The Lasting Effects of Learning Communities

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Abstract

A majority of the research on the impact of learning communities has focused on the positive outcomes for students in their first year of study (Andrade, 2007; Goldman, 2012; Laverick, 2018; Wathington, Pretlow, & Mitchell, 2010). Less is known about the impact of learning community involvement as students complete their enrollment and persist through their next three (or more) years of education. Recent studies have addressed learning community involvement using qualitative measures. This article adds to the literature on learning community impact by describing an investigation of how juniors and seniors characterize the influence of their first-year learning community participation. Findings from the study illuminated the importance of faculty involvement and preparation, the use of High-Impact Practices (HIPS), and ways we might attend to peer dynamics in our learning community classrooms. The practice of following students to determine the possible lasting effects of learning communities has informed our work, and we argue that this practice should be included in learning community program assessment.

While much is known about the impact of learning communities on student outcomes in their first year (Andrade, 2007; Goldman, 2012; Laverick, 2018; Wathington, Pretlow, & Mitchell, 2010), there is little qualitative evidence of the long-term impact of learning community participation. This description of a preliminary study helps fill this gap. Learning communities—courses in which faculty and students in the group learn together through intentional activities—are designed to promote involvement in academics and social learning activities, both in and out of the classroom (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). While students may enter higher education eager to earn a degree, they may not be adequately prepared to succeed (Weinstein, Acee, & Jung, 2011). Learning community participation addresses this shortfall by providing a strong support network that can serve as a springboard for both self-reliance and student success. Learning communities can also help bridge the gap from high school to the college or university level by furthering goals for individual learning and educational responsibility. This study explores the long-term effects of learning community participation.

Learning communities are one of many HIPS that institutions of higher education employ to retain and graduate students. Kuh (2008) outlined eleven practices found to be effective: first year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, ePortfolios, service learning or community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses. Reinhart (2012) suggested that HIPS help students connect with one another and empower students to find their own voice through collaboration with other students. This article details the impacts of learning community involvement in which multiple additional HIPS were used. While recent findings call into question the effectiveness of HIPS as they relate to graduation rates (Johnson & Stage, 2018), educators have used these strategies to bolster retention and provide opportunities for deep learning (Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015).

In their quantitative study, Bonet and Walters (2016) found short-term success in student persistence and increased grade point averages as a result of students' participation in HIPS. The authors confirmed Tinto's (1997) theory that a structure of peers helps students ease into the unfamiliarity of academic rigor and changes in environment of a college campus (Bonet & Walters, 2016). As Johnson and Stage (2018) noted, it is difficult to directly link the impact of learning community involvement (or any HIP) to positive outcomes. However, qualitative studies can give voice to the influence students believe learning community participation has had on their academic experience. A qualitative study of the benefits of learning communities on first year community college students concluded that the rise in student retention and success metrics can be attributed to the exposure of a social and intellectual community, enhanced self-

efficacy, and a more active and engaging pedagogy than the participants previously experienced (Van Ora, 2019).

Similarly, salient themes in a qualitative study of students' reflections on learning communities were increased self-awareness, the importance of overcoming differences to collaborate successfully, and the ability to make deeper connections across subjects and topics (Thomas & Fatherly, 2017). These themes can be enforced by intentional experiential learning opportunities across seemingly varying subject matters where students can immediately put recently acquired knowledge and skills to practice (Smyth, 2016).

The use of HIPS can also help students acclimate not only to increased academic rigor but also to the institution itself. A learning community that includes a first-year seminar and mentoring can provide students with additional institutional knowledge, increased awareness of and access to institutional resources, a small group of peers to turn to should issues like homesickness arise, and a deeper connection to the institution in the form of a mentor as well as peers sharing a similar experience (Laverick, 2018).

