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Supporting Sophomore Success Through a New Learning Community Model

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Abstract

The creation of a Sophomore Learning Community (SLC) model can help address concerns about the “sophomore slump” and sophomore attrition. While managing the logistics of a sophomore LC can be difficult, with proper faculty, staff, and administrative support, positive results can be produced. This article outlines the need for Sophomore Learning Communities and describes the process one university used to pilot an SLC program.

Keywords

sophomores, learning communities

Introduction

During the last three decades, Learning Communities (LCs) have been a popular high impact practice on college and university campuses. Over five hundred colleges and universities have used different types of Learning Communities to provide the support needed for students to adjust to college life (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Smith, 2001). Learning Communities have helped improve retention rates, integrated learning, and social interaction (Finley, 2011; Graziano & Kahn, 2013; Schaller, 2005). Despite the success of Learning Communities targeted towards first year students, few campuses have developed the same type of initiatives for the sophomore year.

The sophomore year is important because many students begin making choices that affect the remainder of their college years. For example, sophomores often make decisions that affect their major, living arrangements, and study abroad experiences. Moreover, courses can become more rigorous as faculty begin to invest more time in assignments and increase expectations of students in upper-level course work (Tabolowsky, 2008). Students experience the “sophomore slump” as they begin to further explore their reasons for attending college and become overwhelmed with their career choices (Bovin, Fountain, & Baylis, 2000; Gansemer-Topf, Stern, & Benjamin, 2007). Schreiner (2001) notes that students not only feel the effects of higher demands but also sense that institutions use the sophomore year as a way to “weed out” students.

While Margolis (1976) acknowledged the “sophomore slump” four decades ago, scholars and practitioners have only more recently made concerted efforts to address the struggles unique to sophomore students (Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013; Young, Schreiner, & McIntosh, 2015). Though used ubiquitously, the term “sophomore slump” does not signify any one issue that sophomores confront (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010). These issues include student feelings of confusion and uncertainty (Furr and Ganaway, 1982), decreased engagement (Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013), and academic anxiety and fear (Perry, Hall, & Ruthig, 2005).

Despite this, research has shown that academic self-efficacy along with institutional commitment to sophomores can positively impact sophomore involvement on campus (Gahagen & Stuart Hunter, 2006; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Further, Nora, Barlow, and Crisp (2005) assert that collaborative learning experiences for sophomores aid in retention.

This article describes how we faced the challenges of developing and implementing Sophomore Learning Communities to increase retention, prevent sophomore slump, and help students thrive as they grow academically and socially.

History of Learning Communities at Western

Western Carolina University, a regional comprehensive university in rural North Carolina with an undergraduate population of 10,000, first developed Learning Communities in the late 1990s. During these early years, several Learning Community models were used: living-learning communities, major-specific LCs, academic LCs with a common theme, and one-hour credit LCs run through the Division of Student Affairs. While each of these models had some success, the university was not systematic in its approach to Learning Communities. Kuh (2008) notes that high-impact practices (such as Learning Communities) can lead to great changes if they are implemented effectively with consistent institutional support and assessment. In the summer of 2014, the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Success at WCU asked a team of faculty to explore a new model for academic Learning Communities. This initial group proposed a year-long Learning Community model that would incorporate classes based around academic themes. The goal for the new model was greater synthesis of various academic disciplines through the themed learning communities. The idea of “synthesis” was the cornerstone of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for WCU at this time, and learning communities were one means to achieve that goal. In addition, the new LC model would target both freshmen and sophomore students.

