

Community?

Learning Communities are small groups of students and faculty who work closely together creating a "community of learners." Many of our programs are residential while other communities are geared toward commuter students. In either situation, Learning Community students have the opportunity to quickly make friends and develop a close relationship with UNC Charlotte faculty and staff. Be sure to explore our wide range of communities to find the one that is right for you.

The supportive environment created in the Learning Communities brings students, faculty, staff, and peer mentors together with the common goal of promoting academic and social success. Communities are offered in various academic areas giving participants the opportunity to explore their interests while working in small, comfortable groups on course-related projects.



Why Join a Learning Community?

Participants in the Learning Community programs enjoy:

- **Academic success with a higher GPA**
- **Specially designed courses, resources, programs and events**
- **Close relationships with faculty**
- **A close network of peers**
- **A small, comfortable living and learning environment**
- **Career development workshops**
- **On-site tutors and mentors**
- **A more positive college experience**

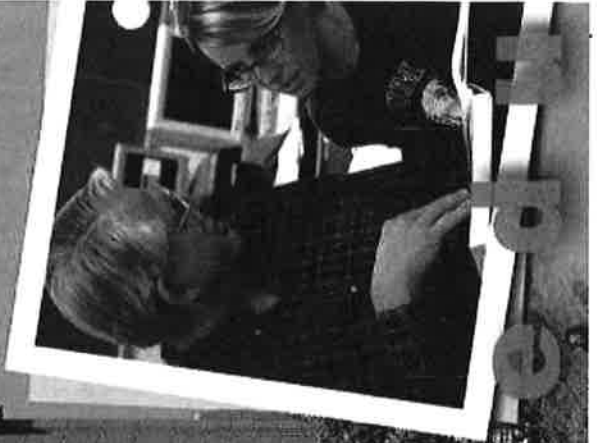
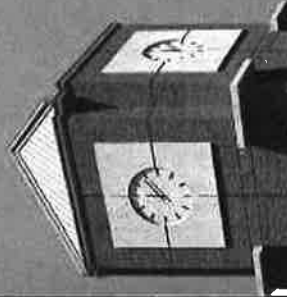


Participate?

Students must be officially accepted to UNC Charlotte before being considered for participation in a Learning Community. Learning Community coordinators are responsible for admission decisions for their particular community. Students in residential Learning Communities need to apply for housing. Please contact the coordinators for questions regarding specific communities.

For more detailed information on specific Learning Communities offered, eligibility requirements and an application, visit our website at: www.lc.uncc.edu

**Space is limited!
Reserve Your
Spot in
a Learning
Community
Today!**



Learning Communities, a unique educational initiative offered by UNC Charlotte, have transformed

the way students live, learn, and ultimately succeed in their academic endeavors.

Learning Communities help participants transition through academic and social challenges by providing small, supportive living and learning environments.

Personal Experiences

"Having a group of students who attend the same classes is a big help. We all look out for each other."

- Ashley Watson, Engineering major

"Learning Communities helped me get connected with what's happening on campus."

- Aaron Best, Pre-Business major

"I get a chance to learn about the students on a more personal level. It's wonderful to work with the total person, not just a student sitting in my class."

- Dr. Susan Furr, Associate Professor

**The Fun Way
for Students to**

**Live, Learn
and
Succeed**



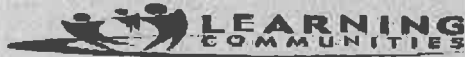
Learning Community programs are a joint effort between the Divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.



For more information regarding:

- A Particular Learning Community
LC Coordinator
www.lc.uncc.edu/contact
- Learning Communities in General
firstyear@uncc.edu, 704-687-8011
- Technical Assistance with Online Application





16 LEARNING COMMUNITIES AT UNC CHARLOTTE!

www.lc.uncc.edu

"Residential" - has a residential component requiring students to live together in the same residence hall, unless otherwise noted.

"Non-residential" - has no residential component; students can live either on or off campus, unless otherwise noted.

