Living-Learning Communities and Student Success: A Literature Review

Angela E. Hoffman

University of Utah
As institutions of higher education are increasingly being held accountable for meeting the needs of society, universities are seeking new ways to foster student satisfaction, retention, persistence to graduation, and academic and social experiences. Several institutions have found that living-learning communities provide a means for meeting the previously unacknowledged needs of students by creating a seamless educational experience in which students’ academic and social experiences can be purposefully integrated through their living environment, conversations with peers, interactions with faculty and attendance at programs (Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, & Owen, 2006). Living-learning communities are intentional communities in which students extend their academic experience from the classroom to their personal life as they live in a specified portion of a residence hall with students that are engaging in similar curricular and co-curricular activities (Inkelas et al., 2006; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Schein, 2005).

The implementation of living-learning communities has been noted at all institution types but has been most recognized at large research institutions where living-learning communities are being rapidly implemented as a means of providing students with a personable, unique, liberal arts experience to their education (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Nesheim, Guentzel, Kellogg, & McDonald, 2007; Schein, 2005). The widespread creation of living-learning communities is supported by research that participation in living-learning communities is associated with students’ increased academic performance, engagement in educational activities, and satisfaction with college experience (Nesheim et al., 2007; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). As the implementation of living-learning communities is on the rise it is imperative to have a clear understanding of the facets of the student educational experience that living-learning communities can successfully address. The purpose of this literature review was to evaluate the
studies that have been completed on living-learning communities to derive a clear definition of what a living-learning community is and the perceived and actual benefits institutions and students can attain by participating in living-learning communities. Specifically, the living-learning community components of balancing faculty involvement, delaying and reducing alcohol use, and facilitating appreciation of diversity were addressed. Lastly, living-learning communities were considered within the context of related student development theories.

**Balancing Faculty Involvement**

A key component of living-learning communities is faculty involvement. In many living-learning communities residence halls are often purposefully modified to include classroom space, faculty offices, and research labs, so that students can have the opportunity to have more frequent interactions with faculty that will enhance their college experience (Wawrzynski, Jessup-Anger, Stolz, Helman, & Beaulieu, 2009). Some research outcomes have shown that students participating in living-learning communities have more faculty interaction and feel more at ease in having formal and informal interactions with faculty than students living in traditional residence halls (Nesheim et al., 2007; Wawrzynski, 2009; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). Faculty involvement is an important piece of living-learning communities as interactions with faculty members have been associated with positive academic transitions (Creasey, Jarvis, & Gadke, 2009). According to Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2010), the demeanor of faculty impacts students as students who found faculty to be approachable, respectful, and available outside of class were more likely to report that they enjoyed learning, were more self-confident in their academic ability, and were more motivated than their peers.

Contrarily, other research outcomes have led to the conclusion that students participating in living-learning communities are more likely to have mentoring relationships but are not more
likely to interact with faculty when compared to students living in traditional residence halls (Creasey et al., 2009; Stassen, 2003). Similarly, first-generation college students in living-learning communities that had an established faculty-student mentor relationship were less likely to have a positive social transition than their first-generation peers (Creasey et al., 2009). Creasey et al. (2009) provided an explanation for the result suggesting that first-generation students may connect with a faculty mentor if they are having difficulty connecting with their peers and that the faculty mentor relationship takes up a lot of time and resources and that first-generation students are therefore, unable to foster relationships with peers. Although faculty involvement may seem detrimental to students’ success in some respects, Komarraju et al. (2010) suggests that for first-generation, minority, or underprivileged students faculty involvement may be essential to their success as their relationship with faculty members may be their only outlet to share the college experience. Komarraju et al. (2010) recommends that student affairs practitioners make special efforts to connect first-generation, minority, and underprivileged students with faculty.

Additionally, research suggests that students form more trusting and connected relationships with faculty when prompt verbal and nonverbal feedback is provided in comparison to those relationships in which faculty do not provide prompt verbal and nonverbal feedback (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). Braxton et al. (2000) encouraged student affairs professionals to help faculty and students form more positive relationships. An ideal method to facilitate positive faculty-student relationships is to integrate faculty into the residence hall environment so that students can receive immediate feedback from faculty, and avoid feelings of inadequacy and anxiety that accompany delays in communication.
One way that faculty can be integrated into the residence hall environment is by holding class sessions in the residence halls. Several living-learning communities include mandatory student success courses that students are required to take if they reside in a living-learning community (Braxton et al., 2000; Lichtenstein 2005). Research has shown that living-learning community classes are one of the best locations to implement experiential or active learning through the use of enhanced lectures and short group activities (Braxton et al., 2000; Lichtenstein, 2005). The utilization of active learning techniques is associated with students’ improved social integration, institutional commitment, and persistence to graduation (Braxton et al., 2000).

