EFFECTIVENESS OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITIES
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Thesis

Presented to the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Education
(Higher Education Leadership)

by
Ashmeeta K. Mishra

SPRING
2012
EFFECTIVENESS OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITIES
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Thesis

by

Ashmeeta K. Mishra

Approved by:

__________________________________, Committee Chair
Geni Cowan, Ph.D.

__________________________________, Second Reader
Debra J. Luff, Ed.D

__________________________________
Date
Student: Ashmeeta K. Mishra

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this thesis is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the thesis.

__________________________, Graduate Coordinator

Geni Cowan, Ph.D.

Date

Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Abstract

of

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITIES
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Ashmeeta K. Mishra

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the learning community program in its initial stage at a local community college. Effectiveness is defined by the researcher as the level of satisfaction experienced by the learning community students based on the factors such as improvement in their ability to interact with others, successfully contributing to group discussions in academic and social settings, increase in persistence towards education continuance, fulfillment that educational goals are being met, and feeling of academic, personal, and societal growth and progress. An effective learning community along with other factors (committed instructors, institutional support, and adequate academic/student services) can make learning communities successful. Success is defined by the researcher as increase in student retention rates, increase in student completion rates, positive student learning outcomes, and overall student success. Specific questions addressed in this research are:
1. Why do students enroll in the learning communities?

2. How to determine the effectiveness of a learning community?

3. What factors make the learning communities successful?

Sources of Data

The sources of data were student survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with administrators and faculty members actively involved with the learning communities. The student questionnaire utilized both the quantitative method and the qualitative method. Likert-scale surveys with a few open-ended questions were used in the student questionnaire. The student questionnaire consisted of 20 questions. Semi-structured interviews were designed for administrators and faculty members. The interviews were comprised solely of open-ended questions – eight questions each for administrators and for the faculty members.

Conclusions Reached

It is evident that the learning communities surveyed in this study are effective and successful to a major extent. Students enroll in learning communities for a variety of reasons. The major reason is to find the community support and structure which the learning communities promise them. For the learning communities to be effective, students need to feel satisfied with the quality of education they are receiving. The data suggests that the majority of the students were indeed satisfied with their education experience. For the learning communities to be successful several factors need to be present and the most important factor is the instructor commitment, involvement, and motivation. Other important factors revealed for the learning communities to be
successful in this study are thorough and proper planning of curriculum and academic instructions, college support, smooth registration process, and student orientation.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Geni Cowan, Ph.D.

_______________________
Date
DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this thesis to my daughter, Shreya A. Mishra. Education is the most valuable asset one can acquire – it is priceless and exceptional. It is the key for dreams to become a reality and opens the pathway to success and wisdom.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my husband, Ashwin P. Mishra for being so understanding and supporting of my educational goals and making all the sacrifices that he had to while I finished my studies.

My special thanks go to my parents for always encouraging me to follow my dreams and providing me with the freedom to do so. Without their guidance, this journey would never have happened.

My warm thanks go to my sister Sherell A. Maharaj for constantly reminding me to work on my thesis and helping me with it.

Thanks to Leland Hunter for his relentless editorial assistance, draft after draft. Thanks to Dr. Debra Luff for agreeing to be my second reader and for the support and guidance throughout my studies.

Finally, yet importantly, a big thanks to Dr. Geni Cowan and Dr. José Chávez for all the guidance, patience, and invaluable knowledge that were provided to us throughout the program. This research would not have been successful without their expert help and assistance.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Problem</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Thesis</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Community Defined</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses of Learning Communities</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Learning Communities</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different Types or Models of Learning Communities</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of Learning Communities</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale for the Study</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA</strong></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting of the Study</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population and Sample</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of the Study</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Learning Community Models</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Understand What A Learning Community Is</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Satisfaction with the Learning Community</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Recommend Joining A Learning Community to Others</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Involvement in the Learning Community versus Connection among other</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Involvement in the Learning Community versus Connection between Personal</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience and Class Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Learning Community Involvement and Application to Real World Problems</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Interest in Continuing Education due to Participation in the Learning</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Improvement in Ability to Work Cooperatively and Productively with Others</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Improvement in Ability to Interact with Others and Contribute to Group</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Sense of “We are All in this Together”</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Team Effort</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Learning Community Classes versus traditional Classes</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Learning Community versus Goals Accomplishment</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Enrolling in other Learning Communities</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Learning Community versus Instructor Availability and Helpfulness</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Learning Community - One Big Class with Integrated Assignment</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
18. Themes – Why Chose to Enroll in a Learning Community .......................... 73
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figures</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Core Practices in Learning Communities</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Higher education is at a very important juncture right now. Colleges and universities are calling for new levels of resourcefulness when approaching educational programs and the relationships between academy and its community. Even though higher education is aware of what promotes student learning, the challenges are still hindering the success of student learning and outcomes. Students are increasingly diverse and the manner of attending college has changed considerably. More students now commute and attend more than one institution at the same time. Many students now also work part-time or full-time, have family obligations while going to school. Many students combine community college programs with online courses and residential experience. In addition, education is becoming more and more important. Society’s expectation for student performance is rising and emphasis is growing regarding new skills and abilities individuals need in order to navigate and succeed in a changing multicultural world. And on top of these issues, the political and financial challenges are increasing. To respond to these challenges, learning communities have arisen as one of the many reformation efforts in higher education. Learning communities are being offered at more than five hundred colleges and universities (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, Gabelnick, 2004).

A learning community is:
any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing
courses—or actually restructure the curricular material entirely—so that
students have opportunities for deeper understanding of and integration of the
material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their
teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise. (Gabelnick,
MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990, p. 19)

The learning community has been in the spotlight for many years now ever since
its inception by Alexander Meiklejohn in 1920. Meiklejohn piloted a two year learning
community program at the University of Wisconsin (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Shapiro &
Levine, 1999). Although the program was short lived and was discontinued due to lack
of positive results, a completely new doorway was opened for educational institutions
which would in later years adopt learning community models. Adopted by many others,
molded in new and creative ways to enhance student learning and outcomes, the learning
communities have served the educational institutions and their desire to meet their goals
and objectives of student retention and student success in some way or other.

Kuh and Love (2004) wrote that students who made cultural connections through
social groups that reproduce their culture of origin were more likely to persist in higher
education. Clark (1996) wrote that what education needs is a “community.” The reason
for this need is because without community learning becomes “lifeless, impersonal, and
functional affairs” (p. 56). Community provides education with nourishment and energy.
Weissman, Cullinan, Cerna, Safran, and Richman (February 2012) stated that out of the
students who enroll in the community colleges for a credential or for a transfer to four
year universities, only about fifty percent are able to accomplish their goals within a six year period. And those students who enroll in colleges to develop their remedial education such as reading, writing, or math, the rate of accomplishment is even lower. Learning communities are the tools which can be employed to improve these students’ success. Also, learning communities are not only likely to improve student success, but incorporates other components such as faculty collaborations, shared assignments and curricula, and connections to student support services which benefit students. Smith et al. (2004) wrote that the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence wrote a report in 1984 which proved to be very influential in educational theory and practice in the United States. The report stated that higher educational institutions need to create learning communities because learning communities could create a more engaging and effective learning environment and can be used to address a variety of issues in the higher education system. Shapiro and Levine (1999) stated that successful learning communities share basic characteristics:

- Organizing students and faculty into smaller groups
- Encouraging the 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 (p. 3)

Many higher education institutions are adopting some form of learning community model as an opportunity to enhance and expand educational deliverance and to revitalize faculty involvement (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Bradley and Blanco (2010) wrote that the learning communities are being viewed by higher education as an effective tool in improving degree completion. Learning communities are excellent tools in promoting academic success and student engagement because they focus on emphasizing student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions while providing intensive mentoring and advising for students. Gabelnick et al. (1990) have stated that learning communities:

…purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students….Built on what is known about effective educational practice, learning communities are also usually associated with collaborative and active approaches to learning, some form of team teaching, and interdisciplinary themes. (p. 5)

Learning communities are becoming the heart of learning societies (Clark, 1996). Learning communities are designed to enhance the educational experience for both students and teachers. They provide more insight to students than just the mastery of course content. The block scheduling of learning communities keeps the same students together through courses which are tied together and provide social and cultural activities for students. Some learning communities also bring student groups who have similar
interests and/or backgrounds together, while others generate community among the diverse mix of students through common activities and interests (Bradley & Blanco, 2010). Learning communities also provide a venue for academic support services to be made available to the students, alleviating the need for students to locate department offices across the campus. Academic advising, orientation, registration, career mentoring, and tutoring can all be part of the learning community (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Statement of Problem

There has been and still is much controversy about the efficiency, effectiveness, quality and standards of education, and accountability regarding higher education. Many times the question has been asked why the higher education system keeps failing the educational needs of its students and how this obstruction can be overcome. Society is becoming more educated and is portraying more interest in wanting to know how their tax dollars are being utilized in the education system. Gabelnick et al (1990) stated that questions are being asked regarding the content and quality of curriculum and educational programs in the education system. He also stated that questions are being raised about how faculty members are utilizing their time at an institution. Higher education institutions and the state are both concerned about student success and retention rates and what can be done in order to rectify these problems. An effective higher education institute is the one that is concerned with and effectively focuses on student retention and student outcomes, and not just the enrollment numbers (Jenkins et al., 2006).
The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the learning community program in its initial stage at a local community college. Effectiveness is defined by the researcher as the level of satisfaction experienced by the learning community students based on the factors such as improvement in their ability to interact with others, contributing to group discussions in academic and social settings, increase in persistence towards education continuance, fulfillment that educational goals are being met, and feeling of academic, personal, and societal growth and progress. An effective learning community along with other factors (committed instructors, institutional support, and adequate academic/student services) can make learning communities successful. Success is defined by the researcher as increase in student retention rates, increase in student completion rates, positive student learning outcomes, and overall student success.

It is hypothesized that the learning communities are effective and successful because of the support among the participants (that is students, faculty members, staff, and administrators) in the community. It is also hypothesized that students enrolled in a learning community have much higher student success and student retention. Furthermore, higher education institutions that adopt learning community models are far better able to meet its students’ academic, professional, and personal goals; and have a higher percentage of positive student learning outcomes. Specific questions addressed in this research are:

1. Why do students enroll in the learning communities?
2. How to determine the effectiveness of a learning community?
3. What factors make the learning communities successful?
Definition of Terms

**Coordinated Studies** – Multidisciplinary program of study involving a cohort of students and team of faculty from different disciplines, teaching courses in a learning community (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

**Federated Learning Communities (FLCs)** – a learning community where a cohort of students and Master Learner enroll in three joined or federated courses based on common themes in addition to a seminar which is taught by the Master Learner (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Kellogg, 2000).

**Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs)** – a learning community where a cohort of freshman students enrolls as a small group in three freshman courses joined together by a common theme and meet weekly with a peer advisor (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

**Learning Clusters** – a learning community where a cohort of students enrolls in two, three, or four discrete courses linked by common themes, historical periods, issues, or problems (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

**Learning Community** – a curricular restructuring approach that links or clusters classes around an interdisciplinary theme and enrolls a common cohort of students (Levine & Tompkins, 1996).

**Linked Courses** – a learning community where a cohort of students enrolls in two courses which are paired together. Students are required to enroll in both courses (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

**Master Learner** – a faculty member from another discipline other than the federated courses who enrolls in the federated courses with other students and is
responsible to convene the seminar linked with the learning community (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

**Student Learning Outcomes** - defined in terms of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students have attained as a result of their involvement in a particular set of educational experiences (YCCD Academic Senate, 2005).

**Student Success** – measures of academic achievements based on college entry exams, college grades, postgraduate achievements, and completion rates (Kuh, Kenzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006).

**Student Retention** – preservation of continued enrollment in registered classes through the course of one semester. Successful completion of units compared to attempted units ratio (Crawford, 1999).

**Limitations of the Study**

One of the limitations faced by the researcher was not being able to conduct the survey on the students who had previously enrolled in a learning community. By conducting a time series study, the researcher would have been able to evaluate students’ responses before enrolling in the learning communities and then re-evaluate their responses after they had finished their learning community classes. The researcher believes that including this group of students for the survey would have yielded broader results, and by interviewing a few of these students, the researcher would have been able to compare and contrast students’ pre-evaluation and post-evaluation on the learning communities.
Another limitation of this study is that the learning community students who were surveyed were community college students. A survey of four-year college (university) learning community students would have broadened the results because a community college and a university depict two different sets of learning and student environments.