**Building Educational Strengths and Talents
(B.E.S.T.) Learning Community**
Freshmen enrolled in B.E.S.T. Program.
Residential

Business Learning Community
Freshmen accepted into the Belk College of Business, designated as pre-business, pre-accounting, and pre-economics.
Residential

Community Service Learning Community
Freshmen living off campus only, interested in Community Service. Open to all majors and disciplines, with exception of students in Architecture, Engineering, Nursing and Honors Program.
Non-Residential

Computing and Informatics Learning Community
Freshmen accepted into College of Computing & Informatics, majoring in Computer Science or Software & Information Systems.
Residential, yet open to students living both on and off campus

Criminal Justice Learning Community
Transfer Students with a pre-major or major in Criminal Justice.
Non-Residential
New!

Engineering Learning Community
Freshmen accepted into College of Engineering.
Residential

*** OVER ***

English Learning Community

Freshman and Transfers with a major or minor in English or have an interest in the creative arts. Residential, yet open to students living both on and off campus

Gender Excellence (Gen X) Learning Community

Freshmen with interest in issues related to women, gender and activism. Open to male and female students in all majors and disciplines, including undeclared.

Non-Residential

Global Village Learning Community

Freshmen with interest in global perspectives, sociology and anthropology. Service learning and study abroad are integral components.

Non-Residential

Health Connection Learning Community

Freshmen accepted into College of Health & Human Services. For students pursuing a major in athletic training, exercise science, Nursing, public health or social work.

Residential

War, Genocide & Human Rights Learning Community

For freshmen interested in history, military history, high school history teacher licensure, international studies and pre-law.

Residential

Leadership Journey Learning Community

Freshmen with interest in Leadership Development.

Residential

University College/Liberal Arts & Sciences (UCLAS) Learning Community

Freshmen with declared majors in College of Liberal Arts & Sciences and undeclared freshmen in University College. Emphasis on community participation. Residential and one section for commuters only.

Psychology Learning Community

Freshmen majoring in Psychology.

Non-Residential

Teacher Education Learning Community

Freshmen designated as pre-education and who wish to become teachers.

Residential

University Transition Opportunities Program LC

Freshmen who participated in UTOP summer bridge program.

Residential

**Final Report:
Improving the Impact of Learning Communities at UNC Charlotte through
Research-Guided Program Development**

A SoTL Grant submitted by the Learning Community Program Steering Committee and
University College

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Kim Buch
Associate Professor of Psychology
Coordinator of Psychology Learning Community
Founding Member of Learning Community Program Steering Committee

Cynthia Wolf Johnson
Associate Provost for Academic Services
Chair of Learning Community Program Steering Committee

Liz Fitzgerald
Director, First Year Programs and Student Support, University College
Member of Learning Community Program Steering Committee

Daniel Bonilla
PhD Candidate
Department of Psychology

Submitted: June 2011

Introduction

In 2009, we received a SoTL grant to expand our understanding of the impact of UNC Charlotte's Learning Community Program. In particular, we were interested in understanding *why* it is that learning communities on our campus are successful. At the time we knew that learning communities were meeting the goals of improved retention and academic success through quantitative outcomes such as GPA and earned hours. What we did not fully understand was what led to the positive impact on academic outcomes and attitudes of students.

Our study included the 16 first-year learning communities that were operating at the time of the study. Although the UNC Charlotte's Learning Community Program began in 2001, our study examined only the last 3 years of longitudinal data available, which at that time included the 2006-07, 2007-08, and 2008-09 cohorts for student academic outcomes, the 2007 NSSE¹ survey data, and the 2008 and 2009 EASE² survey data. Faculty and staff Learning Community Coordinator data were gathered from a 2010 survey and from interviews with several LC Coordinators. Another focus of the study was to identify the extent to which LCs have incorporated the "core and recommended" learning community characteristics³, as defined by the Learning Community Program's Steering Committee. Finally, it was deemed important to determine if these characteristics, in addition to other design and implementation variables on which LCs differed, may have impacted the effectiveness of the LCs.

¹ National Survey of Student Engagement, administered to freshmen and seniors every 3 years at UNC Charlotte.

² Evaluating Academic Success Effectively, administered to new freshmen and new transfers within the first 6 weeks of their experience at UNC Charlotte.

³Characteristics can be found at: <http://lc.uncc.edu/overview.htm>.