The following summer, a faculty steering committee attended Evergreen College’s Learning Community Summer Institute (2015) where they fleshed out the year-long LC model. As we restructured, we were motivated and informed by surveys of student participants in our first-year learning communities that revealed, if given the opportunity, they would continue enrolling in LC classes. Student feedback, combined with sophomore retention numbers at our institution (68.5% in 2012 compared to a 78% freshman retention rate), convinced us that we should expand LC opportunities to sophomore students. By expanding LC options to sophomores, we could appeal to students who may have interest in completing liberal studies credit via a particular theme

In re-visioning the LCs during the institute, the team relied on work like that of Graunke and Woosley (2005) who note that one factor impacting sophomore satisfaction is that sophomores may have a superficial view of institutional commitment. They suggest that sophomores, who typically feel dissatisfied with their interaction with faculty, may persist to graduation if faculty and staff interaction increases. We believed that by creating a sophomore-level opportunity in the new LC model, students would improve their view of institutional commitment thereby increasing the likelihood for retention and persistence to graduation. In our redesigned curriculum, the two-semester structure for Learning Communities was required for both freshman and sophomore students; however

the sophomore communities content was more in-depth. While freshman level LC curriculum provided a broad overview of how disciplines were linked, the sophomore level LC curriculum required students to synthesize and integrate topics and projects that carried over to the following semester and demanded more sustained engagement.

The team that created the new model supported hiring a point person from the faculty who would lead the new LCs. While a new full-time position was not created, largely due to budget concerns, a Provost Fellow position was implemented¹. In 2014, the Provost's Office hired two fellows for Learning Communities (two of the authors of this article) who ran the project through the summer of 2016 under the supervision of the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Success.

Model and Implementation Process

The steering committee that had attended the Evergreen College summer institute returned to campus with a thorough model and implementation plan. The new two-semester model was ambitious and contained logistical considerations that would make implementation challenging. The new LC model required students to enroll in four linked courses over fall and spring semesters, with at least two courses being linked in the fall to maintain the integrity and feel of a "community." The option to extend the LC to the summer was left open to the instructors. In some cases, having a summer course was pedagogically sound because it allowed for study abroad opportunities related to the LC themes. In addition to the four courses, the new model also required an additional High Impact Practice (HIP) as outlined by Kuh (2008). The HIP could be included in one or multiple semesters. Some Learning Communities incorporated more than one HIP.

Once the model was clearly defined, the Provost Fellows and Steering Committee sent out applications for faculty members to create potential LCs. The LCs were advertised in a number of ways: an article was published in our campus weekly email, *The Reporter*, the Provost's office emailed the call for applications to all faculty, and interest meetings were held across campus. The interest meetings were particularly important because they informed faculty about the LCs as well as helped foster connections between faculty members who had ideas of LC themes but did not necessarily know the appropriate faculty members to

¹ Each year at WCU, the Provost's Office creates Provost Fellow positions for faculty that gives the opportunity for young to mid-level faculty to work on issues related to academic administration. The goal of the program is to advance the work of the academic affairs division while also creating meaningful professional development opportunities for junior faculty members.

collaborate with on campus. Additionally, the steering committee facilitated many one-on-one conversations with faculty to encourage involvement. We set a goal of recruiting at least four Learning Communities for the 2016-17 year and received nine applications, all of which were accepted. Three Learning Communities were built for sophomore level students (see Table 1); the remaining six were built for first year students. The remainder of the article will discuss the three Sophomore LCs (SLC).

-----Table 1 goes here-----

From the start, we were concerned about how to recruit sophomores for the learning communities. Recruitment needed to happen quickly, beginning at the start of Spring 2016, after advising day and the registration period beginning at the end of February. We relied on both advisors and instructors to describe the value in signing up for such an extensive plan of study. To achieve this goal, the steering committee advertised on various fronts. A professional writing class in the English department created large posters as well as information sheets for advisors (professional and department) so they would have the necessary information during advising sessions. Promotional materials that included descriptions of each SLC and their respective courses were also created to distribute among interested students. Once the steering committee had the marketing materials printed, the Provost Fellows met with the staff in the Advising Center, department head council, and deans to share specifics and garner support. As advising day approached, students were emailed about SLC opportunities. Faculty members also advertised the SLCs among their classes to encourage their current students to participate.

