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An Enhanced Approach to Living and Learning Together at IUP: Living-Learning Community Certificate Programs

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An Enhanced Approach to Living and Learning Together at IUP: Living-Learning Community Certificate Programs

Abstract

This article details the development of Living-Learning Community Certificate Programs (LLC-CPs) at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). Based on the Best Practices Model for living-learning programs proposed by Inkelas et al. (2018), LLC-CPs will engage cohorts of students in a four-semester sequence of intentionally integrated courses and assignments, organized around development of “essential skills and practices” enhanced by participation in required residential co-curricular experiences. We expect that LLC-CPs will result in both a sense of student belonging and purpose leading to greater retention and persistence as well as a mid-college credential noted on their transcript, providing students an early sense of academic accomplishment and an advantage when seeking future internships, graduate study, or employment opportunities. This article outlines two example LLC-CPs, explores the anticipated benefits of LLC-CPs to students, faculty/staff, and institutions, and offers suggestions for program implementation.

Keywords

living-learning, certificate program, integrative learning, co-curricular experiences, workforce development

Cover Page Footnote

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Brief History of Living-Learning at IUP

Indiana University of Pennsylvania is one of 14 state-funded schools forming the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. It is a doctoral institution serving approximately 9,215 undergraduates and 2,110 graduate students. The university has a residential main campus and two small regional campuses, one of which is also residential. The university is organized into several divisions including a Division of Academic Affairs headed by a Provost, a Division of Student Affairs headed by a Vice President as well as a Division of Enrollment Management headed by a Vice President.

From 2005 through 2010, IUP underwent a Residential Revival initiative, replacing nearly all its traditional residence halls with suite-style residence halls with a capacity of about 3,200 students. All first-year students are required to live on campus as are all transfer students bringing fewer than 30 credits. First-year students make up about 66% of those living on campus. Since the Residential Revival, living-learning initiatives have been a focus at IUP. A declining population in western Pennsylvania has resulted in an increased emphasis on recruitment and retention, with an eye toward novel approaches in interdisciplinary and collaborative offerings. A 2017 visit from Dr. Karen Inkelas, co-author of the book *Living-Learning Communities That Work: A Research-Based Model for Design, Delivery, and Assessment*, sparked new attention in campus efforts. The collaborative support for living-learning initiatives became tangible, as both the Provost and the Vice President of Student Affairs attended the workshop. Dr. Inkelas's visit spurred the development of an enhanced approach to living-learning. The idea was first submitted as a "white paper" proposal to administration. To reinforce the collaboration between Academic and Student Affairs, university leadership appointed a new Living-Learning Executive Team (LLET), consisting of a mix of existing tenure-track/ tenured faculty and seasoned staff members previously active in LLC efforts, to oversee and coordinate all living-learning initiatives.

Since Student Affairs professionals receive training far different from that of faculty, there was a need to become acquainted with and gain knowledge of each other's fields and professional practices. This task was accomplished through joint participation in several professional development opportunities. For example, four members of the LLET, two faculty and two administrators, enrolled in Dr. Hillary Steiner's (Kennesaw State University) on-line course "Learning Communities Faculty Scholars," which familiarized members with educational and developmental theories, the basics of the scholarship of teaching and learning, and the creation of integrative assignments. They jointly attended Student Affairs-related conferences (e.g., ACUHO-I Academic Initiatives Conference) and co-founded an on-campus teaching circle dedicated to LLCs for both faculty and

Student Affairs professionals. All of the members of the LLET worked together to submit a proposal to attend the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where they spent a week together learning more about best practices and crafting a pilot Living-Learning Community Certificate Program (LLC-CP), outlined below.

LLC-CP Pilot Overview

In addition to traditional bachelor's degrees and minors focusing on academic content knowledge, IUP offers academic certificates, typically consisting of four or five courses (12 to 15 credits) that focus on developing specific skills or competencies. Certificate programs are offered in a wide variety of fields, from foreign languages to teamwork and leadership studies. Each is listed on student transcripts, is approved through the regular curricular process, and requires learning outcomes, course descriptions, and assessment plans. The LLET theorized that the co-curricular activities of traditional LLCs would lend themselves particularly well to enhancing a skill-based certificate.