Yet, another limitation to the study is that due to time constraints, the researcher was not able to monitor the grade point averages of the students prior to enrolling in the learning community classes, and then comparing the grade point averages at the end of the semester to actually determine learning community students’ academic improvement.

Significance of the Study

Despite the increase in higher education enrollment, those who actually finish college have stalled. Student success rates are very low and have not been changing significantly over the years (Bradley & Blanco, 2010). Tinto (2005) argues “that the success of institutional retention efforts ultimately resides in the institution's capacity to engage faculty and administrators across the campus in a collaborative effort to construct educational settings, classrooms and otherwise, that actively engage students, all students not just some, in learning” (p. 1). For the last ten years, the graduates among colleges in the nation have declined. Huge numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the adequate skills that employers need (Spellings Commission, 2006). The education system is going through several changes – faculty members who led and those who resisted the curricular changes are retiring. The political and financial challenges are ever increasing. Administrators are spending too much time and energy to manage
declining resources while trying to find creative ways to sustain their institutions. The challenges of education for a new generation are emerging. There is a huge gap of mismatch between student and faculty expectations, and the differences between what colleges think are important and what parents view as important, and what employers want from their employees (Smith et al., 2004).

Research shows that students who are involved in learning communities tend to show “an increase in academic achievement, retention, motivation, intellectual development, learning, and involvement in community” (Kellogg, 2000, “Benefits,” para. 1). Kellogg also stated that the faculty who participate in learning communities become “re-energized and feel empowered” (Benefits, para. 2). They feel that their teaching experience richens and experience widens and allows them to be more creative while increasing their commitment towards their works and institution.

Research conducted by Tinto and colleagues revealed a number of important insight on the impacts of learning communities in student learning and persistence. The impacts summarized are as follows: 1) Learning community students form their own self-supporting groups. These groups are not just classroom bound but extend beyond to outside the classroom. The groups form critical bonds with each other and provide support to each other resulting in college continuance. 2) Students in the learning communities become more actively involved in classroom learning, spending more time together learning both inside and outside the classroom. This behavior helps students to bridge the divide between academic classes and student’s social life. This enables the students to spend more time learning. 3) Participation in learning community enhances
the quality of student learning. Participating as groups enriches the understanding and knowledge. 4) As students learned more and realized their enhanced engagement academically and socially, their persistence increased (Tinto, 2000).

When used correctly and appropriately, learning communities can be the solution to the complexities of the educational problems of student retention, student success, and student learning outcomes. Sensibly designed and implemented learning communities can concurrently address the issues of enhancing student learning and constructing the quality of current academic communities in a cost-effective manner (Smith et al., 2004). The learning communities can also be a gateway for faculty to enrich and widen their teaching style and experience. There have been a lot of quantitative and qualitative researches and studies that have been done on learning communities and their effectiveness in higher education. Learning communities are believed to be a strong tool which can be employed to boost student success and learning outcomes. Student surveys and research reports show that students in effective learning communities tend to show more comfort and safety in a large campus setting, which otherwise would be intimidating to some students (Bradley & Blanco, 2010). In these times of rising challenges, a wide call for reformation and robust research on learning, and learning communities are emerging as a compelling strategy to be used in the restructuring of higher education (Smith et al., 2004).

It should also be noted that the learning communities in itself is not the answer to the higher education problems of student retention and student success. Just by linking random classes and teaching the courses as a community does not accomplish anything.
There are other factors that need to be present, logistics to be worked out, and strategies that need to be planned on order to makes the learning communities effective and successful. Another thing that needs to be considered is as Tinto (2000) states that learning communities is not the “magical bullet” to boost student learning. As with other types of pedagogies, there are unavoidable limits on the effectiveness of the learning communities. Some students do not like learning with others and do not do well in groups. Some faculty members find collaborating with other faculty members and staff difficult. Yet, there is increasing evidence to support that the learning communities enhances student learning and persistence, and at the same time enriches faculty professional lives. “What is needed now is not merely more such programs but the establishment of institutional assessment strategies that will provide the sorts of data institutions need to improve and institutionalize those efforts over time” (Tinto, 2000, p. 12)

Organization of the Thesis

This study is organized into five chapters which include an introduction, review of related literature, methodology, data analysis, conclusions, and recommendations. Chapter 1 of this study introduces the learning community in higher education with core term definitions. Chapter 2 further describes the learning community in aspects of its definition, the uses, history, types and models, implementation, outcomes, and benefits. Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the study including the setting, sample selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 provides the findings of the data
analysis organized by the research questions. Chapter 5 presents the summary, conclusions, and recommendations for the study. The appendix and references conclude the thesis.
Chapter 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Over the course of higher education, there have been several reformation of curricular, education, and teaching initiatives. One them has been the “Learning Community.” Many scholars, educators, and researchers have attempted several definitions of learning communities but the principle and the foundation around which their definitions lie have always been the same. The most basic and simplest definition of a learning community is that it refers to a variety of teaching and education approaches including: linked courses, clusters, freshman interest groups, federated learning communities and coordinated studies (Hill, 1985). One other common definition according to Smith et al. (2004) is “a variety of curricular approaches that intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll a common cohort of students” (p. 20). Many higher education institutions have adopted learning communities and continuously strive to find ways to make them more successful in order to serve the student population in helping them to achieve their educational, professional, and personal goals. Research shows that the learning community when properly aligned with the institution’s goals and missions, and fully integrated with the institution’s educational programs can yield a high rate of success and retention (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008).
Research indicates that it is not only the students who benefit from learning communities, but faculty members too. Learning communities allow faculty to work together more closely and effectively. They enable the integration of curriculum which enriches the content of instructions and deliverance. Faculty members get opportunity to share knowledge and become adept in other subjects (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

When examining the learning community, the review of literature highlights five major themes:

1. Learning community defined.
2. Uses of learning communities.
3. History of learning communities.
4. Different types or models of learning communities.
5. Implementation of learning communities in higher education.

These five components are very important as they can decipher the effectiveness of learning communities in higher education. Understanding the history of learning communities and the early studies that were done when the concept first emerged provides a fundamental knowledge about the purpose of the learning community. By addressing the questions of why, who, and how of early schools that adopted learning communities, current and future practitioners may be able to adeptly evaluate the need for learning communities and how the program itself can be improved to better serve larger student populations according to their needs.

Learning to use a learning community as a success and retention tool will also enable educational institutions to recognize the professional, academic, and personal
needs of students and be better able to serve these students, thus promoting higher
success and retention rates. Positive outcomes can be derived and significant benefits can
be reaped. Kellogg (2000) stated in her article that learning communities assist and
facilitate students to connect “academic work with active and increased intellectual with
each other and the faculty”, and also “promote coherence among students and create a
sense of common purpose and community”. Kellogg (2000) also stated that the students
who participate in learning communities show an increase in academic achievement,
retention, intellectual development, and are more motivated towards their education.

Learning Community Defined

Gabelnick et al. (1990) stated that the learning communities are where classes or
courses are linked together to provide students an opportunity to gain a deeper
understanding and integration of the materials that are being taught, enhancing interaction
with more participation with other students and their teachers. Shapiro and Levine
(1999) furthers this description by stating that a learning community helps students
overcome the feelings of isolation, and enables them to build strong social connections
with each other and the teachers. Learning communities aim to create a balance between
individuality and social connectivity, and provide a pathway to realize that the
relationship, participation, reciprocity, membership, and collaboration is an essential part
of the role which plays in theory of human development that aspires to guide a society
per Feldman (as cited in Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones, 2003).
According to Shapiro and Levine (1999), learning communities initiatives share basic characteristics such as 1) students and faculty are organized into smaller groups, 2) curriculums are integrated, 3) students are encouraged to build strong academic and social support groups, 4) faculty are brought together in a more meaningful way and 5) faculty and students are focused on learning outcomes. These authors stated that the learning communities break students and participating faculty into smaller groups. This is accomplished through enrolling concurrently in a defined set of pre-approved classes for learning communities. Since one of the goals of learning communities is to bring the students and the faculty together in a closer setting, it is vital to maintain a smaller group. Secondly, the curricular offerings are integrated so that the students are able to recognize each course as part of an integrated learning experience and not as a separate course. The faculty members are also required to teach the courses in an integrated manner, where the course curriculums are built upon each other and feed off each other. Next, due to the smaller size of classes with all students taking the same set of classes, students build a higher level of academic and social support networks, both inside and outside the classroom. This introduces the concept of peer group. Astin (as cited in Shapiro & Levine, 1999) defined peer group as “the elements of identification, affiliation, and acceptance” (p. 4). Another characteristic that emerges from the learning communities’ model is that faculty comes together in a more significant manner with highly increased faculty interaction as teachers and learners. The faculty creates a more supportive environment. Gabelnick et al. (1990) stated that the learning community is a major means of “restoring the intellectual vitality of the faculty” (p. 4).
Uses of Learning Communities

Different colleges and universities adopt different forms of learning communities. Regardless of the type of learning communities adopted, the learning community program is focused on having highly student oriented classrooms where teachers and students both share the responsibility of teaching and learning, creating a highly interactive and collaborative environment (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Colleges who are interested in introducing the learning communities on their campuses need to have a basic understanding of how leaning communities would be used in terms of goals and objectives. Most of the colleges adopting learning communities build learning communities either in their general education programs or use them as a core of general education reform. By using the learning communities in the general education program, it improves the general education by uniting the faculty and students together and stimulates a broad range of interaction between them while cultivating the deeper knowledge of curriculum (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The English Composition course is often used as building block for course linkages with some other general education course because it provides an excellent ground for linking skill with content courses to develop and expand student engagement and understanding (Smith et al., 2004). Other campuses use learning communities as a tool for first year experience initiatives. Learning communities provide an ideal environment to introduce first year students to the college experience. First-year learning community programs usually link academic, discipline-based courses to first year experience classes or freshman seminars
(Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Smith et al. (2004) stated that learning communities are a promising strategy for creating knowledgeable communities that make a new and large place, more navigable and welcoming. This kind of innovation involves collaboration between faculty and student affairs professionals to create a support system for new students.

Learning community programs can also be used to improve at-risk student performance by creating a deep support network of faculty, counselors, and other students. A set of classes in the learning community includes mostly basic skills courses to improve the developmental skills that promote student success. A very good example is the STARS learning community program offered at the Gateway Community College. This program is especially designed for at-risk students. The program pairs English and reading classes with a student success seminar. The aim of the STARS learning community is to improve the retention and achievement of these at-risk students by enabling them to better understand the college expectations and develop the attitudes and skills needed to succeed in the college (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). STARS is specifically designed to cater to the students the with lowest skill level who are least familiar with college and who come from least the supportive environment (Rasmussen & Skinner, 1997).

Learning communities can also be effective when introducing the students to the academic culture of a major and/or profession. This brings the new students into forming a solid relationship with faculty and peers in the department and also to form connections with alumni. The writing courses are linked with the introductory courses to form
learning communities through which the scholarship and the language of the discipline are taught to students (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

History of Learning Communities

In order to understand the effectiveness of learning communities in higher education, it is imperative to begin where it all started – the History of Learning Community. The concept of a learning community is not new to higher education. The origin of the first learning community dates back to 1927 when Meiklejohn, the founding father of the learning community, formed the two-year Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin between 1927 and 1932 (Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin is considered to be one of the earliest organized initiatives of the learning communities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Meiklejohn was given the authority to create a two-year program to boost student motivation in an educational environment (Rodolph, 1962) by Glenn Frank who was the president of the University of Wisconsin (Smith et al., 2004). Meiklejohn recognized the need to reorganize the structure of curriculum. His view of the learning community – the ideal integrated college curriculum – was instituted as the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927 (Gabelnick et al., 1990). The Experimental College is still viewed as one of the University of Wisconsin’s most important influence to education innovation per Cronon & Jenkins (as cited in Smith et al., 2004).

The program was built around the study of society: what society is and how society works (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). This was the first learning community – a full-
time, two year lower division program which focused on the Athens of Pericles and Plato in its first program and on Modern America in its second year (Rudolph, 1962).

“Students and faculty read and discussed classic Greek literature the first year and compared it to the contemporary American literature in the second year. Students were required to connect these ideas and write a paper during the summer between the first and second years” (Kellogg, 2000). The Experimental College was built on the principles of a highly connected and integrated learning system (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). It was viewed as a democratic project (Smith et al., 2004). The program explicitly tried to build a community and create a unified interface between the living and learning environment (Smith, 2001). The faculty members teaching in the program were referred to as advisers and the advisers shared in the teaching of all subject matter (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The program operated for five years and enrolled between 74 to 119 freshmen every year (Smith et al., 2004). It was discontinued in 1932 due to lack of positive results (Rudolph, 1962).

