Executive Summary
This report provides an overview of Learning Communities within the Division of Student Success and the impact they have on retention. The University of Akron offers both academic learning Communities as well as living-learning communities. This report will focus primarily on the academic learning communities which reside in the Division’s Student Success Center and are directed by Fedearia A. Nicholson, Assistant Vice President for Student Success.

The higher education community has been called to “intentionally develop learning communities that promote and maximize student learning” (Price, 2005). Four key basic categories exist for learning communities: curricular, classroom, residential, and student-type and offer the benefits of “higher academic achievement, better retention rates, greater satisfaction with college life, improved quality of thinking and communicating, a better understanding of self and others, and a greater ability to bridge the gap between academics and social worlds” (Price, 2005).

A Learning Community (LC) is a group of students who take two to four classes together. These communities provide opportunities for students to meet other students, study in groups, interact with their professors and instructors, as well as learn ways to be active participants in the classroom. In addition to the academic LCs, which are primarily non-residential in focus, there are also Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) and such communities promote student academic success that is supported through residential experiences.

Specifically, this report will provide:

- For Fall 2014 semester, UA offered 30 academic LCs with 615 student participants. Information and data to support how student learning is enhanced by students participating in LCs and their success in the academic experience at The University of Akron (UA). The Fall 2013 retention rates for LC students (first-time, full-time, bachelor degree seeking) on the Akron main campus was 81% compared to the Fall 2013 main campus overall first year retention rate of was 73.9%.
- Collaboration within the colleges and support units provide structured cohort learning experiences for students to engage in as well as highlight the exceptional work and partnerships with faculty, including those teaching in LCs within the College of Business (CBA), Engineering, and academic support units such as the Office of Multicultural Development.
Learning Communities

A broad theoretical framework supports Learning Communities (LC) Programs and links student engagement and involvement to student success. Drawing on the theories of Tinto, 1987; Reason, 2009; Astin, 1984, 1991, 1993; Kuh, 1993; Bobilya & Akey, 2002; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009; Buddel, 2005; Gabelnick et al., 1990; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Kellogg, 1999; Schein, 2005; and Stassen, 2003, Eck, Edge, & Stephenson, 2007, etc., collectively, the theorists have collectively formulated the following conclusions regarding LCs:

1) LCs increase the likelihood that students will experience college as a learning experience across the classrooms and out-of-class settings by linking programs and activities across the dimensions of students’ lives, removing obstacles to student goals.

2) Out-of-class interactions between students and faculty suggest promotion of student integration and have been linked to persistence, particularly when programs are developed as freshman year experience programs.

3) Programs have been developed to foster students’ transition to the university setting and have been designed to assist students who might typically leave college before their second year.

4) Programs have evolved to offer experiences through interdisciplinary themed courses, service learning, and mentorship programs provide opportunities for social interaction and engagement.

5) LCs, by definition, are characterized by a variety of approaches that link or cluster classes around a theme and a cohort of students during a given term; this represents an intentional restructuring of time and experience for students and a major transformation in how campuses think about teaching and learning, characterized by a variety of approaches (focusing on interdisciplinary themes), enrolling a common cohort of students.

6) LCs center on the removal of learning barriers and enhancement to learning, particularly for first-year students, emphasizing collaboration, interdisciplinary themes, and active learning.

7) Students are more likely to remain at an institution if they have opportunities to become connected to the life of the institution in both their social and academic lives through a process of integration. Curricular and co-curricular content may vary in LCs, however, each has shared knowledge, knowing, and peer responsibility in the building and collaboration of learning.
LCs at UA were developed by Dr. Anne Goodsell Love, former Assistant Dean of University College. During that time, the program began with six developmental learning communities and later expanded with Nursing as the first college to sponsor a learning community. The movement for LC’s has grown in large part due to advocacy and leadership provided through the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College.

While there are different types of learning communities on college campuses with the intention of creating an “integrated teaching and learning experience,” there are common basic characteristics that apply to all of them, including:

- Organizing students and faculty into smaller groups
- Encouraging integration of the curriculum
- Helping students establish academic and social support networks
- Providing a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of college
- Bringing faculty together in more meaningful ways
- Focusing faculty and students on learning outcomes
- Providing a setting for community-based delivery of academic support programs
- Offering a critical lens for examining the first-year experience

(Price, 2005)

LCs at The University of Akron are intentional and inclusive learning experiences comprised of 20-25 first-year students who take two to four classes together as a cohort in an integrated learning environment centered around a theme or academic discipline aiding students with their transition to college. Each LC fosters a collaborative relationship between students and faculty creating a deeper learning environment.

There are four key goals for UA’s LC Program:

1) To provide students with opportunities to engage in social and academic interaction with peers both inside and outside of the classroom.
2) Aid first-year students in the transition from High School to college while building a support system to enable them to be more connected to the campus in order to utilize campus resources, such as learning assistants, tutors, academic advisers, and peer mentors
3) Help students establish strong relationships with faculty members by facilitating team-building, collaborative learning and networking through the clustering of courses and sharing of experiences
4) Develop academic skills to enhance core competencies of critical thinking, communication, analytical skills, and diversity

For the Fall 2014, UA offered over 30 academic LCs with 615 student participants. In November 2014, each student received an online survey to assess their overall experience with the program and how it aided in their transition to UA. With a nearly a 50 percent response rate, students provided vital feedback to aid in program enhancement.
Below are highlights from the student survey:

1) Enrolling in a learning community has assisted in my transition to The University of Akron.