While many researchers, including Laverick (2018), point to positive outcomes for first-year students, far less is known about whether such outcomes continue to impact students beyond their first year. Most of what is known about the long-term effects of learning communities has been discovered through quantitative inquiries. One quantitative study pointed to positive outcomes of learning community involvement which were maintained seven years after enrollment (Weiss, et al., 2015). Hobbins, Eisenbach, Ritchie, and Jacobs (2018) recently found that students in residential learning communities had better first and second year grades as well as better 5-year graduation rates than their peers who were not enrolled in learning communities. We found only one longitudinal qualitative study that pointed to long-term positive effects on education (Christie, Tett, Cree, & McCune, 2014); however, the study focused on students' overall first-year transition rather than learning communities alone. Our study addresses the gap in knowledge by investigating how students perceive the long-term effect of learning communities on their academic development.

Study Site

Our study was conducted at Western Carolina University, a regional, comprehensive campus in the Southeast United States. The campus had a student population near 11,000 during the year the study was conducted. This campus typically offers five to seven learning communities each year to incoming first-year students.

Learning Community Model

The learning community program in this study is a two-semester, comprehensive program that includes at least three linked courses spanning the Fall and Spring semesters. Each learning community must use additional HIPS in the courses to increase deep learning. Learning community courses are thematically linked. The learning community developers at the study site put an emphasis on ensuring courses overlap not only thematically, but also in terms of assignments (which were often integrated between courses) and requirements (field trips and out-of-class gatherings).

The goal of the communities is to enhance learning, foster connection, and integrate academic experiences by placing students and faculty in a section of intentionally grouped courses. Faculty and administrators at the study site believe significant impacts on learning outcomes are achieved as students develop a strong network of support, build friendships, and experience learning in a dynamic fashion.

Faculty Preparation

To meet the goals of the learning communities listed above, faculty were recruited and trained to participate. Faculty were recruited based on their teaching reputation and the rapport they tend to build with students and other faculty as well as their subject matter expertise. In particular, faculty interested in team teaching or teaching across disciplines were encouraged to participate. Some faculty were seasoned learning community teachers while others were new to the model. As such, training was developed to ensure continuity of practices and expectations in learning communities. The training, which occurred one full day in the Spring semester prior to teaching, was led by national experts in field. Faculty members learned the goals and purposes of learning communities and how to integrate assignments; they were given access to additional campus resources (such as funding for field trips or additional learning experiences) and were guided through course planning to ensure thematic overlap. Additional professional development activities were offered to all learning community teachers during the Spring. Most of the faculty teams met regularly throughout their semesters of teaching to discuss course progress and students of concern. While social interaction and support to students was not explicitly required of faculty members, all participants were encouraged to get to know their students and support them as best they could. Because most faculty groups met consistently, issues such as class attendance, class performance, and personal concerns were shared with one another and later addressed with the students of concern.

Learning Community Themes

Descriptions of each community represented are as follows.

- *Ripple Effect*, a community engagement themed learning community. Courses include the one credit freshman transition course, a social entrepreneurship course, a criminal justice course, and an introduction to business course. Additional HIPS incorporated into courses: service learning and collaborative assignments.
- *Whee Teach,* a learning community for aspiring teachers. Courses include the one credit freshman transition course, a freshman seminar in education, college writing, and communications. Additional HIPS incorporated into courses: service learning and collaborative assignments.
- *Eat, Love, Pray, London*, a learning community for students interested in healthcare or helping professions. Courses include the one-credit transition course, health and wellness, and college writing (optional social work abroad course). Additional HIPS: writing-intensive course, common intellectual experience, collaborative assignments, and community-based learning.

Method

Our qualitative study followed a basic interpretivist design that was guided by the research question: What, if any, are the lasting impacts of learning community enrollment after the students' first year?

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited based on their enrollment in a learning community as first-year students. All students enrolled in a learning community at the study site in either the 2015-16 or 2016-17 academic years were invited, via email, to participate. Each participant held a class rank of junior or senior at the time of their interview. Of the 118 students eligible to participate in the study, nine accepted the invitation to be interviewed (three from *Eat, Love, Pray, London*; three from *Whee Teach*; and three from *Ripple Effect*). Interestingly, only female students chose to participate despite the gender composition of learning communities overall being 65% female and 35% male. Two of the learning communities represented in the study, *Eat, Love, Pray, London* and *Whee Teach,* were predominantly female (95% and 80%, respectively) whereas *Ripple Effect* was 55% female students and 45% male.