More than thirty years later, Tussman, a professor at the University of California at Berkley and a former student of Meiklejohn developed another learning community program (Gabelnick et al., 1990). After joining the Berkley faculty, Tussman convinced the administration to establish a program modeled on Meiklejohn’s Wisconsin experiment (Smith et al., 2004). The lifespan of this program was from 1965 to 1969 and became known as Tussman’s Experiment at Berkeley. The program was defined as the Experiment rather than a curriculum and consisted of a definite set of classes (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). This program was also short lived but it too, like its predecessor
established a model for other future learning communities and educational reform efforts. The restructuring of the curriculum around the program became revolutionary in impact, just as Tussman had predicted. The program required the re-creation of community among the faculty, since the program could not be taught by only a single faculty or from the perspective of a single discipline. The program required faculty to integrate the teaching materials from the respective courses, and create a highly interactive process of planning and delivering the curriculum in the classroom setting (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

Smith et al., (2004) wrote that simultaneously to Tussman’s Experiment at Berkley, San Jose State College offered a program called the Tutorial Program which had the same curriculum as Tussman’s Experiment but was not identical. Both the programs were full-time, year-long, based on primary texts and seminars, and were team-taught. Both programs studied the roots of modern democracy through the Greeks, moving through the romantic and industrial revolutions and concluding with the American Experience. In the following years, the San Jose Programs developed different curricular content including a program called “Political Ecology” that brought the sciences and environmental themes together. The “Political Ecology” theme was later adopted by other institutions.

In 1970, Tussman’s ideas took root when a group of seventeen planning faculty designed a new, state-supported “alternative college,” the Evergreen State College. The founders agreed that the discrete courses were limiting the effectiveness of the undergraduate education and designed the new college around year-long learning communities called “coordinated studies” program. The program was designed to be
team taught and was organized around interdisciplinary themes (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Jones, 1981). The Coordinated Studies Program was designed to be a year-long and required fulltime commitment from both the faculty and the students (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Mervyn Cadwallader, the dean of Evergreen State College at that time, emphasized the need for curriculum grounded in the humanities and the social sciences that would prepare the students to partake in a democratic society. After the third year of the coordinated studies program, Cadwallader proposed that the Evergreen State College be split into two distinct colleges, one based on coordinated studies program and one based on a traditional college because he believed that integrated programs were not suitable for all curriculum. His idea was rejected by many faculty members and eventually, Evergreen State College was committed only to a coordinated studies curriculum that is still thriving today (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Evergreen became the leader in the learning community movement (Smith et al., 2004). The coordinated studies curriculum became the model for many other colleges that adopted the program in other variations of learning communities in their institutions (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

In 1976, the State University of New York at Stony Brook created its own learning communities program. The goal of the program was to “sharpen the definition of academic community and challenge the existing curricular structures” (Shapiro & Levine, 1999, p. 19). The program was created under the leadership of Patrick Hill. Hill was an active advocate for learning communities and diversity, and brought new language to the Meiklejohn-Tussman rationale for learning communities. Hill’s
federated learning community program became quite influential in attracting prominent faculty members to SUNY and in a few years gathered significant national publicity (Smith et al., 2004).

John Dewey is another famous name associated with learning communities. His work was more prevalent with the teaching and learning process of learning communities rather than with the structure (Gabelnick et al., 1990). He is considered a major influence on the contemporary work of learning communities because of his writings about the teaching and learning process focusing on student-centered learning and active learning (Smith et al., 2004). Dewey criticized the traditional education teaching and learning style. He believed in a cooperative and collaborative approach to education and therefore, he highly promoted learning communities in an educational setting (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Dewey distinguished between traditional and progressive education by stating that traditional education was “formation from without” and progressive education was “development from within” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 25). Gabelnick et al. (1990) stated in their writing that learning communities regularly align themselves with Dewey’s views regarding the teaching and learning process.

Dewey believed that maintaining a silent, less interaction among students, and an orderly environment were major virtues of a traditional classroom, therefore increasing the distance between teachers and students (Dewey, 1938). Dewey promoted the type of education that mandated a closer relationship between the teachers and students – relationship based upon “shared inquiry”. Viewing education as shared inquiry redefines the role of a teacher and instead of being just a primary transmitter of knowledge, the
teacher, together with students, become partners in an interactive and collaborative relationship. Education is viewed as a more interactive and “open-ended inquiry process” rather than a process where a teacher dominates the “handing down power of knowledge as a finished product” (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 16). Dewey defined education as a “purposeful, student-centered social process” that necessitates a closer relationship between the teachers and students, where the learning environment needs to be structured to apply cooperative and collaborative methods. In this kind of environment, emphasis is on interactive learning (Shapiro & Levine, 1999, p. 17). He saw diversity as a key feature of any society – something which needed to be valued and nurtured (Smith et al., 2004).

There are other researchers who have proposed that similar philosophies to learning communities have existed in one form or another earlier than what has been mentioned in this section – since at least the first century A.D. or even earlier in the time of Plato (Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones, 2003). Bradley and Blanco (2010) wrote that learning communities have existed for centuries but under a different name, with roots in the traditional British University model that featured itself as self-contained residential colleges.
Different Types or Models of Learning Communities

Gabelnick et al. (1990) wrote that a learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link several courses together. Learning communities provide students with the opportunity for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, as well as a higher level of interaction with other students in the learning community and their teachers. Different colleges adopt different names for their learning communities and models may differ from each other, but the fundamental effort remains the same – the attempt “to reorganize and redirect the students’ academic experience for the greater intellectual and social coherence and involvement” (p. 19). Students and faculty in learning communities come together and experience courses as complementary to one another and connected as whole rather than separate and isolated classes.

As of today, there are predominantly five different types or models of learning communities in existence. There are: 1) Linked Courses, 2) Learning Clusters, 3) Freshman Interest Groups (FIG), 4) Federated Learning Communities, and 5) Coordinated Studies. As stated earlier, the learning community models and programs may vary from institution to institution; the basic approach remains the same (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

Linked Courses

According to Gabelnick et al. (1990), Linked Courses are the simplest form of learning communities. The community involves pairing of two courses and listing them in the class schedule for a specific group of students to enroll in. The faculty of each
linked course teaches individually but coordinates their syllabi and assignments. Smith et al., (2004) wrote that the interrelated courses mostly include an introductory skill-building class which is linked to a class with heavy content. Kellogg (2000) stated that the Linked Courses model link a cohort or group of students with two common courses where one course is content based such as math or science while the other course is more application based such as writing or speech. The Linked Courses Model provides students with a common experience that focuses on a content-based course that is dynamically braced by a skills course.

The University of Washington is a pioneer in offering linked courses with its nationally recognized Interdisciplinary Writing Program (Gabelnick et al., 1990). The program was founded in 1977 and is the oldest and the largest program of linked writing classes (Smith et al., 2004). The program links an expository writing course with a general education course. Students can choose from any of 27 different general education classes. Instructors of the linked courses work together to generate assignments for the writing class based on the linked general education class. This community of expository writing and general education enables the students to share a common identity and purpose (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Kellogg, 2000). Shoreline Community College in Seattle, Washington also offers a similar linked course that links English composition with classes in natural science, social science, etc. The difference in this model is that two instructors of the linked classes combine their classes by meeting with their students daily for a two-hour block (Gabelnick et al., 1990).
Learning Clusters

Learning Clusters are an expanded form of the linked course model. The Linked Courses model links two courses in the program whereas Learning Clusters link three or four classes at a given time. Like Linked Courses, courses in Learning Clusters are listed in the schedule so that students can enroll in them and become a cohort (Gabelnick et al., 1990). The courses in the Learning Clusters often serve as the students’ entire course load. The courses are usually based on a theme. The degree to which the faculty work together and integrate course materials varies from program to program. Often, Learning Clusters have a seminar component in the program in which the students meet either weekly or bi-weekly to discuss their experiences and class work. Learning Clusters students’ may also have planned field trips, social events, and other common interests (Kellogg, 2000).

Western Michigan University has an Honors College Program which offers at least four learning clusters each semester (Kellogg, 2000). For the first two years, honors students choose a thematic learning cluster. The cluster consists of three courses which attempt to bring the students together and build a sense of community among the students. The clusters also involve faculty from different departments and bring them together, creating a sense of whole. For example, the Human Nature Learning Cluster consists of Introduction to Biomedical Science and Thought and Writing. The Thought and Politics Learning Cluster consists of Thought and Writing, Principles of Sociology, and Introduction to Political Science. Another learning cluster at the Western Michigan
University is Information Processing which consists of Informational Writing, Finite Mathematics with Applications, and Principles of Sociology (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

Learning Clusters at LaGuardia Community College offers a different kind of learning community. The day students majoring in the liberal arts Associate of Arts degree program are mandated to take freshman English Composition class together with a Writing Research Paper class and courses from either Social Science (Introduction to Social Science, and Work, Labor and Business in American Literature). The cluster sizes are limited to about twenty-six students. Faculty collaboratively plans the cluster offerings to ensure that the students build strong connections to their courses (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Though the classes are taught separately, the teaching faculty members and the students get together each week for the integrated hour (Smith et al., 2004).

Babson College has a four year college of management education and has developed a similar cluster that links together required introductory management course to art and communication courses for freshmen. The faculty teaches their courses independently of each other but meet regularly to collaborate and develop assignments common to each linked course. Common themes, issues, problems, and historical periods are agreed upon by faculty to be taught in the cluster. Similar textbooks are also used in the cluster courses. Before the start of the semester, the cluster faculty meet and decide on a common text for each cluster course and plan both the individual syllabi for their courses and the common syllabi for the whole cluster (Gabelnick et al., 1990).
**Freshman Interest Groups (FIG)**

The Freshman Interest Group model is similar to the Linked Course Model because three freshman courses are linked thematically together. FIG is ideal for large universities because several cohorts can be offered simultaneously. This model is linked based on academic majors and peer advising is also available for student support. Students can meet and discuss their course work and problems they might be having adjusting to college life. These sessions are led by peer advisors, therefore diminishing the faculty role (Kellogg, 2000). The FIG is a simple and low cost approach and provides the incoming freshmen with an immediate support system for their first experience at the university (Gabelnick et al., 1990). New students can easily get overwhelmed by the campus size, faculty expectations, and unfamiliar environment, so FIG provides an ideal support for these students to ease into the system (Smith et al., 2004).

The University of Oregon was the first to originate the FIG model due to the need for academic advising assistance and for building social and academic community among the new incoming freshmen. Courses selected for the FIG models are usually the foundation courses which are required for the major linked with writing or communication courses. All incoming freshman are invited to join one of the FIGs over the course of the summer. The FIGs are built around the themes of Pre-Law (courses are American Government, Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics and Fundamentals of Public Speaking), Journalism-Communication (courses are Comparative Literature, Technology and Society, and Fundamentals of Speech Communication), Art and Architecture (courses are Survey of the Visual Arts, Landscape, Environment and Culture, and English
Composition), and Pre-Health Sciences (included courses are Biology lecture and lab, Psychology, and English Composition) (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Kellogg, 2000). The faculty of FIGs is not required to coordinate syllabi or do any co-planning with each other. Peer advisors take the lead role of bringing the learning community together by organizing the New Student Orientation at the start of the semester and then holding weekly seminars. The peer advisors get compensated by receiving upper division credits (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

The University of Washington offers a parallel FIG model and offers over twenty FIGs each year over multiple quarters. The promotion and recruitment for the FIG is done by a FIG coordinator who is a half-time teaching assistant. The FIG coordinator is also responsible for coordinating the peer advisor program. Peer advisors are upper-division students and most of them are majoring in the focus of the designated FIG. They receive credit for their leadership work. All the peer advisors are required to go through orientation and a training session. Peer advisors are responsible to meet with their FIG to earn weekly credits (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

**Federated Learning Communities**

Federated Learning Community is the most complex and most academically ambitious learning community model. This model is appropriate for larger institutions. As the model builds coherence and community for students, it also provides extensive faculty development. The FLC model was first developed by Evergreen provost Patrick Hill at the State University of New York (SUNY) and has been since adopted by other institutions. FLC was an attempt to overcome the isolation and anonymity of large
research universities. FLC, like FIG, unites or federates diverse courses around themed credits (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