The LLET proposed an LLC-CP, a certificate that will begin in Fall 2020, in which students form a cohort by completing four specific courses linked sequentially around a central theme over their first four semesters while living together in designated residence hall communities. Additional learning objectives were added to the foundational content of each course to link to the certificate theme. While enrolled in the same sections of certificate program courses, students engage in both extra- and co-curricular community-building activities designed to support each certificate's learning outcomes. The faculty in each LLC-CP work together to design their courses to build one upon the next to provide an intentional, integrated learning experience. The co-curricular experiences occur in the community residence hall spaces during an hour common to all students in the LLC-CPs, allowing intra- and interdisciplinary activities within and between LLC-CPs. Each certificate's co-curricular activities are intentionally developed to integrate with the certificate's learning outcomes, requiring coordination with each course's faculty member and the graduate assistant who organizes events. By the end of their second academic year, students will have earned a credential that is noted on their transcript and intended to provide them with skills that make them more competitive when applying for research, internship, and job opportunities.

LLC-CPs engage students in integrative learning, identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as essential to undergraduate education in the 21st century (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). In integrating learning, acquiring disciplinary knowledge must be accompanied by applying that knowledge, not only within and between academic disciplines, but also in multiple educational and non-educational contexts (Lardner & Malnarich, 2009). Through intentionally integrative assignments, faculty teams not only

encourage students to connect, apply, and synthesize course content, but also activate integrative learning by engaging with students and Student Affairs professionals in co-curricular experiences beyond traditional classroom walls (Barber, 2012). Table 1 describes the curricular aspects of the two pilot LLC-CPs.

Table 1

Curriculum of Approved Pilot LLC-CPs

Sequence of Semesters	Scientific Communication	Global Scholarship
Semester 1	Lab Science (Scientific Method)	Cultural Anthropology
Semester 2	Logic/Critical Thinking	Global History
Semester 3	Statistics	Presentation Making (Journalism)
Semester 4	Research Writing	Research Writing

Note: Each semester includes a .5 credit co-curricular lab.

The certificate in Scientific Communication develops student skills to examine scientific arguments for validity, collect data, form conclusions, and effectively present findings in oral and written form. The certificate in Global Scholarship develops student skills to interpret, analyze, and evaluate cultural data and scholarly sources, structure effective arguments, and communicate socio-humanistic knowledge to general, diverse audiences in oral and written form. The faculty members teaching in each certificate program will work together to develop integrative assignments and projects linking each course's core content to the certificate's theme. The faculty will also collaboratively develop co-curricular activities, which provide opportunities for students to synthesize their knowledge from each of their four courses outside the classroom and to present their work to campus and local community audiences. The integration of curricular and co-curricular activities in this fashion enacts the effective use of several high impact practices (HIPs): undergraduate research, learning communities, collaborative assignment and projects, common intellectual experience, writing intensive courses, service-learning, capstone projects (Kuh, 2008).

Rationale and Benefits of LLC-CPs

In the context of the multiple challenges facing higher education, these programs offer a creative approach to attracting and retaining students while minimizing the need for additional institutional resources. LLC-CP curricula were shaped by three major factors aimed toward interest in and sustainability of the communities: (a) value added to a student's degree, (b) resource neutrality, and (c) minimal cost to students. The value-added is that students meet future employers' expectations and best practices in their fields; as research has shown (Fair et al., 2014; NRC, 2012), transferable skills, such as communication skills, were needed in work environments. University administrators seek curricular initiatives that are

cost neutral to the institution. The courses forming the pilot LLC-CPs have been carefully chosen so that students may use most of them to fulfill their regular degree requirements, resulting in little or no additional cost or time to degree completion.

