

# **Are Living Learning Communities Beneficial?**

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## **Introduction**

Finding community is a critical part of the college student experience. During a student's first year, there is typically an adjustment period of living independently and feeling a sense of belonging that helps students overcome obstacles they may face in trying to navigate a new world. Students can find community in classrooms, joining a club or organization, forming an outside study group, and often through Living Learning Communities. Living Learning Communities (LLCs), also known as Living Learning Programs (LLPs), integrate "community and academic work into a student's campus residence [to] create a fully co-curricular experience" (Buell et al., 2017, p. 87) through the use of intentional curricula for learning and community building. LLCs work to engage students in the residence halls by hosting events, discussions, or activities that allow like-minded students to get together in their campus homes and find others who are similar to them. LLCs date back to the 1920s and are meant to act as a link for students to create a deeper sense of connection and community through engaging in shared experiences outside of the classroom. Practitioners in the higher education field are continually investigating LLCs' effect on the community and how they benefit students. Research shows that LLCs offer a beneficial opportunity for students, but also come with many unintended challenges. By reviewing the existing literature, recommendations can be made to better serve students living in LLCs and how they can overcome challenges to support a co-curricular student experience within higher education.

## **Historical Context**

The idea of LLCs was created by John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn, where they "founded experimental schools...where they could put into practice their theories about learning as a social process" (Love, 2012, p. 8). Focusing on the work of Meiklejohn and higher education, the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin was "a required research project to be done by students during the summer between their freshman and sophomore years" and examinations of the students' "sociological and political patterns" investigated what can be applied to them from the "real world" to their classrooms (Love, 2012, pp. 8-9). These concepts would then shape a curriculum for students to know what they need to learn prior to attending a university. The Experimental College had the first two years of students at the university stay "[in] a design of the college [that] included students' social networks that would reinforce academic habits and culture" (Love, 2012, p. 9). Through the conceptualization of interdisciplinary teaching within the residence hall and inside classrooms, LLCs started to form.

In the Experimental College's residence hall, there were several teachers, known as advisors, who would also live and work in the residence hall to "foster maximum social and intellectual interaction" (Nelson, 2001, p. 141). After much hesitation about housing the

Experimental College, the Wisconsin state legislature agreed to support Meiklejohn in working with his Experimental College. With 119 students admitted into the school, and numerous faculty willing to cultivate interdisciplinary conversations, Meiklejohn's next challenge would be to encourage students to want to learn and participate in this new way. However, five years after its opening, the Experimental College closed due to effects from the Great Depression and the public's criticism that the Experimental College was teaching students to be undisciplined. Meiklejohn showed that learning can be done anywhere on a college campus, not just in a classroom. There was not a huge wave of this new initiative of LLCs seen until years later, starting in the 1960s, when colleges and universities became more residential and implemented programming inside residence halls.

### **Benefits of Living Learning Communities**

With the heightened interest of incorporating LLCs on college campuses, administration was able to get creative in establishing different kinds of communities that could stimulate deeper learning outside the classroom. LLCs allow residential students to experience a co-curricular academic and living community through a variety of types of LLCs: including academic-based (engineering and science communities), identity-based (international student community), and interest-based (the arts and entrepreneurship communities), just to name a few. Research shows that students who are a part of LLCs are "more likely to hold out-of-class discussions with their peers on topics introduced in their coursework as well as on social and cultural issues" (Inkelas et al., 2008, p. 14) which can lead to an increase in stimulating intellectual perspectives and arguments. LLCs can help students build skills so they are able to hold conversations based on interdisciplinary teaching compared to solely conversations within a classroom, a type of style that does not work for every kind of student. LLCs also work to promote student development by creating ways for students to work and learn through high engagement practices (Buell et al., 2017). Students who join LLC programs early in their college experience are shown to outwardly use critical thinking skills and are more likely than non-LLC students to engage with faculty. Key studies also show that students participating in learning communities display "enhanced academic performance, integration of academic and social experiences, gains in multiple areas of skill, competence, and knowledge, and overall satisfaction with the college experience" (Otto et al., 2015, p. 2). Though critical thinking and academic grades are different statistics, students involved in LLCs challenge themselves academically and push themselves to understand the world a little differently than they once knew it. LLCs have well established their intent to develop interdisciplinary studies through positive student growth and feedback that can contribute to student success in college and beyond.