Students enroll in three courses plus a three credit program seminar which is taught by a Master Learner. The Master Learner is the key person in the FLC. The Master Learner is a faculty member from a different discipline than the federated courses who takes the courses with the cohort. The Master Learner is required to fulfill all the academic responsibilities just as the enrolled students in the learning community. The Master Learner is relieved of his or her regular teaching assignments. The Master Learner, like other students, is a new comer and co-learner of the learning community but the Master Learner leads the seminar and assists students in discovering and exploring the commonality and discord of the federated courses. Because of Master Learner’s experience and training, he or she is in a unique position to assist students in realizing and exploring the integration and contrasting issues and points of view of the three courses (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Faculty members:

who have been Master Learners consistently report how demanding and illuminating it is not only to be a learner in an undergraduate setting again and to reframe their own work in the context of different discipline but also engage in a completely new set of relationships with students. (p. 28)

In FLC, there are a lot of opportunities for faculty development for both Master Learners and the federated faculty members. Even though the faculty members do not collaborate and coordinate their syllabi, they gain valuable insights and experience from
the Master Learner from the program seminar on how their respective course materials
are being learned and benefited from by the federated students (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

It is agreeable upon that there is a disadvantage of substantial cost in releasing a
faculty from their regular teaching assignment in pursuit of becoming a Master Learner.
To minimize this cost, several educational institutions have developed lower-cost
adaptations of the FLC model. One example is the Honors Learning Community at the
University of Maryland. The Honors Learning Community is a part of the General
Honors Program at the university. The Master Learner of the program is a recognized
senior high school teacher who is on a full-time sabbatical fellowship for a year from the
Montgomery County, Md., schools. This partnership provides benefits for the school and
the university. Another adaptation is where one of the federated faculty members is
responsible for holding the weekly student seminars (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

*Coordinated Studies*

Coordinated Studies is the direct descendant of the Meiklejohn-Tussman
experiments (Gabelnick et al., 1990). In this model, faculty and students both
“participate in full-time active learning based on an interdisciplinary theme.” The
curriculum usually lasts for an entire year and the “faculty has the opportunity to redesign
the entire curriculum, providing extensive professional development for faculty.” This
model provides 16 credits per semester and the courses are team taught by several faculty
members in set blocks each week. The courses in the cohort are chosen based on themes
and are flexible to be either broadened or narrowed down in their scope (Kellogg, 2000).
Evergreen State College, Seattle Central Community College and Tacoma Community
College are a few of the many institutions who have curriculum based on Coordinated Studies (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

Gabelnick et al. (1990) stated that Coordinated Studies programs offer a huge diversity in the emphasis and in the methods of instruction. “Some coordinated studies programs are highly sequenced and content-and skills-specific” (p. 29). The nature of the program offers the traditional class schedule with diverse opportunities for longer scheduled blocks of time for extended learning experiences. This restructuring and faculty team teaching opens the doorway to more active and interactive learning.

Lectures, films, presentations, workshops, seminars, and lab sessions are typical parts of the coordinated studies. The model:

- offers a highly integrative and intense intellectual experience for students and faculty. The coordinated studies model engages a faculty team in designing and teaching a significant and unified body of material over an extended period of time. Although this structure brings with it a good measure of ambiguity and uncertainty, it is also open to extraordinary possibility and creativity. (p. 31)

Evergreen State College’s curriculum is mainly built around the coordinated studies model but for many other educational institutions, the learning community is part of the college’s regular course offering Gabelnick et al. (1990). Thoroughly understanding all the different models is very crucial in order to implement and execute them successfully in the educational institutions. In order for an educational institution to be effective and reap the benefits of the learning community, it must first be cognizant of its students’ needs, faculty initiatives and its own goals, mission, and visions. By
completely recognizing and understanding these factors, the institution can then decide which type of model to adopt in order for it to be most successful in serving and meeting its students’ professional, academic, and personal goals.

Table 1 summarizes the attributes of all five learning community models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th align="center">Table 1</th>
<th align="left">Learning Community Models (Gabelnick et al., 1990, pp. 32-37)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td align="center"><strong>Linked Courses</strong></td>
<td align="left"><strong>Clusters</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td align="center"><strong>Definition</strong></td>
<td align="left">Cohort of students enrolls in two courses, frequently a skills courses and a content course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td align="center"><strong>Size of institution</strong></td>
<td align="left">All sizes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic unit of instruction</th>
<th>Linked Courses</th>
<th>Clusters</th>
<th>Freshman Interest Groups</th>
<th>Federated Learning Communities</th>
<th>Coordinated Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two classes usually carrying equal numbers of credits during a given quarter or semester. Students receive separate credit for each linked classes. Faculty teaching loads vary: combined, team-taught classes with large enrollments usually make up two courses of the faculty member’s teaching load.</td>
<td>Two to four discrete classes (whose content may be tied together in varying degrees) during a given quarter or semester, for which discrete credit is awarded. Faculty teaching loads not altered.</td>
<td>Three in-place, typically related but autonomous classes during a given quarter or semester, for which discrete credit is awarded. Faculty teaching loads not altered.</td>
<td>Three thematically related but autonomous classes in a given quarter or semester, for which discrete credit is awarded. In addition, credit is awarded for an integrating seminar. Faculty teaching loads (for federated classes) generally not altered; but the master Learner has no other teaching responsibilities.</td>
<td>The full-time coordinated program is the unit of instruction. Students enroll for entire program and generally cannot break it into subsets. Credit is awarded to equivalent courses, and may or may not be broken out on transcripts. Teaching in the coordinated study generally makes up each faculty member’s entire teaching load.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked Courses</td>
<td>Clusters</td>
<td>Freshman Interest Groups</td>
<td>Federated Learning Communities</td>
<td>Coordinated Studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students involved</td>
<td>Varies. In linked writing course programs, about 25 students are the whole population of the writing class, but they may represent a fraction of a large linked content or lecture class. Large institutions may offer 40 or more pairs of courses each year.</td>
<td>Varies. Usually 25-30. Institutions may offer one or several different clusters during a given year.</td>
<td>Usually 25-30 students. Typically, institutions run upward of 20 Freshman Interest Groups at a time, usually during the fall. As many as 400-500 students are involved.</td>
<td>20-40 students may be enrolled. Usually one FLC is offered per quarter or semester.</td>
<td>The ratio of faculty to students in a given program generally 1 to 20. A typical coordinated study involves 3-4 faculty and 60 to 100 students. Institutions offer one or more different coordinated studies each quarter or semester; some offer one full-time, 15-credit coordinated studies program and several part-time, 10-credit programs each quarter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty roles</td>
<td>Linked Courses</td>
<td>Clusters</td>
<td>Freshman Interest Groups</td>
<td>Federated Learning Communities</td>
<td>Coordinated Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variability in the degree to which faculty coordinate their linked courses.</td>
<td>Variability in the degree to which faculty coordinate the clustered courses. Some faculty offer common sessions or assignments; some choose to meet the faculty seminar before the cluster; some meet during the course of the cluster.</td>
<td>Faculty agree to have their courses listed as a FIG offering. They may be invited to attend a beginning-of-the-term social gathering to meet the FIG students.</td>
<td>Master Learner takes the federated courses and core courses as a student in areas where he or she has no prior expertise and leads a program seminar, where she or he assist students in synthesizing the materials of federated courses, in clarifying issues, and in focusing individual student’s interests. Master Learner acts as a mediator of student experiences and provides feedback to federated course faculty regarding their teaching effectiveness. Federated course faculty teach their respective courses; at some institutions, they work together to plan and offer a “core courses.”</td>
<td>Faculty plan and participate in all aspects of program; although some parts of a program are run for the entire student cohort (such as lecture), others (such as seminars and workshops) are subdivided into small groups. Some programs, offer internal options to choose from, for example, specific skill or content workshops with designated faculty members.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty roles</td>
<td>Linked Courses</td>
<td>Clusters</td>
<td>Freshman Interest Groups</td>
<td>Federated Learning Communities</td>
<td>Coordinated Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linked Courses</th>
<th>Clusters</th>
<th>Freshman Interest Groups</th>
<th>Federated Learning Communities</th>
<th>Coordinated Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty co-planning</td>
<td>Varies.</td>
<td>Varies from planning to coordinating syllabi to extensive planning for addressing common themes and issues.</td>
<td>Generally, no planning or coordination is expected for faculty who teach in the FIG courses.</td>
<td>Federated courses will have some relationship to the FLC theme, but the substance of the course does not change once federated. If there is a core course, faculty do plan and teach it together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked Courses</td>
<td>Clusters</td>
<td>Freshman Interest Groups</td>
<td>Federated Learning Communities</td>
<td>Coordinated Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student seminars</strong></td>
<td>Generally none.</td>
<td>Some courses in the cluster may have a seminar component.</td>
<td>Informal discussions are held every week for each FIG with a peer adviser; some of these may develop into more academic seminar-like discussions.</td>
<td>Program seminar is offered only to students enrolled in all three federated courses. The seminar contains no new reading material. The content of the three courses is integrated in the program seminar, where Master Learner assists students in discussing connections and questions they develop from the courses. Intensive writing occurs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty seminars</td>
<td>Occur occasionally at the discretion of faculty.</td>
<td>Occur occasionally at the discretion of faculty, but are required feature of some cluster programs. Faculty meet to discuss both the cluster’s subject matter and pedagogy.</td>
<td>None.</td>
<td>Weekly gathering of the faculty team to explore content and readings related to their program. This is not a time for program logistics. Programs faculty programs invite students enrolled in the program to observe the seminar discussion: this is called a “fishbowl seminar.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linked Courses</th>
<th>Clusters</th>
<th>Freshman Interest Groups</th>
<th>Federated Learning Communities</th>
<th>Coordinated Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community-building mechanisms</strong></td>
<td><strong>Shared experience of enrollment in two courses and the reinforcement of skills and content between them.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Shared experience of enrollment in three or four courses and the reinforcement of skills and content among them. In addition, some clusters have common readings, meetings, field trips, or social events.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Orientation event to meet fellow students, faculty, and the peer adviser; shared experience of enrollment in three courses; weekly meetings with FIG and peer adviser to discuss the course work and share discoveries and problems of adapting to a first term in college. FIGs schedule additional social events and outings on their own,</strong></td>
<td><strong>Similar shared experience and multiple feedback loops. Seminar groups generally become smaller subgroups within the community of the whole program. Additionally, community might be built socially and spatially, through dedicated program space, potluck dinners, program field trips, and retreats.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implementation of Learning Communities</strong></td>
<td>Implementing learning communities in an educational institution provides the institution with a great many opportunities as well as some serious challenges. Learning communities create a partnership between multiple departments and disciplines. It opens up new dialogs between the faculty members and administrators of participating departments in the learning communities. Learning communities also challenge the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
traditional structure of scheduling courses. It encourages innovative ways of organizing administrative support, promotes flexible curricular arrangements and different styles and methods of teaching (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

Smith et al., (2004) stated that institutions should structure the learning communities in a way that maximizes the synergistic possibilities for meaningful community building and learning. If the learning communities are appropriately designed, they become a space “to bring together the theory and practices of student development and diversity, of active inclusive pedagogies, and of reflective assessment” (p. 97). The authors recommend five core practices when implementing all learning communities: 1) community, 2) diversity, 3) integration, 4) active learning, and 5) reflection/assessment. For the learning community to be “Community,” they must create safe spaces for all students and faculty members to interact closely. The activities in the learning communities must foster inclusion, hospitality, and validation for all the members. Activities in the learning communities need to be diverse to accommodate all students’ needs. The courses need to be integrated in a manner to promote a robust multidisciplinary literature of materials that are taught and learned. Active learning, in fact, encompasses all the core practices (community building, diversity, and integration). Faculty members who use active learning strategies boost educational experiences for the students. Instead of using abstract content, teachers can use real context and problems which force students to access their own knowledge and assumptions. Reflection and assumption brings together and underscores practices in the context of coursework and co-curricular activities. Reflection and assessment requires students to demonstrate what
they have learned and reflect on their work. Reflection and assessment create “a kind of connective tissue among the disciplines and ideas, the skills and content of the coursework, and the teacher’s goal and actual student learning” (p. 123). Figure 1 illustrates the core practices graphically.

Figure 1    Core Practices in Learning Communities (Smith et al., 2004, p. 98)

Selecting of Model

A very critical step in implementation of a learning community is deciding which model to choose from, what classes to link or cluster or federate, and what theme to follow. Gabelnick et al. (1990) listed several questions which may help decide on the learning community model:
How will the learning community be connected to specific institutional goals?

Will the learning community be instituted for faculty development, as a general education reform effort, or as a writing or critical thinking initiative?