In conclusion, faculty play a large role in student’s success in college and it is important to consider the results of research studies to determine the appropriate balance of faculty involvement that will lead to maximum student success.

**Delaying and Reducing Alcohol Use**

Although not originally intended to encourage safe drinking habits, living learning communities may delay and reduce alcohol use. Students residing in living-learning communities reported drinking less before college and during the first and second semester in comparison to students not residing in a living-learning community (McCabe et al., 2007). The number of drinks students reported having in one day increased for all students from precollege to the first semester of college and from the first semester to the second semester of college, however, students in living-learning communities had a smaller increase in the number of drinks in comparison to students not in a living-learning community (McCabe et al., 2007). Since students in living-learning communities alcohol consumption did not match the students in the traditional residence halls until the second semester, McCabe et al. (2007) suggests that living-learning communities may provide a protection against alcohol, but only during the first semester in
which students are transitioning to college. Emphasizing this protective factor, another study found that students of living-learning communities said that they held one another accountable for behaviors in their community and did not want to behave in a way that would jeopardize their acceptance of their peers (Wawrzynski et al., 2009).

The study by McCabe et al. (2007) could have been improved by having students provide a response to why they did or did not drink prior to college, during the first semester, or during the second semester. It would be helpful to identify if students in living-learning communities associated their participation in living-learning events as keeping them preoccupied and encouraging them to avoid drinking alcohol. Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that students that do not drink prior to college may select to reside in a living-learning community because they perceive it to be an academic environment that does not promote drinking (McCabe et al., 2007).

Facilitating Appreciation of Diversity

One of the perceived purposes of living-learning communities is to facilitate an appreciation of diversity in participants of living-learning communities. According to some studies students in living-learning communities have frequent discussions about sociocultural issues (Inkelas, & Weisman, 2003), are aware of personal stereotypes and privilege (Nesheim et al., 2007), and are more likely to view campus climate towards diversity as positive (Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008). Counter to some students’ positive experiences with diversity, the diverse experiences that some students have had in living-learning communities caused conflict. For example, a negative relationship was identified between sociocultural peer discussions and the transition to college for honors students at one institution (Inkelas, & Weisman, 2003). A possible explanation for the negative relationship, provided by Inkelas and
Weisman (2003), was that because the students were intellectually and academically achieving honors students they were willing to address controversial issues with their peers but were not ready to handle the associated emotional turmoil.

On the other hand, some research suggests that students residing in living-learning communities feel that their peer group of students is very homogenous and that there were not sufficient opportunities to broaden perspectives or interact with students or faculty that are diverse (Stassen, 2003; Wawrzynski, & Jessup-Anger, 2010). Similarly, at one institution a living-learning community that was centered on social justice topics reported that students in the living-learning community had no change in their attitude toward social justice at any point during their time in the community ( Longerbeam & Sedlacek, 2006). It is possible that the living-learning community had a definition of social justice that was too broad and did not resonate with the students. However, since these residents elected to live in the social justice themed living-learning community it is also possible that the students already had a highly developed in understanding differences and respecting others. Stassen (2003) and Wawrzynski and Jessup-Anger (2010) suggested that living-learning communities increase the diversity of students and staff through special recruitment and retention efforts and also emphasize social justice and diversity themes in curricular and co-curricular activities.

Lastly, some research shows living-learning communities to be quite diverse and recommends implementing resources specific to the student populations present in living-learning communities. For example, Inkelas et al. (2006) found that African American students were least likely to find their campus racial climate positive but were very likely to have positive perceptions of the residence hall climate and utilized residence hall resources to the highest level. Another study found that students that identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual were more likely to
reside in a living-learning community than in a traditional residence hall (Pasque & Murphy 2005). Measures need to be taken to address those students populations that are residing in living-learning communities and efforts also need to be taken to address those student populations who traditionally do not participate in living-learning communities.