Findings

Our results confirmed the previous findings, as reported in the Learning Community Program Comprehensive Review Report conducted in 2009, that the Learning Community Program is having a sustained and significant effect on its student participants, as measured by all academic and attitudinal measures:

- The PGI of LC students is lower than the PGI of all first-time first-year students (2.61 vs. 2.67, respectively).
- The first-year retention rate of LC students is higher than the first-year retention rate of all first-time first-year students (.81 vs. .78, respectively).
- The first-year GPA of LC students is higher than the first-year GPA of all first-time first-year students (2.82 vs. 2.74, respectively).
- The first-year suspension rate of LC students is lower than the first-year suspension rate of all first-time first-year students (3.1 vs. 4.2, respectively).
- The first-year earned hour average (FHR) of LC students is higher than the first-year earned hour average (EHR) of all first-time, full-time, freshmen students (25.5 vs. 24.3, respectively).
- As defined by NSSE, LC students are more engaged than non-LC students; LC scores were significantly higher on the following NSSE subscales:
 - Level of academic challenge (2.88 vs. 2.76, respectively)
 - Active and collaborative learning (2.43 vs. 2.13, respectively)
 - Student-faculty interaction (2.23 vs. 2.07, respectively)
 - Supportive campus environment (3.91 vs. 3.72, respectively)

- As measured by EASE, LC students score significantly higher on behaviors associated with student success, as follows:
 - More likely to meet with faculty outside of class
 - More likely to know their advisor
 - More likely to receive faculty feedback on their work
 - More likely to come prepared to class
 - More likely to join a student club
 - More likely to study with other students
 - More likely to receive unsatisfactory grade letters

From our LC Coordinator survey and interviews with LC Coordinators, we found that most LC Coordinators are satisfied with their roles and reported positive perceptions of outcomes associated with their LC, as follows:

- The vast majority perceive that their departments and colleges/units support their involvement in the Learning Community Program.
- The vast majority perceive that the success of their LC is very important to their departments and colleges/units.
- The vast majority perceive that the students and staff in their LC have a strong sense of community.
- The vast majority perceive that faculty teaching LC courses feel connected to the LC.
- The vast majority perceive that they have adequate resources to support their LC.
- 100% report that they “are glad to be serving as LC Coordinator.”

In addition to examining the overall impact of LCs on students and coordinators, as reported above, we also attempted to identify the extent to which LCs have incorporated the “core and

recommended” learning community characteristics, as designated by the Learning Community Program Steering Committee following the 2009 comprehensive program review. Qualitative data collection (interviews and surveys of LC coordinators) and content analysis of LC Annual Reports for the past 3 years), suggested that:

- 5 of the 8 “core characteristics” are present in 100% of first-year LCs , and 2 core characteristic are present in all but one LC
- The only core characteristic that is not consistently present in all LCs is “identified connections” between academic and student affairs”, which is mostly limited to residential LCs and not clearly present in non-residential LCs
- Far fewer “recommended characteristics” are present across LCs:
 - Only 1 LC was determined to have “tangible curricular integration with the common curriculum.”
 - Only 3 LCs had a “broad group of faculty connected to the LC.”
 - Only 3 LC Coordinators felt “support” for pedagogical scholarship as a result of their LC involvement; more felt “encouragement” for it but not support.
 - Twelve of the 16 LCs offered early integration into a particular discipline or profession.

Ten LCs included service learning in their curriculum. A final focus of the study was to determine if these above characteristics, in addition to other design and implementation variables on which LCs differed, may moderate the effectiveness of LCs. In order to accomplish this, we conducted focus groups with LC Coordinators and consulted the literature on learning communities to identify design and implementation components on which our 16 LCs may vary (in addition to the “core and recommended” characteristics above). This resulted in a list of 11

design and implementation variables. Next, we classified each LC on each variable. We then calculated average first-year retention and GPA as measures of effectiveness for each level of each design and implementation variable. This resulted in the following findings:

- Four design and implementation components moderated the effectiveness of LCs (as measured by both retention and GPA):
 - LCs with discipline-based curricula had more positive effects than LCs with theme-based curricula.
 - LCs with a service learning component had more positive effects than LCs without a service learning component.
 - LCs that integrated student support services (i.e., academic advising) into the community were more effective than those which did not.
 - LCs which were led by a coordinator with more than 3 years of experience were more effective than those with coordinators who had 3 or fewer years of experience.
- We did not find enough variability on the following variables to truly test for any moderating effects:
 - Intentional integration across the curriculum (only one LC was classified as having intentional integration across the curriculum)
 - Use of active learning strategies (all 16 LCs reported an increased use of active learning)
- The remaining design and implementation components did not moderate the effectiveness of LCs (as measured by both retention and GPA):
 - Whether the LC is residential or non-residential