Design

Each student participant met with one or two of the researchers for a semi-structured interview. Interviews varied in length from 30-45 minutes. Students were asked to begin by describing the nature (theme) of their learning community, the classes included, and how the material in courses linked. The remainder of the interview focused on relationships established as a result of the learning community and current practices, involvement, or beliefs students perceived to have been born of their learning community participation.

Instrument

Interview questions were developed to address the research question: what, if any, are the lasting impacts of learning community enrollment after the students' first year? Following Ortiz's (2016) directives, "how" and "why" questions were used to elicit rich responses from the participants. The interview questions began with intentionally broad questions (such as "*How would you describe the theme of your learning community?*" and "*Why did you enroll in a learning community?*") which could "bring areas of data to light" (Atkins & Wallace, 2016) that we might not have anticipated had we asked direct, specific questions at the outset of our protocol. Follow-up questions allowed the interviewees to "expand upon the subject" (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015, p. 54) and allowed researchers to ask for further detail and discern a better understanding of the participants' experiences as a member of a learning community. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers. Transcripts were emailed to the participants for verification before analysis began.

Analysis

Three researchers went through a pre-coding process in which we noted "rich or significant quotes" that would be "worthy of attention" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 16) as the process continued. Independently, each researcher manually coded the transcripts using thematic analysis. After independent analysis, the researchers met to code-check. Miles and Huberman (1994) note this is a vital step in the coding process since this allows researchers to "see added evidence of the same pattern" (p. 246). At this point, we found that our codes were similar and were supported with evidence from our pre-coding process.

As a result of our coding process, we identified four major long-term outcomes from participation in a first-year learning community: relationships with professors, preparation for college, high-impact practices, and friendships. Each of the themes highlighted below "brings meaning and identity to a recurrent

[patterned] experience and its variant manifestations" (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000, p. 362) that participants richly described.

Results

The Role of Professors

In our interviews, students were asked to describe their relationships with instructors. Each of the students talked about being comfortable with faculty, especially with asking questions or discussing issues in class. Students described their instructors as "caring" and "welcoming" and stressed that they "felt comfortable with the professors." One student stated, "ever since then [the learning community], I have never had more support from faculty." It is telling that the student used the support they found during their learning community experience to gauge support later in their academic career.

Relationships with professors were a highlight for many of the students enrolled in a learning community. Not only did the students find support from their professors, they also considered their professors as mentors and role models. One student said, "I love everything they [my professors] are about. It's like I want to be them when I grow up. Like, if I had to say I had one idol . . . like it used to be Taylor Swift but now it's [Professor's name]. He's an all-star, for sure." Students in the study often discussed how they wanted to "be like" their professors or, when students tried to solve a personal issue, they considered what their professors might do. Viewing their teachers as mentors did not stop after the first year. Many students highlighted their continued relationships with the learning community professors they had in the first year. Our findings confirm Firman, Warner, Rose, Johnson, and Firmin's (2012) earlier assertions that students view instructors as influential mentors.

Preparation for College

Many colleges and universities, including the study site, use learning communities as a mechanism to prepare first-year students for the rigor of college courses (Gebauer, Watterson, Malm, Filling-Brown, & Cordes, 2013). Students noted that being in a learning community helped them navigate the first-year process. "It got me into college. Like, I wasn't really good at emailing and I had to learn really quick in order to get the project done." Students explained that the additional requirements of being in a learning community (namely the HIPS associated with their learning community) provided a guided way to get to know their new community and the expectations associated with college study. The students explained how they felt they were given a level of responsibility their peers who were not enrolled in learning communities did not have.

