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Assessment of Living-learning Communities: Models for Campus Collaboration

By Anita Henck and Jeff Jones

Introduction

Higher education – an environment renowned for autonomy and specialization – is increasingly becoming a culture of collaboration (Doz, 1996; Kezar, 2001; Kezar, 2005; Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). While campus collaborations have historically been interdisciplinary academic programs, present-day partnerships have expanded across academic and administrative lines. Today's campus collaborations often include the combined efforts of academic affairs and student affairs professionals in the development of student living-learning communities.

Historically, institutions of higher education prepared students by creating learning environments—classrooms and lecture halls—where information was passed from instructor to students who were in a passive mode; motivation for participation being provided through competition among students. That autonomous learning environment is no longer the ideal preparation for students who are preparing to function in the knowledge economy of the 21st century. Rather than being mere spectators, students must be able to work collaboratively with peers and faculty members.

Thus, the emphasis on both the student's learned body of knowledge and their acquired interpersonal collaborative skills presents important new assessment challenges for student affairs and academic affairs practitioners alike. This is complicated by the distinctly different cultures of academic affairs and student affairs and their varied approaches to assessment.

This paper will identify key theoretical components of campus living-learning communities, review assessment measures common to academic and student affairs arenas, and report on new approaches to the assessment of the impact living-learning communities have on student outcomes.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical basis for living-learning communities is rooted in Astin's (1996) work on the importance of student involvement in the learning process. Involvement theory takes a student-focused view, rather than a faculty- or curriculum-based view of learning. Astin (1996) conducted a longitudinal study that followed first-year students through four years of college to measure involvement. Measuring 57 characteristics of student involvement, the study found that the three most powerful variables were academic involvement, faculty involvement, and peer involvement—all of which living-learning programs attempt to increase. The study also found that a peer group was the strongest source of influence on students. Astin concluded that a student's interaction with peers involved him or her in the process of education more intensely than did other influences.

Involvement theory takes a student-focused view rather than a faculty- or curriculum-based view of learning. Astin contends that learning comes not so much from what is

taught, but the state of the student being taught. Astin (1984) encourages faculty to focus on “how motivated the student is and how much time and energy the student devotes to the process of learning” (p. 301). This view takes the focus off of the curriculum and onto the student’s learning.

In addition to Astin, Tinto (2000) finds particular significance in the interaction between the classroom and the out-of-classroom environment. Tinto (2000) calls for a seamless learning environment in which learning is constructed beyond the classroom. In these environments, “social and academic life are interwoven and social communities *emerge* out of academic activities that take place within the more limited academic sphere of the classroom, a sphere of activities that is necessarily also social in character” (p. 91). The importance of creating communities where students can integrate their social and academic lives is a key aspect of Tinto’s theory.

Tinto (1997) attempted to understand the effect of peer interaction within the classroom environment. By studying learning communities, Tinto measured the effect of peer interaction on student learning. The study found that learning communities helped integrate students into both the social and academic dimensions of college life. The role that peer support plays in that adjustment is important, both inside and outside of the classroom. The application of living-learning communities draws heavily on Tinto and Astin’s theories.

Living-learning communities have been found as an effective bridge to holistically connect the students to the rich social capital networks of peers and faculty. Through collaborative interaction, solid academic gains are often seen. For example, Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994) found that students involved in living-learning communities had higher levels of persistence, academic performance, and engagement with faculty.

More recent research by Engstrom and Tinto (2007) of academically under-prepared students continues to validate these findings. A major conclusion from the study relates to the importance of clear connections between student services and the academic component of college. Engstrom and Tinto contend that providing students access to college without providing proper support is not adequate for student success. Instead, institutions must be willing to restructure in ways that proactively provide support services to students. The implementation of such a living-learning program requires a high degree of commitment from the organization and an exceptionally collaborative relationship among student affairs and academic affairs.