LLCs also capitalize on Astin's Theory of Student Involvement in that LLCs require high levels of student engagement both in and outside of the classroom, which according to Astin, is directly related to the amount of personal and professional growth that a student experiences (1999). Astin suggests that "frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement" (Astin, 1999, p. 525), something LLCs positively contribute to in fostering that interaction. In turn, LLCs see "increased student retention rates and higher grade point averages" (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016, p. 3) and may be particularly of value for students who are most at risk for not graduating (Otto et al.,

2015).

Student engagement and a student's sense of community and belonging has also been studied through the use of Living Learning Communities. Regardless of the type of LLC, research from Buell et al. indicates that “student outcomes in LLCs include a sense of belonging and positive relationships with peers and faculty” (2017, p. 90). LLCs encourage student socialization with a variety of community members, including students, staff, and faculty. A 2016 study of 80,000 students from over 360 four-year institutions concluded that “students in LLCs felt more connected to their faculty and had the confidence to ask for help from their faculty members” (Arendsorf & Naylor-Tincknell, p. 4). Additionally, students in the Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell study indicated having great respect for their faculty and feeling that they were more approachable, concurring with Astin’s theory. In addition to these benefits, Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell notes that a “significant portion of the impact of college is influenced by students’ socialization on campus” (2016, p. 3) with all community members, including students, staff, and faculty. The Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell research around LLCs show there is a mutual benefit between student and institution, as the LLC can provide students with a greater sense of ability and social feeling that potentially leaves them with a higher GPA and connection with faculty, factors often positively associated with retention.

Overtime, LLCs were also able to strengthen students’ engagement and belonging on their campus. Studies revealed students feel a “higher sense of community and belonging in residence halls among LLC students compared to non-LLC students” and that LLCs are “fulfilling [ students’] general goal of creating a supportive, student-focused environment within the context of a larger college or university setting” (Spanierman et al., 2013, p. 320). In this research of community and belonging, Spanierman et al. identified that the LLC with the highest level of these values was the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) Women LLC. It appeared that this STEM Women LLC “provided social support for women who explained that others might perceive them as ‘nerdy’” and women in this LLC explained that “support from other women was critical” where women felt unjudged and settled in a quiet study environment (Spanierman et al., 2013, p. 320). This type of communal feeling is not uncommon amongst LLC-type communities within higher education. Students feel more supported in their LLC when they are able to be with like-minded people who can both support and challenge their work by having shared perspectives and experiences. Overall, the higher education community continues to recognize LLCs as a high impact learning initiative that shows positive effects on student success.

## **Challenges of Living Learning Communities**

Even with positive results found, there are still some challenges that question the meaning of and goals associated with LLCs. The higher education community has felt that LLC programs are “operating without a clear purpose or mission, noting that too many learning communities are little more than block registration devices, with little alteration of the teaching and learning environment” (Smith, 2015, p. 3). LLCs, at face value, are very useful tools in building community, but higher education practitioners may not fully understand how intricate these programs are and the strong campus partnerships needed to build it, questioning an LLC’s overall benefit and value to the institution at large. This indicates a strong need for periodic reviewal in understanding whether the programs are working or not and why; programs

may be over-produced without keeping the goals of the LLC and values of the institution in mind.

