often limited in scope to one institution (Rocconi, 2010), making it difficult to generalize.

Learning Communities at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Based upon a review of the university's data (www.lc.uncc.edu), there are 19 learning communities at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, a large urban research university in the south. These learning communities cover a vast array of majors, including those in STEM concentrations, business, and liberal arts and sciences. Of these 19 learning communities, 84.2% (16) are directed towards the freshman population. These learning communities all function with

the goal of acclimating first year students to university life, helping them establish ties with faculty and peers, and giving them unique learning opportunities such as scheduled community service. The remaining 15.8% (3) learning communities cater to transfer students. Unlike the majority of the learning communities offered, transfer student-specific learning communities can only be found in the disciplines of Criminal Justice, Sociology, and Community Psychology.

This current research focuses on the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice's learning community for transfer students at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. According to the University registrar, approximately half of the students in the Criminal Justice major are transfer students. Students enrolled in the Criminal Justice Learning Community for Transfer Students take two courses in sequence during an academic year. During these two semesters, these students also take a required course with their learning community cohort. These required courses are not limited to learning community students.

Handel (2011) suggests that roughly half of all students enrolled in higher education find themselves in community colleges before they transfer elsewhere. This is particularly significant since transfer students have been identified as a population of particular academic vulnerability. This is due to the stressors implicit in the transfer student experience, which may not impact those of native/traditional students, such as concern about the process of credits transferring from one school to another, the amount of paperwork involved in becoming a new student, learning the major requirements, the delay between admission and orientation, as well as the delay between orientation and declaration of major. In a study examining learning communities and these stressors, Coston et al. (2013) found that participation in a learning community and the sense of belongingness it provided acted as the largest reducer of the experienced stress by these students.

Transfer students arrive with a variety of unique vulnerabilities. They may enter the institution of their choice with disparate levels of college experience (Fleming et al. 2013). Generally, this initial introduction to their new institution is accompanied with a sense of melancholy and loss for the institution they have left. This comes with a multitude of new obstacles, including learning how to properly adjust to their new institutions (Bingham-Newman & Hopkins, 2004). A major stress noted by Lord et al. (2012) pertains to transfer students' concerns about physically navigating their new campus. In addition to this, these students also worry that their credits will not properly transfer from their old institution (Handel, 2007; Herman & Lewis, 2004). This phenomenon of difficulty in adjusting to a four-year university from a two-year institution is known within the discipline as "transfer shock," a similar concept to "freshman shock." Transfer shock has been identified as occurring particularly in the year following the initial transfer (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Glass & Harrington, 2002; Pennington, 2006; Thurmond, 2007). In addition to these inter-institution stressors, transfer students coming from community colleges are also likely to be holding part- or full-time jobs, as well as coping with personal responsibilities which may be a burden to them (Lord et al., 2012).

As a result of these unique difficulties, transfer students have been identified as at-risk for early dropout. Higher attrition rates amongst transfer students, as well as lower GPAs, have been noticed (Cejda, Kaylor, & Rewey, 1998; Cueso, 1998; Glass & Harrington, 2002). As a result, it is not uncommon for transfer students to drop out after their first year at their new institution. In addition to the aforementioned stressors, this is partially also because transfer students feel lonely and "other" to their native peers. Their transfer status may also make it more difficult for them to interact with and connect to faculty. However, institutions with large populations of transfer students have begun trying to combat these difficulties and are putting programs in place to help transfer students not only graduate, but also flourish (Ehrenberg & Smith, 2004; Finley 2008).

According to statistics from the American Association of Community Colleges (2010), North Carolina has one of the largest numbers of public community colleges in the United States. The population of transfer students is particularly large at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. It has been found that transfer students make up a large number of students in the Criminal Justice and Criminology major. As such, in the fall semester of 2008, this university implemented the Criminal Justice Learning Community for Transfer Students (CJLC). The CJLC is defined as a "year-long voluntary program designed to enhance transfer criminal justice majors' academic and social transition to the university generally, and to the criminal justice major specifically" (Lord et al., 2012).