![Assisted in Transition Chart]

2) As a result of participating in a learning community during my first semester at UA, I feel more connected to the students in my LC than to students in my non-LC related courses.

![Connections to UA Chart]
3) As a result of participating in a learning community, I am comfortable approaching my LC faculty members with questions and assistance when needed.

![Comfortable Approaching Faculty Graph]

4) Faculty members teaching in my LC organized joint assignments around a central topic or theme for two or more courses.

![Organized Joint assignments Graph]

5) My LC encouraged team-building with the other students in classes.
6) Participating in an LC encouraged me to connect to campus resources such as tutoring (math and/or writing lab), peer mentoring, learning assistants, etc.

7) My LC provided opportunities to engage in social and academic interactions with other students in the LC both inside and outside of the classroom.
8) I would recommend this LC to a friend.

While LCs are regarded nationally as a powerful vehicle to increase first-year retention, there is no one silver bullet for student success. Therefore, it is critical that LCs continue to work in concert with other High Impact Practices (HIP) and first-year initiatives such as the freshmen seminar, which is embedded in most UA LCs; writing intensive courses, common intellectual
experiences such as the common reading and lecture, service-learning, capstone projects, peer mentoring and tutoring. UA’s program encompasses all of those components. The Fall 2013 retention for LC students (first-time, full-time, bachelor degree seeking) is 81% compared to the overall first-year retention rate of 73.9%. The program is pleased to boast one of the highest retention rates since the program’s inception.

In addition, a crucial piece to the program’s success is the curricular integration of faculty in the program and vibrant co-curricular experiences for students. This has been a key focus in the program’s redesign. Each faculty member teaching in a LC is expected to attend the Professional Development Institute hosted by the program’s director in May. The Institute places a strong emphasis on the program’s mission; how LCs impact retention; program expectations; the importance of curricular and co-curricular integration as well as an opportunity for faculty to meet with other faculty teaching in their learning community cluster and to begin establish curricular goals and co-curricular experiences. In addition, faculty are strongly encouraged to meet with other faculty in their LC cluster at least two to three times a semester.

While there are many notable learning communities that effectively achieve both curricular and co-curricular integration, two communities that stand out in achieving this effort are the Business and the African American Male LC. First, the Business LC stands out as an exemplar among colleges at UA for their bold commitment to the program and for ensuring their first-year students have a successful transition to UA and a solid knowledge of their major selection. For Fall 14, three cohorts were implemented in CBA and included the Akron Experience: University 101 course taught by the dean of the college as well as the associate and assistant dean. In the survey administered in November 2014, students commented on the impact these individuals had on their first semester at UA. Further, the African American Male LC, which resides in the Office of Multicultural Development, has been supported with funding from the Knight Foundation. This year-long community has been in existence for nearly six years and has consistently outperformed other African American Male students who were not a member of the learning community by nearly 15 to 20 percent each year. The program’s success can be attributed to strong coordination, intrusive academic advising and dedicated faculty members such as Dr. Sheldon Wrice and Ms. Michelle Byrne who have consistently taught both fall and spring semester in the program. Their commitment in conjunction to the academic advising support and overall program coordination by Dr. Patrick Jackson, collectively provide a triage approach to enhance student success and persistence. Additionally, students engage in service-learning opportunities where they are asked to mentor younger students as well as attend campus events with their instructors.
Summary

LCs play a significant role in the success of college students both in and outside of the classroom. In addition to positive academic outcomes, LCs promote diversity, social tolerance, and personal and interpersonal development, and students who engage are also more likely to participate in co-curricular activities (Zhao and Kuh, 2004). All of these are important and have direct impact on student retention, success, and personal development. LC studies show links to desired college outcomes, as well, including “higher grades, more engagement overall, higher persistence rates, and greater gains in intellectual and social development as compared with peers who did not participate in LC’s” (Zhao and Kuh, 2004)

For Fall 2015, there will be 52 academic LCs and 15 LLCs available to entering first-year students. An overview of the program’s offerings includes the following:

- LCs in all Health Profession Majors
- A total of eight Business LCs
- Diverse populations such as International LCs; Women in Engineering; Passage African American Male, Adult Focus and Veteran LCs
- LCs in various colleges including the Buchtel College of Arts and Sciences; Honors; Education, Engineering, and CAST

In addition, seven Career Exploration LCs will be offered for entering first-year students who are still exploring majors. The Career Exploration LC was developed to give exploratory students an opportunity to explore UA majors and career options and to adjust to college life in a collegial and supportive environment. Students in the Career Exploration LC will also have the opportunity to develop a Capstone Project with many elements to support the kind of portfolios so often developed by college students today in support of their future careers.

Best practices show that effective LC’s should help first year students transition from high school to college, connect students to resources, help students meet other students and form friendships, help students connect with faculty and have faculty connect with students, and provide for integration across the curriculum. The LCs at UA are following best practices with a strong and well-coordinated program.

The LC program will continue to be refined with recommendations for increased program growth. The University is currently reviewing the student success outcomes among learning communities to identify ways to improve the program and retention challenges. Assessment of the program is currently being done to include qualitative data from participating faculty, first-year retention and first semester persistence, GPA’s, and overall student satisfaction.
References


Inkelas, K.K., & Weisman, J.L. (2003). Different by design: An examination of student outcomes among participants in three types of living-learning programs. Journal of College Student Development, 44 (3), 335-368.