Although these certificate programs could be stand-alone academic offerings, pairing academics, learning communities, and residential living experience has the potential to increase student retention and student success, creating a seamless co-curricular blend of classroom experience and on-campus living (Arendsorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Hobbins et al., 2017; Purdie & Rosser, 2011). The LLC-CPs address three noted factors influencing the ability to thrive in first-year students (Schreiner et al., 2012): (a) degree goal by early credential noted on their transcript; (b) campus involvement through the co- and extra-curricular activities; and (c) psychological sense of community through the cohort model. These LLC-CPs also address thriving factors for other student populations; for example, faculty interactions are highlighted in the research as important for transfer students and students of color (McCoy et al., 2017; Zilvinskis & Dumford, 2018). Additionally, the LLC-CPs benefit the institution financially by adding one year to the first-year residential requirement.

The Process of Developing LLC-CPs

Although the content and delivery of the LLC-CPs provide the benefits outlined above, the development of the infrastructure, academic environment and cocurricular environment of the LLC-CPs relied heavily on the Best Practices Model (BPM) pyramid, illustrated in Figure 1, by Inkelas et al. (2018).

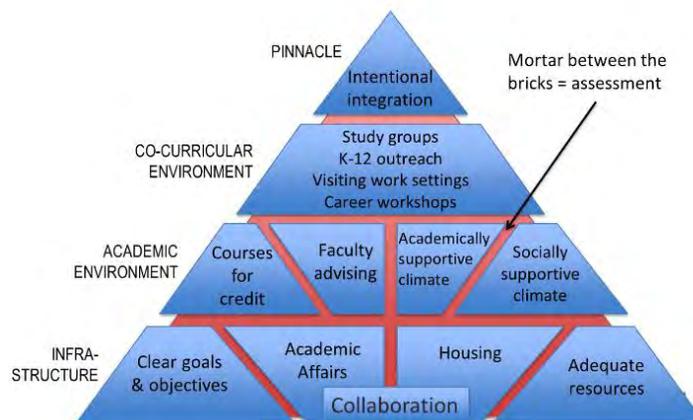


Figure 1. The BPM for Living-Learning Programs. Reprinted with permission from *Living-Learning Communities That Work: A Research-Based Model for Design, Delivery, and Assessment*, by K. K. Inkelas, J. E. Jessup-Anger, M. Benjamin, and M. R. Wawrzynski, 2018, Stylus. Copyright© 2018 by Stylus Publishing.

Infrastructure

The BPM suggests that the foundation for a successful living-learning community requires clear goals and objectives with adequate resources provided by both Academic Affairs and Housing. The LLC-CP approach lends itself to having well-defined goals and objectives as student learning objectives are part of the curricular approval process. All aspects of the co-curriculum should be developed with the learning objectives in mind. The goals and objectives for the proposed LLC-CP pilots were chosen to fit IUP's student learning outcomes and strategic plan.

The structure of the LLC-CP requires significant collaboration and coordination and sharing of resources between Academic and Student Affairs. The division of resources and responsibilities of the various constituents has been the most challenging aspect of the new programs to navigate. The LLET has recommended that a faculty coordinator, a lead staff member and a graduate assistant administer these new programs. Ideally, the faculty coordinator would be responsible for providing the intellectual vision for the program and building academic partnerships across campus to engage faculty and professionals in meaningful exchanges with the participating students. The lead staff member works closely with the faculty coordinator to administer all aspects of the program and provide leadership, supervision, and support for the staff, including residential staff, who are involved in the program. And, the graduate assistant assists in the development, implementation, and assessment of co-curricular and extra-curricular events. Due to institutional resource limitations, the current model still relies heavily on the LLET to serve as coordinators of the program, with no lead faculty member appointed but a lead staff member and a graduate assistant currently in place. Institutions considering such programs should assess whether the new coordination required by multiple certificate programs can fall under existing structures or whether additional staffing is required. While not mandatory, a faculty coordinator for the academic programs is helpful for consistency (Inkelas et al., 2018). Depending on resources available within the institution, compensation could be handled through course release, overload, or alternate work assignment.

IUP is fortunate to have a strong graduate program in Student Affairs in Higher Education that provides a pool of graduate students for assistantships to coordinate the residential experience of the LLC-CP in return for practical skill development and financial support for up to two years. Institutions without graduate programs would need to look to Student Affairs to assign personnel to manage the residential component.