What distribution requirements could be usefully linked together?

What content courses might benefit from the closer articulation with skills courses?

How well does the general education course work cohere?

Could it be better tied to the major?

Are there useful cross-divisional connections made?

Are there some areas with high student attrition that might benefit from a learning community?

Cost considerations also influence the decision about what model is viable (p. 42).

Smith et al. (2004) stated that institutions need to study several factors that will influence the choice of a learning community structure such as student cohort size, student enrollment patterns (full-time versus part-time students), availability of faculty members, existing academic programs, teaching loads, and the institution’s and faculty members willingness to embrace the innovation.

It is imperative to survey the natural student grouping and the present curricular possibilities when determining what kinds of courses and themes to use for the learning community. Students are concerned with fulfilling the specific requirements so the learning community would be ideal if it were formed around the popular courses such as general education and pre-major classes. It is also imperative that the design and theme
of the learning community be made in the context of the institution’s goals (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Gardner and Levine (1999) recommended that educational institutions should begin their learning communities initiative with a limited number of course sections and gradually expand the program.

Selecting Faculty

It is important to find appropriate faculty to teach in the learning community. Having some continuity in learning community teaching teams contributes to the success of the learning community effort (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Learning communities can only prosper when they are taught by faculty members who are capable and creative and can become greatly involved with the program (Smith et al., 2004). For the learning communities to be effective, educational institutions require faculty members to collaborate the content and pedagogy of the linked courses. Faculty members need to work together, as equal partners, to guarantee that the courses which are linked provide a coherent shared learning experience (Tinto, 2003). Some faculty members are more receptive to changing their methods of teaching than the others, and these faculty members must be encouraged to participate in the learning communities (Lucas & Mott, 1996).

Institutions continuously strive to discover different ways to do collaborative teaching. For example, some methods which have been adopted by institutions include where a faculty member sits in on the learning community a term before he or she teaches in it or holding faculty retreats to bring newcomers and veterans together to share expertise and experience, or even hiring part-time faculty to teach in the learning
community (Gabelnick et al., 1990). That’s why it is essential in the first place to select faculty members who will stay with the program and will recruit capable successors as this ensures a long-term viability for the program (Smith et al, 2004).

**Student Recruitment**

Student recruitment strategies for the learning communities need to be designed to the specific learning community goals. Learning communities are most easily and effectively promoted if they are built around real student needs with enrollment patterns in mind (Smith et al, 2004).

If a learning community is to succeed, there must be a continuous effort in the marketing, recruitment, and registration. Students need to be made aware of the learning communities being offered at the institution. Ways in which this can be accomplished are through marketing materials such as flyers, booklets, and/or posters that describe the program. Other ways to market the program is through the student newspapers, radio announcements, and student testimonials. The University of Maryland promoted its learning community through the slogan “Learn and Earn”. It is also important to educate and involve advisors and registration staff in the process of developing learning communities. The staff could be invited to planning meetings, program meetings, and seminars (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

**Rationale for the Study**

The review of literature indicated that learning communities can be an excellent tool in creating student and faculty synergy. When used correctly and appropriately,
learning communities can be the solution to the complexities of the educational problems of student retention, student success, and student learning outcomes. As a result, the researcher developed a study in the hopes of gaining insight into the attitudes and experience of learning community students, faculty members, and the administrators. The researcher wanted to understand why students would enroll in learning communities and what factors are necessary to make learning communities effective and successful.

Summary

Review of literature confirms that employing learning communities in higher education has positive outcomes and numerous benefits. Over the course of recent years, many studies have been conducted and numerous focus groups have been analyzed to portray the positive outcomes of learning communities. Studies have shown that learning communities have benefited students on a larger scale when compared to those not participating in the learning community. The major and core benefits of learning communities can be summarized as following:

- Higher student success and student retention rate.
- Higher completion rates.
- Healthier and closer relationship with faculty.
- Students are more confident and more comfortable in school.
- Higher degree of satisfaction in school and in course work.
- Development opportunities for faculty members.
- Educational institutions ability to achieve its goals and objectives.
Kilapatrik, Barrett, and Jones (2003) stated that the benefits of learning communities encompass benefitting the individual, the community, delivers economic prosperity, improved student academic and social achievement, the institution’s faculty, and staff.

Hundreds of higher education campuses are adopting learning communities. The institution should decide what outcomes it is expecting from a learning community, which population group of students are being targeted, and which programs and themes to select for the learning community. All these answers need to be aligned with the institution’s own goals. Understanding the history of the learning communities, the five different models, and the outcomes and benefits which could be generated by the learning communities help the institution to better implement, execute and reap the utmost benefits of the learning communities. With the careful selection of motivated faculty members and motivated support staff, educational institutions widen the possibility of creating effective learning communities. With the employment of adequate academic and student services resources, the possibility of creating effective learning communities increases even more.

Unless education has some frame of reference it is bound to be aimless, lacking a unifying objective. The necessity for a frame of reference must be admitted. There exists in this country such a unified frame. It is called democracy. – John Dewey (Smith et al, 2004, p. 24).
Chapter 3

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the learning community program in its initial stage at a local community college. An effective learning community along with other factors (committed instructors, institutional support, and adequate academic/student services) can make learning communities successful.

The review of literature indicates that the students enrolled in the learning communities have much higher student success and student retention. The review of literature also indicates that higher education institutions that adopt learning community models are far better able to meet its students’ academic, professional, and personal goals, and have a higher percentage of positive student learning outcomes. The specific areas this study targets are:

1. Why do students enroll in the learning communities?
2. How to determine the effectiveness of a learning community?
3. What factors make the learning communities successful?

The research of targeted areas in the learning communities would measure the usefulness of a learning community. The researcher has attempted to answer the target areas questions through literature review, student surveys, and interviews of the administrators and faculty who are actively involved in learning communities at a local community college. The student survey questions and administrator and faculty
interview questions were designed after the literature review. This chapter describes the study setting, the population and sample, design of study, data collection, instrumentation, and data analysis procedures.

Setting of the Study

The current research study was conducted at the Smart People’s College (SPC) and one of its outreach centers – Smart People’s College Outreach Center (SPCOC). Smart People’s College is one of the oldest public community college in California and has enrollment in excess of 24,000 students. The students, staff, and faculty bring a vast diversity to the college including, but not limited to race, religion, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic background, etc. SPC offers more than 150 associate degrees and certificates in various disciplines. SPC offers semester long classes (spring and fall) and summer classes which range from 4 weeks to 8 weeks. SPC embraces the core values of “working together, pursuing excellence, and inspiring achievement”.

Smart People’s College Outreach Center is a satellite center for SPC. The student enrollment at the SPC Outreach Center is in excess of 3,000 students. Like its parent campus, SPC Outreach Center is also highly diversified in its student, staff and faculty demographics.

Smart People’s College offers four different learning communities – 3 at the main campus and 1 at its Outreach Center. The Puente Project Learning Community links three courses – College Composition class and two Human Career Development classes (The Puente Project and Life and Career Planning) and makes up a total of 5 units. There
are two faculty members teaching in their discipline’s respective courses who integrate the assignments and occasionally spend time in each other’s classes. Get Up! Stand Up!: Social Justice, US History, and Personal Success Learning Community links two courses – History of the United States and College Success and makes up a total of 6 units. There are two faculty members teaching their discipline’s respective courses who integrate assignments and occasionally spend time in each other’s classes. The Main Campus Learning Community links three courses – College Writing, College Success, and Pre-Algebra and makes up a total of 10 units. There are three faculty members teaching their discipline’s respective courses who integrate assignments and occasionally spend time in each other’s classes. The SPC Outreach Center Learning Community links five courses – Developmental Writing, Intermediate English Skills, Building Foundations for Success, Basic Skills Mathematics, and Mathematics Study Skills making up a total of 12 units. There are four faculty members teaching in their discipline’s respective courses who integrate assignments and occasionally spend time in each other’s classes. There are a total of 108 students currently enrolled in these learning communities.

Population and Sample

The population and sample size for this study consisted of community college students who are enrolled in the learning communities at Smart People’s College and administrators and faculty actively involved with the learning communities. The survey was administered in Spring 2012. There are 108 students currently enrolled in the four learning community programs at SPC and all the students were invited to participate.
Out of four the administrators who are actively involved in the learning communities, only two were interviewed by the researcher. Out of seven faculty members who are teaching in learning communities, two were interviewed by the researcher. In total, the target population size for the study was 119. Participants did not receive any compensation for completing the questionnaire or participating in the interviews and did so voluntarily.

Design of the Study

The researcher chose the topic for the research and got approval from the program coordinator. Upon being granted the approval for the research, the researcher started the review of literature. After a brief literature review, the researcher started formulating the student questionnaire and interview questions for the faculty members and administrators. Since the purpose of this research is to study the effectiveness of the learning community program in its initial stage at a local community college, the researcher decided to use both the quantitative methodology and the qualitative methodology. “Quantitative research has to do with quantifying data and analyzing it, using statistical procedures. Qualitative research is characterized by its focus on the development of information from the subjects in environments that are not under the researcher’s control” (Cowan, 2007, p. 37).

The student questionnaire utilized both the quantitative method and the qualitative method. Likert-scale surveys with a few open-ended questions were used in the student questionnaire. The student questionnaire consisted of 20 questions (see Appendix A).
Semi-structured interviews were designed for administrators and faculty members. The interviews were comprised solely of open-ended questions – 8 questions each for administrator and for faculty member (see Appendix B and C). A cross sectional design was conducted as the single event where the researcher collected data from the sample of a population only once. Each sample was measured only once (Cowan, 2007).

Data Collection

The first step in data collection was to get human subject approval from Smart People’s College and from California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). After the approval from both institutions, the researcher initiated informal meetings with the learning community faculty members (face-to-face, phone, or email) to get permission to conduct the student survey in their classes. After the permissions were granted by the faculty members, a date and time was set when the researcher would go to the learning community classes to conduct the student surveys. The researcher visited the classes on the set date and time to conduct the student survey. Consent letters were handed out to students and those who were willing to participate in the student survey were asked to read the consent letter and sign it. After the signed consent letters were collected, the researcher handed out the hard copies of the student questionnaires to the students who had signed the consent letter agreeing to participate. The student questionnaires were collected by the researcher upon completion.

For the faculty and administrator interviews, the researcher approached them by calling them over the phone and requesting one-on-one interviews. A date and time were
set for each respective interview with the administrators and faculty members. On the set
date and time, the researcher met with the respective interviewee. Before beginning the
semi-structured interview, the interviewee signed the consent letter. The researcher
recorded the interview session on a digital recorder and later transcribed the interview
session for analysis purpose.

Instrumentation

All the students enrolled in all of the four learning communities at the Smart
People’s College and Smart People’s College Outreach Center were invited to participate
in the student survey. The invitation was made by visiting the learning community
classes. Those students who agreed to participate in the study signed consent letters
acknowledging their desire to participate. Those who did not wish to participate in the
study did not sign the consent letter and thus were omitted from the study. The
participating students filled out hard copies of student questionnaires.

The student questionnaire attempted to gather the students’ understanding and
satisfaction with the learning community, and if enrolling in the learning community has
helped them see connections among other classes. The student questionnaire also
attempted to determine if participating in the learning community has improved their
attitude and interest in continuing their education, if they feel instructors are more
available than in stand-alone classes, and if they feel they are doing better in the learning
community classes compared to in stand-alone classes. Overall, the student
questionnaires attempted to measure the student’s satisfaction and experience with the learning community.

Of all the administrators and faculty members, only a few were approached by the researcher because of the time constraint for the invitation to participate in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted one-on-one with the available individuals and each session was recorded. The interview questions were designed to measure the advantages and disadvantages of the learning community and what factors needed to be present to make learning communities successful. Overall, the interviews attempted to determine how learning communities can be used to increase student success, student retention, and student learning outcomes.

Data Analysis Procedure

*Student Questionnaires*

The data collected for student surveys were hard copies. After all the surveys were collected, the researcher used Microsoft Excel 2010 to construct a table with headers and columns to record the responses by the students. The researcher manually tallied the responses and recorded them in the table. The top row indicated the specific questions as headers and the first column indicated the responses. A copy of this table is presented as Appendix D). After compiling and sorting the data in Microsoft Excel 2010, Analysis ToolPak add-in in Microsoft Excel 2010 was used to analyze the data scientifically. Analysis ToolPak add-in allowed the researcher to determine the
frequencies and percentages. The researcher then communicated the responses from the student survey in table format.