During this time, the steering committee met to anticipate the many logistical considerations posed by the SLCs. Faculty members (in conjunction with their department heads) provided the Provost Fellows with course section numbers and meeting times. This information was given to the Registrar's office so that the courses could be linked in Banner. Linking the courses required students to sign up for all courses in the LC and prevented students who did not want the LC experience from accidentally enrolling. It was our hope that all LC classes would be "true" LC cohorts without outside peers (students enrolled in a linked class but not part of the LC). However, one course, Criminal Justice 355: Theories of Crime, part of the SLC *Inside the Huddle*, had a large course cap (36 students) that could not be reduced. The Registrar's office split the course in two and linked half of the class with an English 202 class.

Enrollment numbers were monitored throughout the spring and the summer. The Provost Fellows and instructors sent emails to enrolled students to remind them about the SLCs and to encourage their participation. One SLC, *Paved Paradise*, did not fill (our goal was at least 12 students in each LC), which left us with two SLCs, *Science: Engagement and Communication* and *Inside the Huddle*.

Students were notified by their fall instructors (in person) and the advising office (by email) that their schedule would be prepopulated with the remaining LC courses in the spring. If the students did not want to continue on, they had to contact the Advising office to request removal. The courses were linked in Banner so if a student dropped one course they dropped the remaining LC courses as well. A few students from *Inside the Huddle* chose not to continue because they enrolled in the SLC to take English 202 (a Liberal Studies requirement) and upon completing that requirement, decided not to continue with the final two classes. The remaining students successfully completed the SLC in the Spring 2017 semester.

Professional Development

Engaging faculty in a new model for Learning Communities can be a challenge. Professional development proved to be crucial in developing faculty buy-in and commitment to the new year-long model. The steering committee spoke within their departments about the new LC model. They also assisted in planning and leading workshop sessions across campus on topics such as integrated assignments, classroom assessment, and building LC themes. Once the LCs were created, the instructors from each LC met often to strategize about how to fit content together. The Steering Committee worked with the teams on *integrating* content, not just *linking* content. Course material would require students to use common readings and assignments that would connect throughout the two semesters. The Provost Fellows hosted several small meetings with teams, and the university hosted one large day-long workshop with a nationally recognized scholar for Learning Communities. These types of professional development activities were invaluable in bringing faculty, staff, and administrators together to better understand LC learning outcomes. As a result, resources were set aside to continue professional development for all LC instructors throughout the year. This included on-campus activities as well as off-campus conferences.

Lessons Learned & Guidance for Implementation

Logistics concerned us more than anything else during the process—not because we felt they were unsurmountable but because at times there were many stakeholders to consider. Our success was largely thanks to support from the Registrar’s office. For our part, we scheduled our registration deadlines ahead of the department deadlines to avoid conflict. These deadlines required faculty members to think further ahead. More importantly, faculty members worked with their department heads to allocate course times and faculty assignments in order

to prevent course overlap. Provost Fellows also stepped in when necessary to answer questions and navigate course cap and scheduling issues

There were typical problems that became part of our routine. Faculty department heads were not always informed about enrollment procedures and LC requirements, such as the lower cap level. Other challenges arose as a result of staffing decisions. As we progressed through the course coordination process, we made a few compromises so the intention of LCs could continue even if the format changed slightly. For example, in *Science: Engagement and Communication*, a biology class was moved from fall to spring to accommodate department teaching loads. This decision not only broke up the continuity of the SLC, it also meant that the first semester did not contain linked courses, merely a stand-alone SLC course that would prepare students for two courses in the spring semester. Enrollment in this fall class, ENGL 429: Special Topics in Technical and Professional Writing, was “mixed,” with many students intending to move forward with the SLC and a few who were not. Many students in *Science: Engagement and Communication* indicated that they did not feel the sense of community or integration they anticipated would be a part of their experience. As a result, in our planning process for next year, we have held onto the requirement for two classes in the fall semester and will not allow single classes in the fall semesters to run.