In a 2007 survey, the National Study of Living Learning Programs found that “faculty involvement in LLC programs was overall, quite low...23% included no faculty participation, and 64% utilized somewhere between one and three faculty members” (Council of Independent Colleges, 2015, p. 5). Of the LLCs that did have faculty members, they were limited to faculty involvement of teaching courses and academic advising, but not assisting with the larger development of the co-curricular and extracurricular activities. This suggests that faculty may not fully understand their duties as participants in an LLC and how it differs from that of a typical faculty role in the classroom. Consequently, because of the vital role faculty play in an LLC, their lack of involvement and enthusiasm may cause disinterest in student involvement. Moreover, faculty involvement may be compounded by the type of institution the LLC is operating in; at large research institutions, it may be more challenging for faculty to get involved if they are also concerned with other courses they teach and producing independent research if required by their academic department.

While Living Learning Communities offer students a deeper sense of connection with their faculty and peers, researchers have found that the connections made can “sometimes lead to cliques within the respective LLCs, leaving some students feeling isolated from other students” (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016, p. 12). The same researchers note that the social adjustment in college is critical in the high school to college transition and not immune to the development of conflict. Students can create tension unknowingly by forming a type of social circle that isolates others from the conversation in a single LLC. Those who feel ostracized from the LLC may be more inclined to retract from the community or withdraw altogether. Looking at first-year students in the residence halls, it is important to remember that these students are coming from high school environments and it takes time to relearn new environments. This means “a small group of traditional-aged first-year students can also recreate and reinforce a ‘high school-like environment’ with the attitudes and behaviors that accompany it” (Jaffee et al., 2008, p. 58). While some hope an LLC brings people together to form a cohesive living community, there are shortfalls in LLCs to allow for a proper high school to college life transition.

Additionally, the dualistic nature of LLCs means that conflicts that happen in the classroom may easily seep into the dynamics of the residence hall community. Institutions should be cautious of students creating a detachment from the larger campus and choosing to isolate themselves in their residence halls in a group of people similar to them. Students might enjoy their LLC so much that they choose to have their residence hall be their primary community instead of having multiple communities of equal comfort. This overinvestment in the community may become a breeding ground for increased risky behaviors, such as the consumption of alcohol or drugs, and peer pressure situations (Smith, 2015). This in turn can lead to students choosing to participate more in such risky behaviors over the communal conversations and stimulation that are seen in LLCs. The emphasis on students living together should not be reason alone that a community is built, especially if there is a specific focus on bringing peers and faculty together and an overlooked consideration of students wanting to be experiential in decision-making when they enter a college campus.

## Recommendations

Many research studies have illustrated that Living Learning Communities have a positive effect on a student's GPA and overall sense of community at an institution. However, after considering the challenges, there are still some steps institutions can take in order to alleviate any issues they might face. The recurrence of exclusive cliques can impede LLCs' goal of creating community, so Residence Life leaders could establish explicit values and expectations for inclusivity within the LLC and engage students in developing guidelines for their LLC that address needs and interests of the students. In addition, bringing all the LLCs that exist on a campus together in some capacity to share experiences may bring together the multiple interdisciplinary conversations that are occurring on one campus and establish another space for students' sense of belonging. Residence Life staff may also help in encouraging students within one LLC to engage with other students in another LLC. Mentoring programs may also be of use in LLCs, as it may encourage students to interact with others that they may not normally engage with and can provide another layer of support. Additionally, considering the risk of dangerous behavior in these types of communities, Residence Life staff can proactively provide alcohol and drug education, sexual violence awareness, and other educational programming to help students make educated decisions. Residence Life leaders should continue emphasizing and enforcing consequences for policy violations that every campus has on these behaviors.

The Council of Independent Colleges (2015) sees assessment as critical in understanding the impact of LLCs; through direct and indirect methods of assessment, higher education professionals can see what their students are taking away from their LLC experience and where there are areas for improvement. Consistent assessment will share with administration whether or not the LLC is functioning in line with the campus' mission and goals. When it becomes clear through assessment that LLCs are losing student interest, leaders can focus on the areas that need improvement and intentionally use the assessment to better the student experience while being student-centered and keeping the overall mission in mind. It is vital that LLCs continue to act as a co-curricular and interdisciplinary feature that stimulates student development and growth while at the college, aside from just focusing on connection and high GPA.