The student survey also included some open-ended questions which related to the qualitative data. The written remarks from the students were recorded and most common answers were sought, coded and recorded under common themes, which were then communicated in the form of narrative statistics.

Administrator and Faculty Interviews

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with selected administrators and faculty members. The interviews were conducted individually on a one-on-one basis. The entire session was recorded and then transcribed. The researcher utilized interpretational analysis to analyze the interview responses. The recorded responses were coded relevant to the categories and related concepts. By doing this, themes emerged. The themes were then reported in the form of narrative statistics.
Chapter 4
DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the learning community program in its initial stage at a local community college. Effectiveness is defined by the researcher as the level of satisfaction experienced by the learning community students based on the factors such as improvement in their ability to interact with others, successfully contributing to group discussions in academic and social settings, increase in persistence towards education continuance, fulfillment that educational goals are being met, and feeling of academic, personal, and societal growth and progress.

1. Why do students enroll in the learning communities?
2. How to determine the effectiveness of a learning community?
3. What factors make the learning communities successful?

The data to be reported in this chapter were collected through student surveys of questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The participants in the research were the learning community students enrolled in spring 2012 semester, administrators, and the faculty members who were actively involved in learning communities. All participants were from Smart People’s College and Smart People’s College Outreach Center. The learning community students participated in the student survey and the administrators and faculty members participated in the semi-structured interviews. The target population for
this study was 119 (108 students, 4 administrators, and 7 faculty members). From the
target population of 119, 89 participated in the study (85 students, 2 administrators, and 2
faculty members). Because there were two research methodologies, the research findings
will be presented in two sections, the first relating the findings from the student survey
and the second discussing the results of the narrative statistical analysis of the interviews.
The student surveys attempted to measure the students’ satisfaction and experience with
the learning community, while the interviews with administrators and faculty members
attempted to determine how learning communities can be used to increase student
success, student retention and learning outcomes. A note needs to be made that out of 85
students, not all the students participated in answering all the questions.

Presentation of the Data

Student Survey

Table 2 shows the results to question 1 asking if the students fully understood
what a learning community is.

Table 2

Understand What a Learning Community is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Understand</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Understand</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Understand</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 shows that out of 85 students enrolled in the learning communities, only 65% fully understood what a learning community actually is while 33% somewhat understood, and 2% don’t understand. This information is important in deciding if student orientations should be conducted for the learning community students before start of the classes and what information needs to be covered in the orientation.

Table 3 is a representation of satisfaction with the learning community.

Table 3
Satisfaction with the Learning Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Satisfied</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Satisfied</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Dissatisfied</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Dissatisfied</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows out of 84 students who participated in this question, 64% were strongly satisfied with the learning community experience, while 31% were somewhat satisfied, 3% were somewhat dissatisfied, and 1% was strongly dissatisfied. In the researcher’s opinion, this result is a significant measure of effectiveness of the learning community because if students are satisfied with learning communities, this would mean they are meeting their educational goals thus leading to higher student success.
Table 4 shows how many students will recommend joining a learning community to others.

**Table 4**

Recommend Joining a Learning Community to Others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Encourage</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Encourage</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Discourage</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Discourage</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>85</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 illustrates that out of 85 learning community students, 61% will strongly encourage others to join a learning community while 22% will somewhat encourage. 2% will strongly discourage others from joining. This result also plays a vital role in measuring the effectiveness of the learning community.

Table 5 shows if the students feel that their involvement in a learning community has helped them see connections among other classes.
Table 5

Involvement in the Learning Community versus Connection among other Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 shows that out of 85 respondents, 65% strongly agreed that their involvement in a learning community helped them see connections among their other classes, that is, learning in one class was supported or expanded in other classes, while 32% somewhat agreed, 2% somewhat disagreed, while 1% strongly disagreed.

Table 6 depicts if involvement in a learning community has helped students see connections between their personal experience and class learning.
Table 6

Involvement in the Learning Community versus Connection between their Personal Experience and Class Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>85</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 represents that out of 85 respondents, only 58% strongly agreed that their involvement in a learning community helped them see connections between their personal experience and class learning, while 39% somewhat agreed and 4% somewhat disagreed. This result is important for educational institutions when deciding the objective and goals for the learning community and which classes should be linked.

Table 7 shows involvement in a learning community and the application of knowledge to real world problems.
Table 7

Learning Community Involvement and Application to Real World Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>85</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 shows that out of 85 respondents, only 60% strongly agreed that their involvement in the learning community helped them to apply what they learned in class to real world problems, while 32% somewhat agreed, 5% somewhat disagreed, and 4% strongly disagreed. This is vital data for educational institutions to consider when deciding the curriculum, structure, goals, and objectives of the learning community.

Table 8 depicts improvement of students’ interest in continuing their education due to participation in the learning community.
Table 8

Interest in Continuing Education due to Participation in the Learning Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 indicates that out of 85 respondents, 63% strongly agreed that by participating in a learning community, it improved their interest in continuing their education, 14% somewhat agreed, 7% somewhat disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed. This information is very important in measuring effectiveness of the learning community since it directly relates to student persistence.

Table 9 shows that the learning community experience has improved students’ ability to work cooperatively and productively with others.
Table 9

Improvement in Ability to Work Cooperatively and Productively with Others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 illustrates that out of 84 students who participated in this question, 61% strongly agreed that the learning community experience had improved their ability to work cooperatively and productively with others, while 31% somewhat agreed, 6% somewhat disagreed, and 2% strongly disagreed.

Table 10 depicts that the learning community experience has improved the students’ ability to interact with others and contribute to group discussions.
Table 10

Improvement in Ability to Interact with Others and Contribute to Group Discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10 represents that out of 84 respondents, 67% strongly agreed that their learning community experience had improved their ability to interact with others and contribute to group discussions, while 24% somewhat agreed, 7% somewhat agreed, and 2% strongly disagreed.

Table 11 illustrates if the learning community students felt a strong sense that “we are all in this together.”
Table 11

Sense of “We are All in this Together”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>85</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11 indicates that out of 85 respondents who participated in the survey, only 54% strongly agreed that they felt the sense of “we are all in this together”, while 31% somewhat agreed, 9% somewhat agreed, and 6% strongly disagreed. This question was to measure the students’ sense of cohesiveness and connection to one another in the learning community.

Table 12 shows the students felt that the learning community was a team effort.
Table 12

Team Effort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12 shows that out of 85 learning community students, only 53% strongly agreed that the learning community is a team effort, while 34% somewhat agreed, 12% somewhat disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed. This question was also to measure the sense of cohesiveness and connection among the students. The response to this question was consistent with the response to previous questions.

Table 13 shows the students felt that they do academically better in the learning community than in traditional classes.
Table 13
Learning Community Classes versus traditional Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13 shows that out of 84 respondents, only 51% strongly agreed that they did academically better in a learning community than in traditional classes, while 35% somewhat agreed, 7% somewhat disagreed, and another 7% strongly disagreed. This question was designed to measure the effectiveness of learning community compared to traditional classes.

Table 14 shows the students feel that by participating in the learning community, their goals were being met.
Table 14

Learning Community versus Goals Accomplishment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14 illustrates that out of 84 participants; only 58% strongly agreed that by participating in the learning community, their educational goals were being met, while 36% somewhat agreed, 5% somewhat agreed, and 1% strongly disagreed.

Table 15 portrays if the students will enroll in other learning communities.

Table 15

Enrolling in other Learning Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 15 represents that out of 85 respondents, only 53% strongly agreed that they will enroll in other learning communities, while 33% somewhat agreed, 7% somewhat disagreed, and the other 7% strongly disagreed. This data is important when measuring the students’ desire to enroll in other learning communities.

Table 16 represents if the students feel that the instructors in the learning community are more available and helpful than in traditional classes.

Table 16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Community versus Instructor Availability and Helpfulness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16 portrays that out of 84 students who responded, 67% strongly agreed that the instructors in the learning community are more available and helpful than in traditional classes, while 18% somewhat agreed, 13% somewhat disagreed, and 2% strongly disagreed.

Table 17 indicates if the students feel that the learning community instructors view community as one big class and work together to assign integrated assignments.
Table 17

Learning Community - One Big Class with Integrated Assignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>84</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 17 portrays that out of 84 students who responded, 63% strongly agreed that the learning community instructors view community as one big class and work together to assign integrated assignments, while 26% somewhat agreed, 10% somewhat disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed.

When asked why the students chose to enroll in the learning community, various answers emerged. The answers were organized into the major themes by the researcher. The major themes which emerged are: Student Persistence, Required or Desired Classes, Community Support and Familiarity, Academic Support and Resources, and Class Availability. Some of the student comments were unique and could not be classified under any themes and are recorded under “Other”.

Table 18 below shows the major themes and the percentage of respondents.
Table 18
Themes – Why Chose to Enroll in a Learning Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Support and Familiarity</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Support and Resources</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required or Desired Classes</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Persistence</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Support and Familiarity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twenty-three students responded on this theme. They claimed they joined the learning community because they wanted to experience the sense of community and support the program offers. Few others commented that they wanted the experience of the community to ease themselves back into the academic life after years of being away from school. Some of the comments were:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted the experience of getting to know my classmates and create a family environment – which did happen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I personally have trouble learning on my own and in the community I can talk to my peers about all of the classes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• I chose to enroll because I took a year off after high school and I wasn’t prepared to meet new and different people. It’s nice to find a learning community where we see the same faces in each class.

• For the support and accountability that comes along with the learning community.

• I chose to enroll in a learning community because we would work as a team in one class.

• To have a more structured and bonded learning.

• Because I felt that the structure of the community would help me talk to people.

• For the smaller classes and the support of the community.

• Because returning after 36 plus years, I needed a way to slowly migrate back in school.

• I chose to participate because I like small group settings and it has been a very long time since I have been in school.

• I chose to be in a learning community because it combines two important subjects and allows building of a community within the class.

**Academic Support and Resources**

Twenty-three students responded on this theme. Some of the comments were:

• To prepare myself as a better college student with the help of professors.

• Bring GPA up with the help of services and support provided.

• It would enhance my success in the college.
• Help me gain more support in finding my educational goals.
• I chose the learning community so that I can have better academic support.
• To have extra support and ease in into the reality of the college life.
• Have more support in my classes.
• Because it gives you more help than other classes.
• I chose to be in a learning community because I wanted that familiar support and resources.

Required or Desired Classes

Eighteen students responded that they enrolled in the learning community because it had the classes which they either needed or wanted. Some of the comments were:
• It offered three classes that I needed at convenient times.
• All the basic classes were together at both a convenient time and place.
• It had classes that I needed to take.
• To relearn the basics of Math and English.
• The requirement to a 4-year college.
• Well, honestly it was what I had to take and it was still open. I am glad I did though.

Student Persistence

Seven students commented their reason for joining the learning community was to be encouraged to continue with their education. They believed they will be able to further their education due to the encouragement, support, and accessibility of the instructors
which are found in the learning community. And by furthering their education, they will have a better future for their family and themselves. Some of the comments were:

- Because I to have higher education than just a high school level. In doing this, I would have a better future for myself, and as well as my family.
- To further my education.
- Being in the learning community has encouraged me to continue with my education.

*Class Availability*

Seven students commented that they enrolled in the learning community because they were the only classes available. Some comments were:

- Only thing available.
- Late to register, only classes available.
- There was not any room in other classes.

When asked about the three things that the students liked best about the learning community, the following themes emerged: Teachers, Classmates, Schedule and Class Structure, Environment, and Knowledge and Diversity.

*Teachers*

The majority of students responded that one of the best things they liked about the learning community was the teachers. Some of the comments were:

- Teachers work together to help students achieve their goals.
- Teachers are more approachable and helpful.
- Instructors are there when we need help.
• I felt that the teachers got to know us as individuals.
• Instructors are more available.
• Teachers take time to help with life and school.
• Teachers are dedicated to us.
• Feedback from the teachers.
• Professors care about the students.
• Professors working together and overlapping contents for both classes.

Classmates

The students responded another thing that they liked about the learning community was the chance they got to network, socialize, meet new people and make friends. Some of the comments were:

• Get to know everyone.
• Same people in all the classes.
• Getting to know new people.
• Networking.
• Family sense.
• It builds strong relationships among the other students.
• Friendship between students.
• We are almost like a family.
• Other students.
Schedule and Class Structure

Another thing the students liked about the learning community was the schedule and structure of the classes. The categories in this theme included types of courses that were linked, schedule of the courses (days and times), and the connection and integration of class materials and assignments. Some of the comments were as follows:

- The subjects.
- Class times.
- The link between classes.
- The structure of the learning community.
- Smaller classes – students feel more connected.
- Class interactions between subjects.