This learning community is designed to cater to the needs of students who are transferring from community colleges and are therefore somewhat older (24 years of age) than average university students. As a result, although many other learning communities on this campus require the students to live on campus in the same housing unit, members of the CJLC are not required to be residential. The CJLC was created with the intention of incorporating fundaments known to improve students' success rates. These fundaments are as follows:

1. Aid in easing the transition period from small college to large university by introducing them to occasions for "campus connections." This is included to build a sense of community within the learning community cohort, increase feelings of connection to the university itself, and decrease "transfer shock."
2. Offer and foster a sense of tight-knit "community of learners" in an otherwise large university.
3. Inspire students to take advantage of habits and skills meant to increase student success.
4. Act as an introduction to the students' discipline of choice as well as a way to explore opportunities for potential career paths and subdisciplines (Lord et al., 2012).

Part of addressing these was accomplished through the use of blocked seating in "problem" core courses such as Criminological Theory, Criminal Justice Research Methods, and a social sciences statistics course (a pre-requisite for the Criminal Justice major), with the Learning Community Coordinator (LCC) offering advising. Blocked seating ensured that the members of the CJLC were able to take courses together. In addition to these core courses, CJLC-specific courses were also given for the participants. These courses, *Criminal Justice Learning Community Seminar I: Learning about the University and the Criminal Justice Community* (offered in the fall semester) and *Criminal Justice Learning Community Seminar II: Civic Engagement* (offered the following spring semester), strive to expose students to support systems both on and off campus, introduce them to the field of criminal justice, and familiarize them with the career opportunities they had selected during the fall semester (Lord et al., 2012).

After an initial planning year including an annual budget of $5000 each year from the Office of the Provost, the non-residential Criminal Justice Learning Community for Transfer Students (CJLC) began in 2008. Over this data's timeframe of 10 years, over 1000 undergraduate criminal justice pre- and majors were solicited for participation. Only twenty-five newly-enrolled undergraduate students were selected each year because the yearlong program (two courses) met both the written and oral communication requirements. The Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology was responsible for planning and overseeing the LC. Although, the university had freshman learning communities, this was the first LC designed exclusively for transfer students at this institution and has been used as a model for establishing new transfer learning communities at the same.

The Criminal Justice Learning Community for Transfer Students (CJLC) was proposed as a year-long program designed to enhance the students' academic and social transition to the university generally, and as Criminal Justice majors specifically. One important finding by the university's department of Registration and Records is that criminal justice transfer majors are graduating at a slower pace than non-transfer majors. Through closer coordination with community college criminal justice directors and admission offices, block enrollment and completion of the two "obstacle" criminal justice core courses, and completion of written and oral communication requirements, we expected those transfer students who participate in our learning community to increase their pace towards graduation.

The target population for our non-residential learning community is transfer students who have the two-year degree from a community college and have met our pre-requisites to become a criminal justice major. Departmental data indicates that over the past 10 years we have accepted 806 transfer students and 246 were participants in our LC. Most of these majors are transfer students who come to UNC Charlotte from local community colleges, i.e., Central Piedmont, Rowan, Gaston, and Cleveland Community Colleges. Enhancing communications between the directors of these local community colleges and the Learning Community Coordinator will ensure the student's level of preparedness.

An ongoing study of undergraduate criminal justice majors at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte (Hartman, Bjerregaard, & Lord, 2009) has found that transfers are more likely to have attended the Student Orientation Advising and Registration (SOAR) but less likely to meet with advisors. The transfer students who participated in our learning community were marketed through SOAR programs, Explore UNC-C open houses, and the departmental undergraduate student advising office for criminal justice majors. Also, to initiate the relationship with our transfers and to facilitate their belonging within the university, the LCC visited the local community colleges with criminal justice programs to speak to potential transfers. We selected transfer students who had met the pre-requisites to become a criminal justice major (i.e., completed Introduction to Criminal Justice and Statistics 1222). To attract transfer criminal justice pre-majors, during the planning year we assessed the benefits of conducting the two CJLC courses on Saturdays or evenings. We incorporated the assessment within the ongoing study of Hartman et al. (2009).