Academic Environment

The second level of the LLC BPM is the academic environment. This layer is addressed by the four integrated, sequential courses and the faculty support provided to the academic and social environment within the living space. The LLC-CP is grounded in the four courses and co-curricular labs that form the certificate. Only students participating in the LLC-CP are enrolled in each of the cohort-specific sections of courses. LLC-CPs that include science labs are limited to 24 students, and in such cases 2 sections of 24 students (48 total students) would create a cohort. All lecture-based course sections would be capped at 48. Cohorts fill by means of first-come-first served (or as an application process for the more desirable programs). Non-lab LLC-CPs do not have this same constraint, but LLET recognizes a maximum of about 50 students per cohort to be ideal to foster a sense of community and offer enhanced faculty-student contact.

In the event a cohort enrollment is too low for a designated section to run, students not in the cohort could be allowed to register since all courses in the program contain either general education or common in-major requirements along with the enhanced learning objectives for its respective certificate. Institutions should consider the impact on community building and student buy-in within the LLC-CPs if non-cohort students are included in the courses.

Each LLC-CP is taught by a team of four faculty members working collaboratively on meeting the certificate outcomes while primarily responsible for each of their own courses. Each member generates integrative course topics/materials, assignments, and co-curricular events—built around their courses' learning objectives and the certificate's objectives—that continually build upon each course in the four-course sequence. The faculty are a visible presence in the residential community by participating in regular out-of-class activities. The graduate assistant and residential staff work with the faculty to develop activities that reinforce classroom content and the certificate's student learning objectives. Ideally, the residential community becomes an extension of the classroom and a site for integrative learning.

Co-curricular Environment

The third level of the BPM, the co-curricular environment, is specifically and intentionally designed to reinforce the themes of each certificate. The weekly required co-curricular lab period can provide a traditional structured, scheduled times for activities that focus on topic and community building, such as guest speakers, remote facility tours, and peer mentoring. When the weekly co-curricular labs are scheduled to meet within the same time period, they can further facilitate interdisciplinary community building. Having each LLC-CP provide programing

to one another allows for individual communities to build a larger university-wide community and thus a larger sense of belonging.

Integration and Assessment

Assessment is planned at both the institutional and certificate program level. Institutionally, the addition of LLC-CP is expected to improve student retention and persistence for the institution, which are easily measured by comparing certificate participants' retention rates, GPA, and engagement level with those of the general student body. At the program level, each certificate has its own set of expected student learning outcomes that are measured by direct and indirect methods.

It is important to note that these student learning outcomes are chosen to meet the priorities of the divisions of Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Enrollment Management. Each certificate's curriculum incorporates formative and summative assessment measures tailored to both academic and co-curricular goals. Requirements for explicit assessment are built into the curricular approval process.

Implementation Suggestions

For institutions considering an LLC-CP model, the LLET recommends attention to four areas: faculty and staff partnerships, curricular process, institutional support, and student recruitment. The timing in each area is critical. Students must be recruited before arrival at the institution. Therefore, faculty-staff partnerships, new student orientation, admissions, curriculum development, financial aid, and institutional support must all be in place well in advance of the recruitment cycle for the intended start year. Possible stakeholder partnerships are addressed below and illustrated in Figure 2.

It is important for all faculty and staff involved in LLC-CPs to be appreciative of one another's disciplinary and professional cultures since the implementation requires significant investment of time and energy. Identifying professional development opportunities in which all partners may participate, such as workshops and national or regional conferences, is critical to developing a common vocabulary and purpose.

The LLET faced two major curricular hurdles. First, there was confusion as to the limited selection of courses. Most minors and certificates have a menu of courses to choose from that enable departments to include one or more courses as options. Since the LLC-CP requires dedicated sections and intensive faculty commitment, course selection must be narrowly focused. Further, the dedicated co-curricular lab added tuition cost to students and faculty workload cost for the institution. The LLET was able to win administrative approval to develop half credit courses, minimizing the cost to students. The labs are currently assigned to a

LLET faculty member, but ideally they will be assigned to the faculty director, with the goal of providing administrative compensation on faculty load.