Considering the important role that faculty play in the facilitation of the LLC, Residence Life collaborating with and training LLC faculty is a critical component to making sure that the right people are a part of the community. Residence Life staff should also structure faculty responsibilities to align with their faculty roles and knowledge, which can make sure faculty know what they are getting into as LLC faculty and set realistic expectations for their duties. Training further reinforces this by giving them the tools they need to effectively engage with their students in and outside of the classroom. Strong partnerships between the LLC faculty and staff can create a united front amongst the professionals running the LLC and indicate to students that they are fully supported by the LLC faculty and Residence Life staff.

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed the functions of LLCs where they have not been quite the same as most institutions have operated fully or partially remote. It is up to the Residence Life teams and their respective institutions on how LLCs will continue to live on their campuses post COVID-19. While LLCs are meant to be housed in residence halls, there is still a thriving community aspect that can still be honed in and established in a virtual platform. Institutions will need to see LLCs as flexible as academic

classrooms were made to be to continue its work of faculty and student engagement, as well as creating a space of connection, which is much needed in the time of the pandemic. With students no longer living on campus in their LLC, they are no longer able to experience the dual living and learning components of the program. This has caused universities and colleges to reconsider how they can best replicate the LLC environment in a virtual platform. Because a virtual LLC may not give students the same benefits as an in-person one, students may feel less willing to join one. Residence Life has been one of the most affected offices within higher education since it is incredibly challenging to have students co-exist in the same space while also enforcing safety guidelines of physical distancing and mask wearing. Additionally, Residence Life staff is less driven by programmatic aspects and more concerned about “the pressure of both lower operating capacity and refunding housing costs have put a financial strain on institutions” that can lead to an increase in hiring freezes and furloughing staff (Williams, 2020). Safety should be an institution's priority, but it raises the question of where community building falls within the reopening strategy.

During the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, safety concerns prompted institutions across the country to close residence halls and send students home. The following Fall 2020, many residence halls stayed closed, and the ones that re-opened had limited programming. While the pandemic can be seen as a hindrance to in-person community building, LLCs do not necessarily have to disappear in a virtual world. Facilitators of LLCs are already established, with a faculty and/or staff member prepared for discussions and activities. Even if the pandemic kept residence halls closed, learning communities already have intact partnerships that can be transitioned into a virtual setting. Some sort of reconstruction might be required to continue with discussions and activities, but learning communities are still able to bring members together for academic and social reasons. The National Learning Community Collaborative (2020) notes, “the cherished traditions that solidify a sense of community on campus can be offered online in innovative ways that maintain a high-quality learning community experience that engages students...,” (paragraph 5) driving the point that these communities do not have to be neglected because there is a lack of physical setting but can be transformed for a virtual setting and continue the out-of-classroom experience.

## **Conclusion**

Living Learning Communities were established to bridge the gap between academic and non-academic worlds. The student subpopulation in the residence halls benefits greatly from LLCs because they can experience programming and discussions that are geared towards their interests. Students who participate in LLCs also develop skills outside the classroom and build community with other students who are similar in interests and identities. Students in LLCs are more engaged with faculty and peers and feel a stronger sense of community, which could influence higher GPAs and increased retention. While LLCs create a plethora of benefits, there are a few notable caveats that may inadvertently cause challenges for students, staff and faculty. LLCs can create cliques among their well-connected students and isolate others, as well as lead to an increase in risk-taking behaviors. LLC faculty engagement increases students' sense of belonging, but in most applications, the faculty may have unrealistic expectations for their role and may lead to a lack of involvement in the living learning community. Moving forward, LLCs need to create stronger and individual assessments to evaluate the LLCs and if

student needs are being met. The COVID-19 pandemic has halted the functions of LLCs and may shift the way intellectual conversations as part of an LLC are conducted in the future. Despite their challenges, Living Learning Communities are a strong addition to campus communities and provide space for critical personal and intellectual growth.

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