As noted above, the CJLC facilitated the academic and social transition to UNC Charlotte. Another finding by Hartman et al. (2009) is the importance of feeling connected to the University for students' success. The students in the CJLC were immersed in the University in a number of ways. Their co-curricular activities began with a Venture team-building experience to build cohesiveness with each other and the LCC. One of the means to achieve student connectiveness was through one or more joint activities with the criminal justice student associations and their faculty advisors. The CJLC also initiated and monitored contacts between cohorts of transfer students and their peers in the criminal justice major, criminal justice faculty and advisors, university support services, and criminal justice and victim agencies. Our program provided group team-building activities and academic study and service initiatives that will served as a resource for the students' acclimation to campus environment and local criminal justice agencies.

Table 1: Intended Program Outcomes, and an Assessment for Intended Outcomes

Intended Program Outcomes	Corresponding Department/College/ Unit Outcomes	Specific LC Experiences Designed to Meet outcomes	Assessment Methodologies for Intended Outcomes
1. A decrease in the number of pre-major concerns as a new transfer student.	Become integrated into the University student population, understanding and taking advantage of its services and activities.	Exposure to different University services in The Learning Community Seminar I (CJUS 3000) Teambuilding activities and tours of CJ agencies/facilities. Interaction with CJ associations.	Evaluation of students' written assignment that addresses concerns. Pre/post assessment of participant concerns about transferring to the university.
2. An increased sense of community service, cohesiveness to their cohort, and a sense of connection to the University.	Department's values and beliefs surrounding our role to serve the regional and larger community.	Exposure to sector within the University and CJ agencies in LCSI. Service hours during LCSII: Civic Engagement.	Pre/post assessment of participants' perception of service A higher level of participation in our Criminal Justice Internship program
3. Secure employment in criminal justice agencies or continue in graduate school	Increased employment of CJ majors in the CJ field. Placing qualified students in our graduate program.	Exposure to on and off campus units and local criminal justice agencies Interacting with CJ faculty and becoming informed about their research	Percentage of students who will secure employment in criminal justice agencies and/or related agencies. Acceptance into graduate school or law school within two years after graduation.
4. An increased rate of graduation	Criminal Justice majors will begin to graduate sooner than in times past	Exposure to segments on campus designed to smooth the transition to successful completion of degree requirements.	Monitor students: graduation/withdrawal from school & GPA of participants versus non-participants
5. An improvement in understanding and application of theories, methods, and application of the disciplines.	Criminal Justice majors will complete the two core course requirements, CJUS 3100 and CJUS 3101.	Exposure to co-faculty learning objectives (between the LCC who will teach both learning community courses and the professors who will teach the two required courses).	The Professor of the LC will assess the progress of the LC's cohort of transfer students as compared to other class participants.

Program Outcomes

Expected outcomes for a student completing this two-semester non-residential learning community program include:

- a reduction in the number of concerns (stressors) about the transfer experience after the first seminar course compared to those transfer students who were not enrolled in the program;
- increased sense of belonging to the University;
- higher numbers of participants who graduate with their bachelor's degree in criminal justice compared to those transfer students who did not participate in the program; and

- a greater number of job prospects with criminal justice agencies for those transfer students who participated in the program than those transfer students who did not participate in the program.

Specific aspects of our program and benefits to those transfer students who participated in our year-long learning community program are the opportunities to complete (a) six credits of their required 12 credit Criminal Justice electives through the two LC seminars; (b) two University required goals (the two writing and one oral communication requirements); (c) two required courses that our majors have traditionally found to be barriers to completing their requirements: *Criminal Justice Theory* (CJUS 3100) and *Criminal Justice Research Methods* (CJUS 3101) with their transfer learning community cohort; and (d) the learning community seminar sequence with special emphasis on integrating knowledge obtained in Theory and Research Methods with material taught in the seminars. Additionally, students can develop a foundation for employment opportunities in the criminal justice and/or related field through community service in criminal justice and/or related organizations and information discussed in the seminar courses.

All of the identified outcomes were met and are listed in the following Tables.