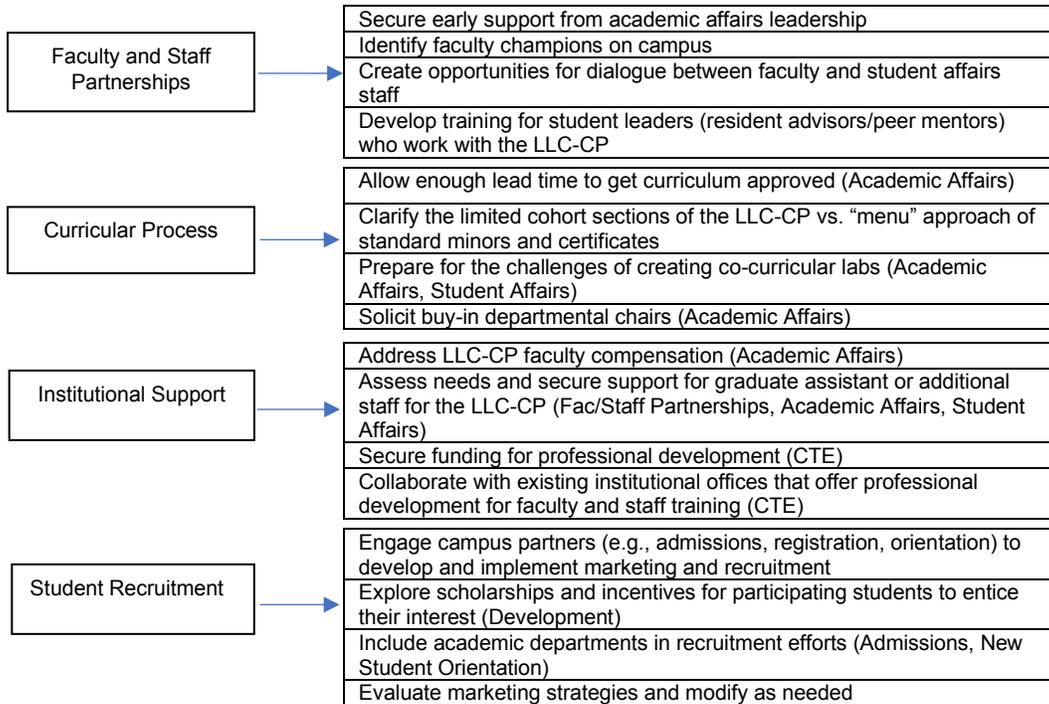


Figure 2. Suggestions for implementation

Additionally, the LLC-CP requires significant institutional support. Both Student Affairs staff and faculty need professional development and time for planning. The IUP model includes funding for a graduate assistantship to coordinate co-curricular activities. Programmatic funds also need to be identified for recruitment, advertising and co-curricular activities.

When preparing to recruit students, additional partners should be consulted, such as new student orientation, admissions, financial aid, marketing, development, and potential participating university colleges and departments. Faculty and staff partners need to be involved in all on-campus admissions' events and support promotion and development initiatives. Working with marketing and communications to ensure that the program is integrated into the institutional message is key.

Our LLET found that it was helpful to meet each stakeholder individually to provide a tailored overview of the program, with specific objectives and tasks, to initiate collaboration with each office/division. Each meeting highlighted the benefits to each stakeholder, such as increased recruitment possibilities for admissions, the ability to attract and retain new majors or minors for academic

departments, and increased occupancies for housing. Specific efforts were made with the institutional marketing team to ensure the inclusion of LLC-CPs into the branding of the institution. An emphasis was placed on integrating the necessary tasks into existing processes to minimize impact on budgets and personnel workload.

Conclusion

Although it is early in the pilot phase and further work may be required for the LLET and participating faculty, staff, and students to ensure the success of LLC-CPs, this unique approach should provide the institution a new tool to address the changing landscape of higher education. The LLET intends that this enhanced approach to living-learning communities not only succeed at IUP but also become a model for collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs to meet current and future student needs.

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