**Student Development Theory**

Research strongly indicates that student development theory was used to shape the development of living-learning communities and that living-learning communities meet the needs of students going through various developmental situations. Inkelas et al. (2006) noted that living-learning communities specifically meet the needs of first and second year students who are seeking to progress through Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) identity development vectors of achieving competence, managing emotions, and moving through autonomy toward interdependence as students in living-learning communities score higher on these vectors than students living in traditional residence halls. On the other hand, Astin’s (1993) involvement theory has an established connection to living-learning communities through research using the input-environment-outcome model. Astin’s (1993) input-environment-outcome college impact model was utilized in several studies to analyze the incoming characteristics of students, the impact of the environment, and the resulting student outcomes (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007). Stassen (2003) noted that Astin’s (1993) theory of involvement applies to students’ involvement with living-learning communities as they have the opportunity to become involved with their peer group and have important peer interaction around the integration of their academic and social experiences. Lastly, Tinto’s (1993) theory of integration also supports the development of living-learning communities as students are able to achieve integration by being involved in the integration of academic and social experiences, interacting with faculty and
peers, and establishing a connection to the university (Johnson et al., 2007; Tinto, 2000). A critique of Tinto’s (1993) integration theory is that it can be interpreted on putting the pressure on the students to integrate to the college culture and leave behind their preexisting heritage (Johnson et al., 2007). However, in reality students and institutions should both be responsible for the successful integration of students and students should never have to give up who they are to integrate to the college culture (Johnson et al., 1997). When Tinto’s (1993) integration theory is viewed as a partnership between students and institutions students are more likely to persist in college (Johnson et al., 2007).

**Recommendations for Future Practice and Research**

After reviewing the literature on living-learning communities there are some notable gaps in the research and several topic areas that could benefit from further exploration. The field of student affairs and specifically those practitioners looking to revise or develop new living-learning communities could benefit from research on methods to identify students that could benefit from participation in a living-learning community and subsequently, how to get students to participate in a living-learning community. Similarly, research on what attracts students to living-learning communities and what innate personal characteristics are common among living-learning community participants would be valuable. Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, and Leonard (2007), suggested future research consider ways to target recruitment and ways to open programs to those that are unable to reside in the residence halls as a means of making the living-learning community experience accessible to all students who might benefit from participation. As the current literature focuses predominately on the living-learning community experience for first-year students future research should investigate the benefits living-learning communities have
for upper class students and should suggest ways to modify living-learning communities to keep students engaged throughout their college experience.

In addition, consideration should be given to the specific facets of living-learning communities that make them successful and the ideal number of students to have in a living-learning community. Since living-learning communities are associated with a decrease or delay of alcohol consumption (McCabe et al., 2007), future research should investigate if living-learning communities are associated with a decrease in other unhealthy behaviors such as drugs or unprotected sex. Lastly, research on non-academic living-learning communities such as themed living-learning communities might provide insight into the similarities and differences between the various types of living-learning communities.

There are also some experimental design components that could be improved in future studies. For example, academic achievement should be considered a construct that can be measured not only utilizing the common tool of GPA but also by utilizing the number of upper division level courses a student successfully passes or the number of research hours a student does. Similarly, when social or co-curricular involvement is considered constructs other than geek life involvement, student organizations, and employment should be considered. Measurements such as involvement with volunteering, hobbies, and athletics should be considered as additional ways to measure social and co-curricular involvement. Lastly, longitudinal studies should be conducted at various types of institutions to gain more complete information about the impact of living-learning communities.

In conclusion, living-learning communities have a lot to offer students and institutions. Specifically, as participating students of living-learning communities are more likely to demonstrate more academic effort, active learning, collaborative learning, critical thinking, have
a more positive view of the institution as supporting academic and social needs, and achieve higher levels of academic and social integration in comparison to students of traditional residence halls (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Living-learning communities therefore, can help higher education institutions meets society’s expectations by helping students adapt to college living, excel academically and socially, and persist to graduation. However, it is important to note that learning communities are not the only way or are the best way to provide students with an integrated academic experience (Tinto, 2000; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). Learning communities exist that are beneficial to student success but are not of the residential variety. For example, options such as clustering courses based on where students live in the residence halls, offering student success courses, utilizing active learning techniques, providing faculty-student luncheons, or providing co-curricular experiences as part of scheduled courses are all ways that learning communities can be implemented without the residential component (Braxton et al., 2000; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Wawrzynski, & Jessup-Anger, 2010). As men, transfer students, and part-time students are less likely to participate in a learning community before graduation (Zhao & Kuh, 2004) it is essential to consider some of the nontraditional ways in which the dynamic aspects of living-learning communities can be implemented to accommodate and benefit students that do not typically participate in the learning community experience.
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