From 2008-2018, there were 246 participants in the Criminal Justice Learning Community for Transfer Students and 806 transfer students that did not participate. The median age of a participant in the learning community was 25 years old with a standard deviation of 2.1 while 21years old was the average age of non-participants with a standard deviation of 2. Table 2 depicts other descriptive statistics of the two populations.

Table 2: Descriptive Characteristics of the Two Populations*

	Participants (p=246) *% (f)*	Non-participants (p=806) *% (f)*
Race		
Caucasian	49.19 (121)	51.30 (414)
African American	11.79 (31)	2.73 (22)
Hispanic	14.63 (36)	11.65 (94)
International	2.03 (5)	0.62 (5)
Asian		2.03 (5)
Mixed		4.47 (11)
Unknown	0.00 (0)	2.73 (22)
Pacific Islander	0.00 (0)	0.37 (3)
Gender		
Male	49.19 (121)	58.61 (473)
Female	50.18 (125)	41.39 (334)
Type of Institution Transferred		
Two-year college	65.04 (160)	70.47 (568)
Four-year college/	29.67 (73)	21.71/21.69 (175)
Multiple transfers	5.28 (13)	7.82/7.81 (63)
Taken Introduction to CJ before transferring		
No	60.57 (149)	561.71 (498)
Yes	39.92/40.42 (99)	43.79/48.08 (388)
Taken Statistics before transferring		
No	82.04 (201)	70 (564)
Yes	17.96/17.89 (44)	30.02/29.99 (242)

*Note: Percentages could be off due to missing cases.

As illustrated in Table 2, the racial majority of both the participating and non-participating groups is Caucasian, with Hispanic students following distantly in second place. The racial breakdown of these two groups remains roughly approximate, as does the gender breakdown

(though females seem to be somewhat more present in the non-participant group). In addition, both groups have similar proportions of individuals transferring from two-year, four-year, and multiple institutions. With regard to classes taken (Introduction to Criminal Justice and Statistics, respectively), an interesting discrepancy between the two groups comes from the learning community participants' lack of experience with Statistics. While similar, there is a markedly greater proportion of non-participant students who have taken a Statistics course before transferring. The reason for this discrepancy is not yet clear.

Statistical tests (Comparison of the Means tests) significantly revealed that participants in our CJ Learning Community earned better grades in Statistics, Introduction to Criminal Justice, Criminal Justice Research Methods, and Criminal Justice Theory than did their non-participating cohorts. All of these courses are requirements of CJ majors.

Table 3: **Academic Characteristics of the Two Populations**

	Participants	**Non-Participants**
Median number of criminal justice credits transferred	48	45
Median GPA= for Introduction to Criminal Justice	3.4	2.6
Median GPA= for Statistics before or while at current location	2.5	2.2
Median grades in Criminal Justice Theory	3.0	2.8
Median grades in Criminal Justice Research Methods	3.0	2.8
Graduate rates	60%	40%
Grade point averages for those who have graduated	3.1	2.8

As shown in Table 3, participants in the learning communities had overall better academic outcomes than their non-participant peers. In addition to having higher median GPAs in Statistics as well as core classes such as Introduction to Criminal Justice, Criminal Justice Theory, and Criminal Justice Research Methods, participants' GPAs at the time of graduation were also higher. Students who participated in the learning communities also graduated in 2 years at a rate of 60% whereas those who did not participate graduated at a rate of only 40% in 2 years.

At the beginning of the program, learning community participants were asked to identify their biggest stressor. At the end of the program, they were asked if this stressor was still a problem and, if it was, to identify its intensity. In Figure 1, stressors identified are displayed along with the ranking and intensity of these stressors at the end of the semester.