- The size of the LC (whether larger than 20 students per cohort or 20 or fewer students per cohort)
- Whether the LC coordinator is a faculty or staff member
- Age of the LC (whether it was older than the median age of 6 years or not)

Recommendations

The following recommendations follow from the results of the study:

- Continued longitudinal tracking of the Learning Community Program by averaging outcomes over a three-year period, as done in this study. This was found to be a good way to summarize effectiveness outcome measures such as GPA, retention, and EHR. It may also prove useful for examining probation and suspension rates, as well as graduation rates.
- Conduct periodic tracking of the implementation of “core and recommended” characteristics.
- Continue to separate NSSE and EASE results by LC and non-LC groups so that statistical analyses can be made for each item and subscale.
- Continue to use NSSE and EASE results to help identify those particular student behaviors that separate LC from non-LC students that are associated with student success, such as those identified in this study.
- Use information gained from this study in marketing the Learning Community Program to more systematically recruit students. For example, the EASE and NSSE results show that LC students are more likely to engage in many student success behaviors than non-LC students (e.g., study with other students).

- Look for ways to spread the identified success behaviors beyond LCs to other student interventions (e.g., increased opportunities for active and service learning and other forms of engagement that are clearly linked to student success).
- Continue to be flexible with most design and implementation variables, as most were not identified as moderators of LC effectiveness (e.g., it does not matter if LCs are residential or non-residential, or if they are large or small, or if they are led by a faculty or staff member). Resource considerations can be placed above effectiveness considerations when it comes to these factors (e.g., large communities or non-residential communities may be preferred to smaller or residential ones if the latter are more resource intensive).
- Encourage more departments to offer discipline-based communities, as they seem to offer advantages over theme-based communities. This should not replace efforts to increase the curricular integration of theme-based communities (both existing and new), as it is widely recognized as an LC “best practice” that has much support in the literature (see next bullet).
- Consider having more LCs (existing or new) commit to more intentional integration across the curriculum; this requires much more collaboration across faculty and may require special support; however, it is widely recognized as an LC “best practice” that has much support in the literature.
- Consider ways to increase the continuity of LC Coordinators (e.g., all LC Coordinators reported satisfaction with their position, so what is driving turnover)? Can departments or units do more to support or encourage continuity?
- Establish a mentoring program that matches new LC Coordinators with experienced LC Coordinators.

- Encourage increased use of service learning in all LCs (e.g., look for ways to support LC staff in this endeavor). Some things that were discussed at the 2011 LC Coordinator's Retreat in May are encouraged, such as more partnering with Crossroads Charlotte and the Volunteer Services office; the creation of more campus-wide projects that our students can participate in (e.g., Niner Neighbors, Stop Hunger Now, Homelessness Awareness Week).
- Encourage all LCs to examine ways to more fully integrate student support services such as academic advising into their communities, including the use of "one-stop" models that have been identified in the literature as best practices; encourage the Learning Community Program Steering Committee to consider models that may centralize or provide "economies of scale" for these services, so that each LC does not have to do it alone.
- Encourage involvement of more faculty and staff in LCs; our findings suggest that the sustainability of several LCs may depend upon the present LC coordinator.
- Encourage more clear alignment of LC goals with department, unit, and/or college goals, and clearly align measurement with these goals. Ensure that the role that LCs contribute to department and unit goals are clear in annual reports and strategic plans.
- Continue to look for and monitor additional design and implementation variables that may moderate LC effectiveness.
- Implement more formative assessment, perhaps supported centrally by the Learning Community Program, or perhaps encouraged as a decentralized part of unit assessment, that is used to inform change and continuous improvement (and separate from outcomes or summative assessment).

In closing, the literature is very clear that one of the greatest advantages of learning communities is their flexibility and versatility. The study supports the notion that at UNC Charlotte we should encourage creativity in the design of learning communities, followed by assessment which attempts to identify new components which may have the greatest impact on effectiveness. Most importantly, this study demonstrates that there are particular interventions which lead to strong learning communities. This study helps us to understand *why* certain learning communities are particularly successful.