In addition to building confidence to succeed in class, participants also noted that being in a learning community gave them a breadth of experience on

campus. One student explained, "I feel like if I had never done the learning community I would not have been in half the stuff I am now. . . . I feel like if I hadn't done it, I don't even know what I would be doing right now. I've been given so many opportunities and done so much on campus." This student linked her learning community experience with her ability to engage with the campus community. She indicated that, if left to her own devices (i.e. without a learning community) she would not have been aware of, or sought out, opportunities beyond the classroom. Participants noted that by the end of their time in a learning community, they knew what the expectations of college were and also knew how to enhance their own experience by getting involved outside of the classroom. Many attributed this knowledge to their experience engaging in High-Impact Practices which we will discuss in the following section.

Use of High-Impact Practices (HIPS)

High-Impact Practices are educational practices that increase student retention and student engagement. As noted earlier in the article, the study site requires the use of multiple HIPS in learning communities. While participants did not identify HIPS by their higher education nomenclature, each of them pointed to various HIPS that left an impression on their experience and their future decision-making as a student on campus.

In the *Eat, Love, Pray, London* learning community, students pointed to their experiences reading a common book (common intellectual experience) in each linked course as the most valuable experience because it connected to many areas of interest and helped students determine their major and career interests. One student explained, "with the [common read], there were a lot of ethical things. . . . I was taking a class second semester about it too and it kind of built a more, a better understanding of what I wanted to do." Not only did students connect their use of the common intellectual experience to their development, they maintained that it allowed them to connect with their families. The depth of their learning community common read went beyond the classroom: students persuaded family members to read the book and, two to three years after their experience, they quickly identified the book as the most meaningful contribution to their development as students. Another student noted that the topics from the book discussed in her learning community are still shaping the way she approaches her work in upper-level major classes.

Similarly, in a learning community designed with a service learning focus, students recalled being charged with developing service projects for their learning community members and other students at the institution. Each student in this community confirmed that the process of designing projects was integral to their lives beyond their first year on campus. In fact, many of the students in the group desired to keep their connection going beyond the first year. They recognized that

their formal experience in a learning community would not continue but that did not mean their community service had to stop. Students from the *Ripple Effect* learning community created a new organization on campus focused on community service project design. "After you leave, there is no more of that community service project stuff. So, they wanted . . . the older ones wanted to be able to do that and still have an outlet for people afterward. Otherwise, you are just mentoring students, which is fine, but we wanted to do it ourselves, continue doing the projects." While students were able to stay involved in their learning community as mentors after the first year, they recognized that the learning community was more than just the structure of their small group, it was about helping the local community. One participant explained, "probably one of the best decisions I made was to check the box *yes, I want to be part of this*." For those in the *Ripple Effect* learning community, their connection to the local area and the empowerment they felt was instrumental in their involvement on campus for years to come.

Friendships

One of the most important outcomes of learning communities is social—we want students to develop a community of people with whom they can trust, rely on, and enjoy being around. Yet nearly all of the participants (7 of 9) stated that the relationships they built with their peers were out of convenience rather than "true friendship." While life-long or "true" friendships were not an explicit outcome outlined by the study site, there is an innate hope that students remain friends after their learning community experience has come to an end. Many students stated that while they worked together throughout their first year, any relationships they formed in the first year fizzled when they found themselves without a required reason for spending time together. One participant explained, "we had to become friends" in order to complete coursework. Another participant (in the same learning community) confirmed, "if I see them [we] will say, like, 'hey' to each other. But it's nothing more than that. After the class ended it wasn't as close knit anymore. So, we don't completely ignore each other, but we don't go out of our way to see each other." Each of the participants noted that their bond was formed as a result of being in a similar situation, rather than organically developing on its own. Students, therefore, did not feel compelled to keep their relationships afloat once the common denominator of the learning community was removed from their daily lives.

As previously noted, each of the participants in this study identified as female. Participants in *Eat, Love, Pray, London* and *Whee Teach* noted that their relationships were often "strained" and at times "created a lot of drama." One participant noted, "having all the classes together and then spending all that time together, kind of like, really puts a lot of tension on you." Yet another participant

explained that early in her first semester the learning community group became fractured:

> It kind of cliqued off, which I mean, is always expected of a group of young women. . . . people feel the need to start a rivalry and it got out of hand. And so, the people who were once living happily in the same classes in the same majors now sit on opposite sides of the room and despise one another.