Environment

The students responded that they liked the environment that was created by the learning community. The categories which were considered in this theme were the learning atmosphere and help and support experienced by students. Some of the comments were:

- Comfortable environment.
- Supportive environment.
- We help each other out.
- Peer help.
- Teamwork
- Student support.
• Positive environment.

• We work together as a team.

• We are a team. There is always someone to help you.

• Study groups and group works.

Knowledge and Diversity

The categories focused in this theme were class content, teaching and learning styles, and diversity. Some of the comments were:

• Teaching style different from traditional classes.

• Getting to hear other people’s ideas.

• Connect with people of other backgrounds.

• We learn from each other’s culture.

• Learned effective ways of studying.

• Class materials are intriguing.

When asked to identify the most dissatisfying aspect of the learning community, the majority of the students opted either not to answer this question or answered that they didn’t have any comments. For the students who answered the question, some of their comments are stated below:

• Lack of participation from some of the class members.

• The class is paced a little too slow.

• The learning community ends after one year.

• Work not challenging enough.

• The class starts too early in the morning.
• Some students do not put effort in the class or group work.
• One of the teachers seems not committed like the rest.
• That the community is going to be over next semester.
• Some of the students are not taking classes seriously.

When asked if the students had any comments or suggestions to help to improve the class, some of the comments were:

• Make it clear to the class that everyone needs to participate.
• The learning community is perfect.
• Need more learning communities.
• Create a way for everyone to keep in touch with one another.
• Teaching style different than the traditional class – easier to be successful.
• Clearer assignments.
• Limit tardiness and absences.

Administrator Interviews

Of the four administrators who are involved with the learning community programs, two were interviewed by the researcher. The data was organized in the following themes: learning community defined, student expectations and benefits, learning community as a student success and retention tool, and success of learning communities.

Learning Community Defined. Both administrators defined learning community as a group of students with common interests. One of the administrators commented, “For example the one in the outreach center is based on the students Mathematic and
English Assessment” (Administrator 1). One of the administrators commented, “…learning community as being something that is multidisciplinary…involving at least couple of disciplines…and multiple pedagogies” (Administrator 2). Data indicated that the learning communities are viewed as a group that is engaged in a learning process where different ideas, styles, and methods are used to deliver instructions and class contents. Administrator 2 stated, “Groups which come together to help students broaden their knowledge.”

Student Expectations and Benefits. Administrators indicated several things that students were expected to learn in a learning community program:

- The learning outcomes for the particular classes.
- What type of learners students are.
- New approaches and styles to learning.
- Working in groups.
- Working with more than one instructor at a time.

Administrator 2 commented that learning communities provided students with the opportunity to “explore their learning styles better, practice different styles of learning and get accustomed to being around to other people’s ideas more.”

Data suggests that by being in the learning community, students have the opportunity to develop their interpersonal skills further. They have the opportunity to better their communication skills, social skills, learn teamwork, and how to behave in group settings. Another benefit that was illustrated through the data was that by
participating in the learning communities, students are able to see the integration of two or more different courses. Administrator 1 stated:

I think that the greatest benefit they [students] get from this type of work is having relevance in their assignments where they use the newspaper for example, they solve math problems from the newspaper yet they are reading and doing work for their English assignment from the newspaper.

Administrator 2 comments that by “having two instructors who believe that two disciplines belong together and complement each other and that’s really the value of learning community.”

Learning Community as a Student Success and Retention Tool. Both administrators affirmed that a learning community can be a major tool that can be used to increase student success and student retention. Administrator 1 stated:

There is increase in retention, there is increase in persistence from semester to semester where students enroll in the next semester and research shows that there is increase in success rate. There is less of an opportunity for students to quit because there is so much support in the learning community.

Administrator 2 commented that most students tend to stay and finish their classes because they feel that they belong to the community and get support from each other. “Learning community is one of the tools that can be employed to increase student retention rate. I think that’s one of the big reasons we are trying right now. We are hoping that it will help us with our completion rates too.”
Success of Learning Communities. Data indicated that success of learning communities is dependent upon a variety of factors:

- Instructor involvement and commitment.
- Careful planning of instructions and curriculum for learning community classes.
- Administrative support.
- Adequate resources availability such as money.
- Easier registration process.
- Orientation session before the start of classes.

The learning communities cannot be successful on their own without proper resources, planning, and commitment from the educational institutions. The interviews illustrated that the major factor that funnels to the success of the learning communities is the instructors, their commitment and dedication to the program. Administrator 1 commented, “In order for a learning community to be a success, additional time commitment and more long term planning of lesson plans is required.” Administrator 2 pointed out that “it helps when instructors are committed to the whole philosophy of the learning communities and integration of disciplines. Instructors need to be committed in developing relationships with their students.” Proper planning and aligning of course contents and assignments are essential for the success of the learning communities. “Instructors need to plan out the learning community very carefully, if assignments are to be integrated, what purpose it serves and what is the expected outcome” (Administrator 2).
Administrative support is also mandatory for a successful learning community. There are a lot of resources which are needed to maintain a successful learning community. Administrator 2 talked about his experience when he was teaching in the learning community:

It was English Writing 50 and English reading 110 and, either a psychology or a sociology class. The instructors got 20% release time. It was a great learning community because all three instructors were there all the time. We got to model students behavior. We don’t have it anymore as it was expensive. But now I’m not teaching it anymore just helping out with an administrative standpoint. I guess both of those points of view allow me to respect and value learning community. I worry about the logistics. I worry about that it is hard to maintain because a lot of resources are needed, they can burn instructors out. Even instructors who go into the learning community with all enthusiasm, it can burn them out easily.

Administrator 1 talked about the registration process. She talked about how the complexities of the registration process may hinder proper student enrollment and delay accurate class rosters. This causes confusion among the instructors for who is enrolled in the learning community and who is not, resulting in a bumpy start. Administrator 1 also talked about the need to have an orientation before the semester starts “so that the students know what their expectations are.” She mentioned that for some of the students the concept of learning community is unfamiliar and by holding an orientation session for
the students, students will be provided adequate information about the expectations, obligations, and responsibilities.

Faculty Interviews

Out of the eight faculty members who are involved with the learning community programs, two volunteered to be interviewed by the researcher. The data was organized in the following themes: learning community defined, student expectations and benefits, policy blunders, success of learning communities, and release time or compensation.

Learning Community Defined. Both faculty members defined the learning community as one where students are able to establish a bond and gain enriching experiences. Faculty Member 1 stated “It’s a community of faculty, they form their own community, there’s a community of students, and there’s a community that compromises both the students and the instructors as group. It provides enriching experiences for the students and for the faculty.” Faculty Member commented, “The better type of the learning communities are where both - the students and all learning community teachers together in the classroom.”

Student Expectations and Benefits. Both faculty members stressed that they expected their students to learn their content subject. One of the linked classes is Human Career Development class, and by taking this class the students are expected to learn how to be a successful college student. Faculty Member 1 stated that the linked courses offer a great advantage to the students because they are able to see the subjects as one content and individual. “We do use English to teach Math and we do use Math to assist in teaching English and it’s all intertwined” (Faculty Member 1). Faculty Member 2 states:
There always seems to be one or two mother hen type of students. Having the connections with each other in the community and carrying that connection outside. So if they have problems, they will call each other. That’s something that doesn’t happen in regular classes. In the community, they help each other. There also seems to be good attendance. The ethic that keeps them in classes is learned in the learning community.

*Policy Blunders.* Data illustrated that the policy of maintaining concurrent enrollment in all the learning community classes hinders student success. Faculty Member 2 points out that if students want to drop one class, they will need to drop all the linked classes. This impacts negatively on students because students who are not doing well in one class tend to get disruptive because they have no incentive to be there. Because the cohort compromises 12 units, and most of them need to maintain their financial aid status, students keep attending all the classes – the ones in which they are doing good and the ones in which they are not doing so good. The faculty members suggested that it would be better to have two learning communities which link two courses and make half-time units than have one learning community make full-time units. “It’s frustrating for the students to know that they won’t pass the class but they cannot drop the class either because of the policy, drop one then drop them all” (Faculty Member 2).

*Success of Learning Communities.* Data revealed that they are some major factors that are needed to be present to make the learning communities successful:

- Motivated instructors.
- Structural support from top down.
- Good recruitment and advertisement
- Orientation session

Both faculty members stressed that instructors play a huge role in making learning communities successful. “You need to have faculty members that want to do and are excited about it [learning communities]” (Faculty Member 1). Faculty Member 2 states “one of the key things is instructors – instructors willing to acknowledge that they are part of the community.” Faculty Member 2 also states that the students need to know that they are being supported and know that the educational institution is behind the learning community. This can be accomplished by having administrators coming and talking to the students in the classrooms. Faculty Member 1 commented that advertisement and recruitment needs to be adequate and appropriate to recruit the correct group of students who wants to be in the learning community. Faculty Member 2 states, “We are getting the last minute students because no other classes are open and learning community becomes unit filler. These students are not interested in the program.” Both instructors commented that having an orientation session is necessary before the start of the semester to provide information to prospective students regarding the requirements of the learning communities.

Release time or Compensation. Another theme which stood out from the data is that the faculty members are cut short of compensation for the extra time they spend on planning collaboratively for the classes, sitting in each other’s classes or team teaching the courses. Faculty Member 1 states:
It’s a lot of extra work for the instructor. It’s extra time you have to leave open in your schedule to be available to be in other classes, there’s a lot of extra meeting with other instructors, takes a lot of planning and lot of energy. There is currently no compensation or acknowledgement for that extra time – whether it’s release time or monetary compensation. In long term, people will burnout for taking on all these extra work on top of everything else they still have to do” (Faculty Member 1).

Higher Course Completion Rate. Another very important indication of data was the completion rate of the courses. Data confirmed that students tend to have higher course completion than most of the traditional classes due to support which is found in the community. “All 25 students in my English class are still enrolled and attend most of the class. There is very low absence” (Faculty Member 2).

Data Conclusion

The data collected in this study and their findings proved to be very essential in measuring the effectiveness of this study. The students’ responses on the survey provided some insightful data, as did the administrator and faculty interviews. The findings from the research have proved mostly as hypothesized by the researcher.

On the average, 62% students strongly agreed on the survey questions, while 30% percent somewhat agreed. This puts 92% students in the upper range of agreement to the survey questions favoring the positive factors of the learning communities. The positive factors are summarized below:
• Overall learning community experience.
• Recommending others to join learning community.
• See connections among classes.
• See connections between personal experiences and class learning.
• Apply what learned in class to real world problems.
• Improved interest in continuing education.
• Improved ability to work cooperatively and productively with others.
• Improved ability to interact with others and contribute to group discussions.
• Strong sense that “we are in this together”.
• Learning community is a team effort.
• Do academically better in learning community than in traditional classes.
• Feel that educational goals are being met.
• Will enroll in other learning communities.

More than 50% of the students answered that they chose to enroll in the learning community because they knew it would be more connected like a family, more student and instructor support would be provided, more academic support and resources would be available to them. They liked the idea of linked classes and the opportunity to network with other students.

Almost 46% of the students stated that the best aspect of the learning community were the instructors. They liked the fact that the instructors were very helpful, supportive, and approachable. Some even stated that they felt like the instructors got to know them at an individual level.
Almost 90% of the students stated that once enrolled in the learning community, they felt connected like a family and found the atmosphere to be very comfortable and supportive. They stated there always was someone to help and the teamwork was great. There was a connection between the students which helped them build a successful network and support group.

The administrators and faculty interviews revealed a strong passion and commitment toward the learning communities program at the educational institution. The data revealed that the administrators and faculty members both felt that one of the key success factors for the learning communities are the instructors. It is the instructors’ motivation and their hard work that makes the learning communities more effective and successful. Three other common learning community success factors that emerged from the administrator and faculty interviews were administrative support and a need for student orientation before the start of the learning community.
Chapter 5
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the learning community program in its initial stage at a local community college. It is hypothesized that the learning communities are effective and successful because of the support among the participants (that is students, faculty members, staff, and administrators) in the community. It is also hypothesized that students enrolled in a learning community have much higher student success and student retention. Furthermore, higher education institutions that adopt learning community models are far better able to meet their students’ academic, professional, and personal goals; and have a higher percentage of positive student learning outcomes. Specific questions addressed in this research are:

1. Why do students enroll in the learning communities?
2. How to determine the effectiveness of a learning community?
3. What factors make the learning communities successful?