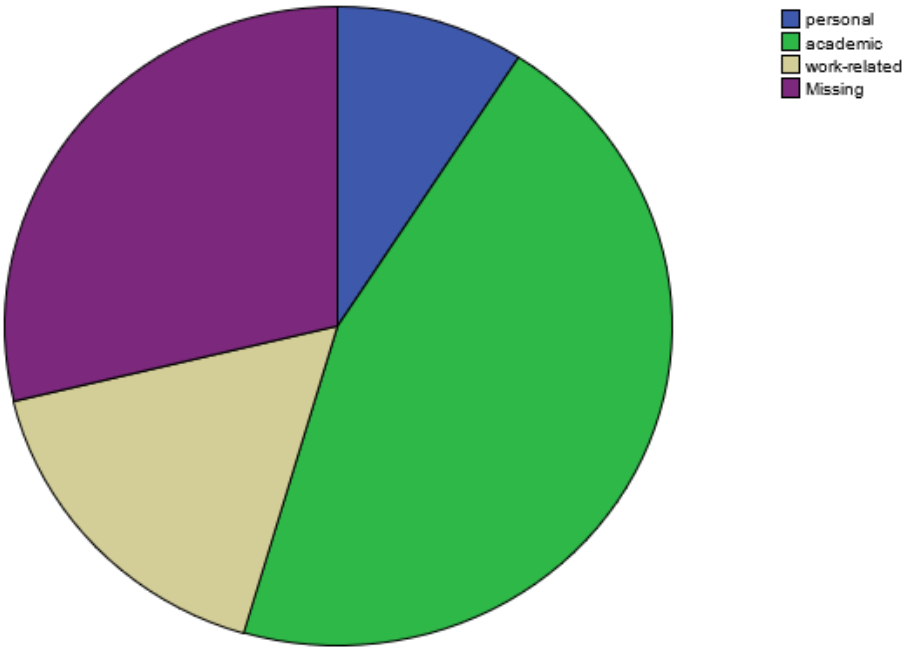

Figure 1: Stressors of participants

In order of how often they were mentioned, the stressors identified were (a) personal (commuting, health problems financial aid, expense of tuition, learning a new city, learning a new campus, acclimating to the US after military deployment, parking); (b) academic (transferring credits, learning new campus, delay in acceptance, size of school, too much paperwork, choosing the right major, different teaching styles, registering for classes, taking statistics); and (c) work-related (balancing working full time and studying).

Over time, transfer students enrolled in the learning community experienced a decline in the intensity of their identified stressor. The reasons for this decline in intensity may have been because students formed a cohort based on their participation in team building exercises and subsequently tapped one another for resources both in the community and within the university. On the first day of class, as well as in the middle of the year and the final day of involvement in the CJLC, participants were presented with a survey on which they were to identify their main stressor and to gauge the intensity of this stressor. To address the question of intensity, this survey featured a Likert scale with possible responses of 0 (not intense) through 5 (most intense). On the first day of classes, participants' median intensity rating was 4.00. A drop of perceived intensity can be seen at the next administration of the survey in the middle of the year, with participants' median score settling at 2.00. Finally, on the last day of the CJLC program, the participants' median score had dropped to a 1.00.

Discussion

The academic outcomes of students participating in learning communities and those who did not were compared. These statistics featured all of the Criminal Justice transfer students from the

last ten years, with 246 of these students participating in the learning communities and the remaining 806 students not participating. The GPAs, times of graduation, and average grades for specific core classes were measured. These populations were equivalent in demographic characteristics such as race, gender, type of institution attended prior to transfer, and classes taken prior to transfer. In addition to comparison of these two groups, the population of participating students was also examined. This process involved the administration of a survey meant to measure stressor prevalence and intensity to the participating students.

Academically, students participating in the learning community had higher grades on average than their non-participating peers in core classes such as Statistics, Introduction to Criminal Justice, Criminal Justice Theory, and Criminal Justice Research Methods. In addition to this, the length of time it took for students to graduate was examined. It was found that participating students graduated at a rate of 60% over the course of ten months whereas their nonparticipant peers graduated at a rate of only 40% over the same span of time. At the time of graduation, participating students were found to have a higher GPA on average by 0.3 points than those who were nonparticipants. The higher-grade point averages in core classes, expedited graduation rate, and higher overall GPA at the time of graduation observed in these participants suggests academic benefits to involvement in learning communities.