The tension between students and the resulting group fracture signaled to many that their time together would not continue once the learning community was over. Indeed, most participants noted that after the learning community experience was over they did not go out of their way to spend time together. These reactions may be a function of hyper bonding, or forming tight social bonds (MacKinnon, 2006), that occurred the first year but which fizzled out over time.

Discussion

Participants in this study were happy to reflect on their time in a learning community, as many saw it as an opportunity to inform faculty and staff about how to make the program more robust or offer their opinions for improvement. Interestingly, even students who did not have an altogether *positive* experience in their learning community still found it to be a *valuable* experience. Findings of this study suggest that learning communities provide positive outcomes for first-year students as well as long-term effects. We found that while learning communities are one type of High Impact Practice, the outcomes resonated louder and longer when paired with additional HIPS. Students interpreted the learning community as being a vehicle for other experiences they might otherwise not have had, rather than the learning community being the practice of importance. In many ways learning communities can serve as a conduit that is crucial for students and the university. They provide social support, a faculty mentor, and a connection to other HIPS during a student's first year. We argue that as faculty and staff develop learning community themes and structure, they should continue to integrate additional HIPS into the process, in particular, service learning and common intellectual experiences since these were the HIPS that continued to impact participants in our study well after their learning community participation was complete.

Although students did not directly comment on faculty preparation for teaching in learning communities, it is clear that learning communities with faculty who had years of experience and training promoted more long-term effects in the students. The implications of faculty preparation cannot be understated. Scholars have argued for years that faculty preparation is key to learning community success (Smith, 2001; Stevenson, Duran, Barrett, & Colarulli, 2005). Professors who are trained and supported in practices that link course content, highlight engagement in all aspects of the community, and

incorporate activities and expectations beyond a traditional classroom structure help provide more long-term effects. Yet it is evident from our research that in addition to appropriate training, the years in which faculty members engage in the same learning community will also increase student outcomes. As faculty members refine their practices and in-and out-of-classroom activities, students reap the benefit. We suggest that those who administer and recruit for learning communities not only train their faculty but work on developing their long-term involvement.

Finally, in our study a number of the students noted the friendships they built were not long-lasting and, after the learning community experience, seemed superficial. As a function of being in the same learning community, students saw each other often and at times grew tired of being together, especially since they viewed their friendships as a matter of circumstance rather than choice. Whether or not the absence of sustained friendships was a direct result of the intensity of working together in a learning community, the interviews suggested we pay close attention to the dynamics that develop in learning communities. While learning communities can facilitate a strong support network for students, those networks can sometimes become too close-knit. This phenomenon, known as hyper bonding, can be a significant detriment to the overall success of the learning community (MacKinnon, 2006). Hyper bonding can take many forms (such as the creation of cliques experienced by participants in our study). At its worst, hyper bonding can disrupt the entire group dynamic. Faculty members should be aware of what hyper bonding looks like and work to ensure groups are addressing issues as they arise. Continued faculty support and training throughout the learning community semester(s) would allow faculty members to navigate these issues appropriately.

Conclusion

The findings of this preliminary study, while limited in scope, point to some long-term outcomes from learning community enrollment. Learning how students interpret their educational experiences can inform curriculum choices, program development, and training for faculty. While quantitative evidence of effectiveness can tell administrators *what* might be working, qualitative evidence in the form of student voices tells us *why* and *how* students learn and develop. We suggest that those administering learning communities should expand their data collection to not only look at retention, persistence, and graduation rates, but also follow up with former participants to better understand how their first-year experience has potentially influenced their remaining years on campus. Should faculty members identify how students grow as a result of their learning community experience, they may also be able to facilitate avenues for increased

campus and community participation beyond the first year which would ultimately benefit individual students and the larger campus community.

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