

The Power of Learning Communities: Creating a Collaborative Campus Culture

Sub-theme: Collaboration and Culture Building

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Abstract

Learning Communities at Iowa State University (ISU) have maintained a successful, high-impact experience for new students that has continued to grow and thrive for 30 years. The effectiveness of this program is demonstrated by enrollment growth, increased student retention, and higher graduation rates year after year. The accompanying poster represents the ISU Learning Community model, a description of the administrative framework, and data validating the efficacy of this sustained campus collaboration.

Learning Communities at Iowa State University

Currently, 79 Learning Communities (LC) are offered, supporting the academic and social transition of 7,256 undergraduate students, with 95.2% of all new direct from high school students participating in their first semester (Fall 2025 data). The LC model offers the opportunity for small groups of students with similar academic interests to take one or more courses together, engage with upper-division peer mentors, get to know faculty and staff, participate in out-of-class activities, and, for some, live together in the same dormitories. Nearly 100 faculty and staff coordinate these individual LC options, and over 600 upper-division students serve as peer mentors.

A Powerful Partnership

Learning Communities aim to enhance learning and college persistence, a goal achieved through the long-standing partnership between the Division of Academic Affairs and Division of Student Affairs (Gruenewald and Brooke, 2007). LCs create a culture of care by integrating faculty, staff, and peer mentors who collaborate to build academic and social connections for new students in the first year on campus. Shared courses, study groups, service-learning and community service projects, social activities, field trips, and industry tours connect new students with the campus and community. Campus partners work collaboratively to administer, recruit, enroll, engage, evaluate, and continuously improve upon Learning Communities leading to greater student participation, persistence, and success.

Metrics and Results

The Learning Communities program engages in ongoing data collection and analysis of key performance metrics. Core performance measures include student enrollment and participation, retention, and graduation rates; learning and academic indicators measured by learning outcome reporting and student grade point averages; and, engagement and experience measures assessed through the National Survey of Student Engagement, LC Experience and Peer Mentor surveys, and individual LC annual reports.

The benefits of LC participation are reflected in our one-year retention and six-year graduation rates. The one-year retention rate for the Fall 2024 cohort of New Direct from

High School (NDHS) LC students was 4.9 percentage points higher than non-LC students. The six-year graduation rate for the Fall 2019 cohort of NDHS LC students was 4 percentage points higher than non-LC students. Further, a recent study showed a significant return on investment as students retained through the LC program contribute an estimated \$3 million in additional annual tuition revenue to the institution (Gwebu et al., 2021).

Key Insights and Future Directions

The success of ISU's Learning Communities demonstrates the importance of cultivating strong campus collaborations to ensure a sustainable program. It is crucial to continuously assess the program, engage in LC scholarship, and provide on-going professional development for LC coordinators (faculty and staff) to maintain and continuously improve program quality. Secured funding, particularly for a robust peer mentoring program, is critical to Learning Communities. Peer mentors (upper-division student leaders) provide guidance, academic support, and outreach to LC participants and are essential to the LC experience. Additionally, it is beneficial to maintain a flexible LC model to maximize the potential for growth in supporting the changing needs of college students. Learning Communities thrive when supported by a campus-wide culture of collaboration benefitting the students and the greater institution.

References

Gruenewald, D., & Brooke, C. (2007) Working Together from the Ground Up. In Smith, B.L., & Williams, L.B. (Eds.). *Learning Communities and Student Affairs: Partnering for Powerful Learning*. Olympia, WA: The Evergreen State College, Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.

*Gwebu, K. (KB), Compton, J., Holtman, K., Kollasch, A., Leptien, J. R., Pistilli, M. D., & Shelley, M. (2021). Learning Communities: A Sound Investment in Higher Education. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*.
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