In the fall of 2016, the Provost Fellow position was removed and a new faculty member began to share the administrative responsibilities of the LC model with an Academic Advisor in the Advising Center. This transition has been both beneficial and challenging. The new faculty member in charge was not previously involved with any LCs on campus and has had to learn quite a bit about the model and process. He heads the LC Steering Committee that contains both of the former Provost Fellows as well as faculty who currently teach in a Learning Community and a staff member who coordinates a similar LC program. The addition of the Academic Advisor to the team has been integral in helping faculty members better understand degree and credit requirements. During the development stage, the Academic Advisor was able to foresee scheduling and recruitment issues students may have that faculty are often not aware of. Again, though, there has been a learning curve in sharing all vital LC knowledge as it relates to our campus model. Throughout the many iterations of LCs on our campus, the faculty members have advocated for the creation of a part or full time position to coordinate the Learning Communities. Creation of such a position has not been institutionally supported which affects recruitment, organization, and development of faculty support. Other institutions have noted that having a dedicated position to administer their Learning Communities has aided in the success of programs (Gebauer, Watterson, Malm, Filling-Brown & Corden,

2013). We suggest that any new program have a dedicated staff or faculty member to attend to and coordinate the necessary logistics.

Assessment of the program will guide future recruitment efforts (both for faculty to create and students to enroll). The faculty member and Academic Advisor in charge of Learning Communities continue to work with WCU's institutional planning and evaluation office to measure retention and persistence of those students enrolled in Learning Communities. While enrollment in the first year were too low to suggest any meaningful predictive numbers, the faculty, staff, and student response to the program was encouraging. Informal student feedback at the end of the year highlighted the students' positive feedback. They noted that the integration and overlap of assignments from one class to the next made the assignments more meaningful. They also received feedback for assignments from more than one professor, a practice that promoted the importance of writing as a social act. Finally, students stated that they enjoyed their small cohorts and the ability to work with one another and their instructors in a way that is not usually feasible in traditional classroom settings. Though not formally solicited assessment, the feedback provided by students suggests that our model can be successful if carefully implemented.

Our model worked well in a mid-size university. We were able to find faculty from many disciplines interested in collaborating on a long-term teaching project. WCU has the infrastructure and administrative support to sustain the new model, even given the logistical concerns noted above. While we cannot attribute retention numbers solely to enrollment in the LCs, 100% of the students enrolled in sophomore level LCs returned to campus the following year. We have not collected formal data (aside from retention numbers) on these participants but recognize that assessing the student experience will be necessary for program growth. Future qualitative studies might offer better insight to the student experience and reflect the overall value of the program from the student perspective.

Conclusion

The sophomore year creates some unique challenges that, for many, result in the "sophomore slump." Historically, campus resources have focused on first-year student efforts rather than on sophomore needs. The creation of a Sophomore Learning Community model can help address concerns about the "sophomore slump" and sophomore attrition. While managing the logistics of a sophomore LC can be difficult, with proper faculty, staff, and administrative support, positive results can be produced. Creating SLCs that relate to specific majors or career paths increase the likelihood that courses will fill and that students as well as faculty will have a positive Learning Community experience.

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Table 1. Sophomore Learning Community Course Schedule

<i>Paved Paradise: Exploring Sustainability*</i>	<i>Science: Engagement and Communication</i>	<i>Inside the Huddle</i>
Fall- English 208- Literature of Place	Fall- Studies in Technical and Professional Writing	Fall- Theories of Crime
Fall- Experiencing Spanish and the Spanish Speaking World	Spring- Evolutionary Biology	Fall- Writing and Critical Inquiry
Spring- Writing and Critical Inquiry	Spring- Bioarchaeology	Spring-Users Guide to Mass Media

Spring- Oceanography	Summer- Bioarchaeological Investigations	Spring- Crime, Delinquency, and Sport
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*SJLC was accepted but did not fill