Assessment Methods

The continued call for assessment in higher education results in the need for measurable outcomes, as well as data to document these outcomes (Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson, 2006). The value of the program to the institution can be established through the assessment process. But the challenge is rooted in the distinctive differences between the cultures and assessment systems of academic affairs and student affairs. Typically, academic affairs focuses on learning outcomes and student affairs focuses on social outcomes and student satisfaction.

To determine the impact of living-learning communities, Stassen (2003) developed an instrument that measures the experience of students during their first semester

in learning communities. One component measures a student's social experiences at the institution; it questions the amount of institutional commitment the student experiences. This relates to whether the student feels a sense of community and has an overall positive experience at the institution. The social experiences instrument also considers a student's exposure to diversity during the program. These questions include exposure to ethnic diversity as well as contact with individuals with different values. Examining a student's social experiences helps clarify the extent to which learning communities increase persistence and challenge the student's deep-set and pre-existing notions about differing ethnicities and values.

Stassen's assessment instrument also looks at indicators that point to students becoming more integrated into the academic life of the institution. These measures include the extent to which students collaborate with their peers on academic work. Students are asked if they have had increased interaction with faculty, including deeper conversations about careers and course performance. Improvements in academic engagement and general academic behavior are also measured. These behaviors include being prepared for class, asking questions, participating in discussions outside of class, and displaying academic confidence. In addition, the overall learning environment is explored to understand if the student has mentor-like relationships with faculty and has found personal fulfillment at the institution.

Another assessment, developed for the National Study of Living-Learning Programs, can also be used to analyze living-learning programs (Inkelas *et al.*, 2006). This instrument is distinct in that it not only measures the experiences gained by students in the living-learning communities, but also examines the non-living-learning aspects as well. Inkelas *et al.* are proponents of Astin's (1993) view that other activities, besides those associated with a particular outcome, must also be measured in order to accurately understand the result of a specific program. As a result of this view, the assessment measure considers the effect of both living-learning experiences and non-living-learning experiences within two areas—environmental factors and learning outcomes.

In trying to understand how the college environment integrates into the life of students, the assessment instrument questions how often students discuss academic related topics and socio-cultural issues with peers. Stassen's approach also addresses this issue, but Inkelas *et al.* stress the depth of the conversations and the likelihood the students spoke about topics that are more common among close friends, such as religious and political views or different lifestyle choices. Similar questions are asked about student relationships with faculty, such as informal contact and deep discussions about ambitions.

The Inkelas *et al.* assessment also addresses the following factors:

- *Environments of residence halls.* These questions include whether the student has taken advantage of workshop, counseling sessions, and study groups.
- *Academic environment present in the residence hall.* This includes the overall value of studying, space available to study, and staff assistance to achieve academic goals.
- *Mixing of ethnically diverse groups.* This examines whether diversity is observed during meals, extracurricular activities, rooming, friendships, and

dating. General areas of trust and respect among different groups are also included.

- *Academic learning outcomes.* A section on critical thinking asks whether the student challenges the ideas presented in class or accepts the professor's views without question, as well as studying the student's ability to internalize the course material and whether the learning experience is enjoyable.
- *Student's deeper cognitive growth.* This relates to the developmental process of traditionally-aged college students with regard to individualization (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). These questions seek to understand whether the students have grown in their self-confidence and in their ability to appreciate differences.

Each of these assessment measures provides a way to show empirical evidence of the value of living-learning communities. The process of assessment can enable the whole institution to view the effectiveness of the program and provide validation. By considering the outcomes of the living-learning programs, student affairs is better able to show how they positively affect multiple aspects of the institution.

Conclusion

Living-learning communities have much to offer higher education and the students they serve. The research is becoming increasingly clear that these collaborative approaches are beneficial to students both academically and socially. The assessment measures presented can provide a means of bridging the dissimilar cultures of student affairs and academic affairs practitioners. Such collaborative ventures can be complicated, particularly because of different approaches of sub-cultures within the institution. Yet the shared goal of student learning and success make the collaboration worthwhile.

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