Participants in the CJLC were also asked to report on three separate occasions over the span of their year of involvement the stressor causing them the most distress. In addition to this, they were asked to report the intensity of the distress this stressor was causing them through the use of a Likert scale. This scale was oriented so that a score of 0 indicated no intensity and a score of 5 indicated the most intensity. On the first occasion—the first day of class—students reported a median stress-intensity level of 4. The main type of stressor indicated was that of an academic nature, with the most highly reported of these being the transfer of credits. On the second occasion the survey was administered, during the middle of the semester, the participants reported a median stress-intensity level of 2, showing a 50% drop since the first day of classes. The third and final administration of survey occurred on the last day of classes. The median stress-intensity level reported here was 1, indicating an overall drop of intensity by 75% since the beginning of the year. These results may indicate that involvement with the learning community contributed to an overall decline in perceived intensity of stressors for those who participated. It is prudent to note, however, that without a comparison group it is impossible to be certain how much of this decline is natural attrition and how much is attributable to involvement with the learning community.

Overall, these results seem to indicate benefits to involvement in a learning community. In addition to a potential alleviant for stressors commonly experienced by transfer students, the data suggest a variety of academic benefits. Such benefits include better performance in the Criminal Justice department's core classes, better overall academic performance, and an earlier graduation. The latter list of benefits has been compared against an equivalent comparison group, and suggests that involvement in the learning community may have been the definitive factor in improving student performance and graduation rates as well as allaying perceived distress.

There are many limitations that have been identified in research on learning communities. One of these which extends to this research is the lack of longitudinal research on this topic. Identified as a weakness of the field by Nye (2015), the lack extant of longitudinal data on this topic limits potential assessments of results. Because of this lack of follow up on these students further along their academic and occupational paths, one cannot be sure that results of the intervention last beyond the years of undergraduate education. Therefore, this study, with its absence of longitudinal data in favor of that which was cross-sectionally gathered, fits Nye's

(2015) description of a study which may not be as effective as it could. In addition to the need for studies of a longitudinal nature, there is also the more basic need for replication of this study.

Limitations applicable to this particular study extend beyond these concerns for learning community research as a whole. Self-selection bias, for example, may prove problematic to the assessment of research results. This is due to the nature of the selection process for the CJLC, which invites all transfer students, but only those who respond to the invitation are included. For this reason, it may be possible that those who responded to the invitation and joined the CJLC were qualitatively different from their non-respondent peers, in that they may be more intrinsically ambitious or focused on their education.

In addition to this, examination of the stressors and their perceived intensities experienced by participants suffers from a lack of comparison group. Since there are not data on stressors and intensity gathered from a group of comparable students who are not members of the CJLC, it is impossible to know whether the reduction in perceived stressor intensity experienced by the CJLC students over the course of the semester is unique to their involvement in a learning community. It is impossible to determine whether such attrition in stress level is natural and common across all transfer students as time passes. For this reason, these results should be carefully and thoughtfully considered.

Policy Suggestions

The outcomes of this study suggest that learning communities are important tools which may be used to help transfer students thrive in the setting of the four-year university. Data gathered from this study suggest that those who participate in the learning community setting are ultimately academically more successful than their non-participant peers in every area measured, including, most notably, a higher overall average GPA and earlier graduation dates. This learning community's population may suffer from the bias of self-selection. In other words, those who participated chose to be in each year's group of learning community students.

As such, this author proposes replications of this study and those like it. Through such replication, if results remain the same, a greater faith may be placed in this system as one that is effective and useful for transfer and other vulnerable students. In addition, if this is not the case, greater understanding will be gathered about learning communities as an entity, how to make them useful, and what makes them unhelpful. It is this authors' opinion that this study should be replicated across department types and should be made adaptable to curricula other than just that for Criminal Justice students.

Much like those in this study, however, it is not possible to include all transfer students in learning communities. As such, this author suggests a greater presence of assistance, academic and otherwise, for transfer and other vulnerable students. In addition to potentially heartening these students against trials they may come across in the future, such an activity would similarly enrich the body of knowledge on how to best academically aid vulnerable populations.

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