The researcher attempted to answer the targeted research questions through the review of the literature, conducting surveys of the learning community students, and interviewing administrators and faculty members actively involved in the learning community programs.

The data presented in this chapter is an analysis of responses to survey questions and interview questions administered by the researcher. The participants are the learning
community students, administrators, and faculty members from Smart People’s College. Using a mixed methods approach enabled the researcher to explore the experiences of students through a series of closed-ended, quantitative survey questions and open-ended qualitative questions. The researcher also examined the perceptions of administrators and faculty members through open-ended, qualitative interview questions. The data analysis and report of findings will prove beneficial in the process of validating the overall research study being performed by the researcher.

As mentioned above, the data was collected from the Smart People’s College students, administrators, and faculty members. Of the target population of 119, 89 volunteered to participate in the research. All the participants were directly involved in the learning communities either as students, or department administrators, or instructors.

Conclusion

The review of literature provides ample answers and examples to the research questions. The review of literature indicates there are many factors that need to be present to have an effective learning community, for example, choosing the right model, selecting appropriate instructors, advertisement and recruitment effort, creating the right synergy of structure, learning, and community, etc. Keeping all these factors in mind, the researcher attempted to use the relevant data from the study to answer the research questions.
It is evident that the learning communities surveyed in this study are effective and successful to a major extent. Below is the summary of averages in percentages of the student survey of all the quantitative questions collectively.

- 62% on average answered strongly agreed for all the questions.
- 30% on average answered somewhat agreed for all the questions.
- 6% on average answered somewhat disagreed for all the questions.
- 3% on average answered strongly disagreed for all the questions.

The data shows that 62% of the learning community students answered strongly agreed, indicating a strong response of satisfaction with the learning communities. The researcher attempted to conclude the survey by breaking down the results according to the researcher’s questions.

Research Question 1: Why do students enroll in the learning communities?

The data indicates that there are several reasons why students choose to enroll in the learning community. Question 2 in the student survey was an attempt to get a first-hand response from the students. Students indicated several reasons to enroll in the learning communities. Table 19 (depicted in Chapter 4) summarizes the students’ comments into the common themes: community support and familiarity, academic support and resources, required or desired classes, and student persistence. One of the major reasons the students enrolled in the learning communities was because they wanted to experience the sense of community and support the program offered. The learning communities provided the students with family-like structure, support, comfortable, and safe environment – the factors that students were looking for. The students were
interested in a bonded learning, which was provided by the learning communities. Few
students stated that they were returning to school after a long absence and enrolling in the
learning communities seemed a good idea because of smaller classes and closer
relationships with the other students and faculty members.

Another major reason why students chose to enroll in the learning communities
was because of the academic support and resources. Students wanted the extra support
and help the learning communities provided such as in class tutoring, guaranteed
enrollment in the following semester’s learning communities, and extra counseling
support. For example, The Puente Project Learning Community students works closely
with their counselor, English tutor and mentor to prepare to transfer to four-year colleges
and universities.

Another stated reason for enrolling in the learning communities was that the
desired or required classes were linked together, providing a block schedule for the
students. This has proven beneficial for most first-time students who want to take basic
skills classes and learning communities offer these classes as part of their program. This
helps the students ease into the college life, enroll in the desired classes and take
advantage of the community structure and support of the program.

Students also stated that they enrolled in the learning communities because they
knew that the support and guidance offered in the program would help them continue
their education and increase their persistence towards education. By being involved in
the community and creating a support groups, students motivation towards education
increased. The support groups made students realize there are others who share the same
feelings, attitudes and even obstacles towards their education, and forming a close bond with others was a way of overcoming their obstacles and increasing their interest in pursuing higher education.

*Research Question 2: How to determine the effectiveness of a learning community?*

Effectiveness is defined by the researcher as level of satisfaction experienced by the learning community students based on the factors such as improvement in their ability to interact with others, contribution to group discussions in academic and social settings, increase in persistence towards education continuance, fulfillment that educational goals are being met, and feeling of academic, personal, and societal growth and progress.

The student survey included many questions that prompted the learning community students to express their satisfaction of the program. Questions 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, and 14 were used to measure the student satisfaction which was then used to determine the effectiveness of the learning communities. Below is the summary of averages in percentages of the student survey of all the quantitative questions collectively.

- 61% on average answered strongly agreed for all the questions.
- 31% on average answered somewhat agreed for all the questions.
- 6% on average answered somewhat disagreed for all the questions.
- 2% on average answered strongly disagreed for all the questions.

The data shows that 61% of the learning community students answered strongly agreed, indicating a strong response of satisfaction with the learning communities. The researcher concludes that this is a good indicator of the effectiveness of the learning
communities. Most of the students felt that the learning communities helped them develop the interpersonal skills such as group communication, teamwork, helped them develop academically and personally, and improved their education persistence.

Research Question 3: What factors make the learning communities successful?

An effective learning community along with other factors can make learning communities successful. Success is defined by the researcher as increase in student retention rates, increase in student completion rates, positive student learning outcomes, and overall, student success. The researcher feels that the data collected was not sufficient enough to adequately answer this research question thoroughly. The administrator and the faculty interviews did provide some significant insight to answer this question theoretically, but not enough quantitative data was gathered to illustrate the comparison of increase in student retention rates, increase in student completion rates, and positive student learning outcomes.

However, the interviews with the administrators and faculty members revealed some common factors that they believe is necessary for the learning communities to be successful, and some of these factors also have been revealed through the literature review by the researcher. The factors mentioned in the data collections are:

- Instructor involvement and commitment.
- Thorough planning of curriculum and instructions.
- Administrator (college) support.
- Smooth registration process.
- Student orientation.
The data indicates that instructor involvement and commitment is one of the most important factors that need to be present to make the learning communities successful. This was also indicated by the student data (46%) when they stated that one of the things that they liked the best about the learning communities was the instructors. Instructor’s motivation and dedication makes a huge difference in the success of the learning communities. When the instructors are not dedicated or motivated enough, the success of the learning is affected and so is students’ morale, as is apparent through some of the students’ comments about one of the learning community instructor not being as committed and/or motivated compared to the rest.

A thorough planning of the curriculum and instructions is also very important to the success of the learning communities. This can be accomplished through collaboration of the learning community instructors, especially when they are team-teaching. Proper planning and aligning of courses are important because they enhance students learning outcomes by reducing the instruction material complexities and student confusions.

Another important factor revealed by the data was that administrator support is essential for the success of the learning communities. Administrator support is important to boost instructors' morale as well as the students. Just by knowing the college and administrators are there to support them, students feel appreciated and wanted, and this may result in positive learning outcomes.

Smooth registration process is another key leading to the learning communities success. This is especially true for first-time students. It should be easy for them to be able to find the learning community classes and be able to enroll in them effortlessly. If
the registration is difficult, especially for first-time students, it may result in a negative experience and lead to many prospective students giving up even attending school.

Data reveals that a student orientation also helps in ensuring the learning communities success. Having an orientation session is necessary before the start of the semester to provide information to prospective students regarding the requirements of the learning communities. This is also helpful to weed out the students who are not interested in the learning communities program. Some students do not like learning with others and do not do well in groups. By holding an orientation session and making the requirements of the learning communities explicit to the prospective students, students who do not want to participate in the learning communities have ample time to enroll out of the learning community and join traditional classes, instead of continuing the program and setting themselves up for failure.

Recommendations

After the review of this study and the facilitated research, recommendations for a future study exist. This research has just briefly touched upon the vastness of the learning communities in higher education being used as tools for student retention rates, student success rates, student completion rates, and student learning outcomes. During the course of the study, the researcher realized that there are many aspects of the learning communities contributing to their success and it would have been impossible to include them all in this study.
The researcher recommends the quantitative part of this study be repeated and the results be separated out according to individual learning communities. Because individual learning communities have separate goals and objectives, it will be easier to determine if the respective goals and objectives are being met, and accurately measure the students’ satisfaction with their respective learning communities. By separating the results and comparing the data, useful information can emerge regarding the specific strategies employed by the individual learning communities and the successes and failures associated with these strategies.

Another recommendation is to further the study by comparing the Grade Point Averages of the students before and after enrolling in the learning communities to determine the students’ academic improvement. By monitoring the GPAs of the students through the longitudinal study, the educational institution would be able to track students’ academic progress. By comparing the results of the study to traditional classes, the institution would be able to determine if the learning communities indeed are effective and successful.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Student Survey
Survey Questionnaires

1. Do you fully understand what a Learning Community is?
   - Strongly Understand
   - Somewhat Understand
   - Don’t Understand

2. Why did you choose to enroll in a Learning Community?
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

3. How satisfied are you with your learning community experience?
   - Strongly Satisfied
   - Somewhat Satisfied
   - Somewhat Dissatisfied
   - Strongly Dissatisfied

4. Would you recommend joining a Learning Community to a friend or a prospective student?
   - Strongly Encourage
   - Somewhat Encourage
   - Somewhat Discourage
   - Strongly Discourage

5. My involvement in a Learning Community has helped me to see connections among my classes (e.g., learning in one class supported or expanded on what I learned in another class).
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

6. My involvement in a Learning Community has helped me to see connections between my personal experiences and class learning.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

7. My involvement in a Learning Community has helped me to apply what I learn in class to real world problems.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Somewhat Disagree
8. My participation in a Learning Community has improved my interest in continuing my education.
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

9. My Learning Community experience has improved my ability to work cooperatively and productively with others
   - Strongly Agree
   - Somewhat Agree
   - Somewhat Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

10. My Learning Community experience has improved my ability to interact with others and contribute to group discussions
    - Strongly Agree
    - Somewhat Agree
    - Somewhat Disagree
    - Strongly Disagree

11. Among our Learning Community participants, there is a strong sense that “we are all in this together.”
    - Strongly Agree
    - Somewhat Agree
    - Somewhat Disagree
    - Strongly Disagree

12. I feel that the Learning Community is a team effort.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Somewhat Agree
    - Somewhat Disagree
    - Strongly Disagree

13. I feel that I do academically better in learning community than in traditional classes.
    - Strongly Agree
    - Somewhat Agree
    - Somewhat Disagree
    - Strongly Disagree
14. By participating in Learning Community, I feel like that my educational goals are being met.
   o Strongly Agree
   o Somewhat Agree
   o Somewhat Disagree
   o Strongly Disagree

15. I will definitely enroll in other Learning Communities.
   o Strongly Agree
   o Somewhat Agree
   o Somewhat Disagree
   o Strongly Disagree

16. Instructors in the Learning Community are more available and helpful than in traditional classes I had in past.
   o Strongly Agree
   o Somewhat Agree
   o Somewhat Disagree
   o Strongly Disagree

17. Instructors in Learning Community view the community as one big class and work together to assign integrated homework and projects
   o Strongly Agree
   o Somewhat Agree
   o Somewhat Disagree
   o Strongly Disagree

18. Three things that I liked best about the learning community:
   I. __________________________________________
   II. __________________________________________
   III. __________________________________________

19. What was the most dissatisfying aspect of your learning community?
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

20. Do you have any comments and suggestions for help improve learning community?
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
APPENDIX B

Administrator Interview Questions
Administrator Interview Questions

1. What does a learning community mean to you?
2. What do you expect the students to learn from learning community?
3. What do you think has worked well for the students and how have they benefited from being in this learning community?
4. What would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of stand-alone classes compared to learning community?
5. What can the instructors do to help make learning community a success?
6. What are the ways in which learning communities can help the college reach its goals and objectives.
7. In your opinion, what factors need to be present in order to make learning community successful?
8. Is there anything else about your learning community experience you would like to share?
APPENDIX C

Faculty Interview Questions
Faculty Interview Questions

1. What does a learning community mean to you?
2. What do you expect your students to learn from learning community?
3. What do you think has worked well for your students and how have they benefited from being in this learning community?
4. What do you think has been frustrating for your students and has not worked well for them?
5. Having taught courses in both community and “stand-alone” format, how would you compare your experiences?
6. What would you say are the strengths and weaknesses in each approach?
7. What factors need to be present in order to make learning community successful?
8. Is there anything else about your learning community experience you would like to share?
APPENDIX D

Student Survey Data
Student Surveys Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q6</th>
<th>Q7</th>
<th>Q8</th>
<th>Q9</th>
<th>Q10</th>
<th>Q11</th>
<th>Q12</th>
<th>Q13</th>
<th>Q14</th>
<th>Q15</th>
<th>Q16</th>
<th>Q17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUM</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/resources/upload/Sustaining_LC_Ed_Reform_article.pdf


