Wisconsin Teaching Scholars
Final Report
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1. Please describe the teaching and learning problem you addressed, and the course revision you undertook. What question(s) did you address? What research procedures did you follow in gathering evidence, etc.?

This study examined the impact that participating in a freshman Learning Community (LC) has on student engagement on campus and in the residence hall, retention, and successful degree completion. In Fall, 2004 the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater implemented a pilot LC designed for freshman education majors. As part of the LC, students lived on the same residence hall floors and took five interrelated courses together. Learning community programs are primarily designed to create coherence in curriculum, help students transition from high school to college, encourage intellectual interaction with faculty, and facilitate student retention (Howser, 1998; Matthews & Smith, 1996). An additional possible positive outcome of LLC participation is that student learning is increased. However, academic learning is usually not the primary goal of a LC, rather it is seen as a positive by-product of integration, transition, and retention focused goals (Howser, 1998). As a result, student learning has not been examined as fully in LC assessment programs as other types of outcomes have (Matthews & Smith, 1996). The current study is designed to explore whether students in a LC engaged in different amounts or different forms of learning than students who were not part of a live and learn community and whether participation resulted in increased retention, GPA, engagement, admission to professional major coursework and timeliness of program completion.

Participants for this study were recruited through membership in the LC and random freshman of similar majors of LC participants. All participants were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of demographics and a survey of activities the students participate in on campus. Data collected included: GPA and course selections, Pre Professional Skills Test Scores (COE student participants only), admission to the College of Education records (COE student participants only), Pell Grant Status and graduation date. In addition, all students were over sampled on the National Survey of Student Engagement.

The study continues to be conducted as a longitudinal comparison. Students who took part in the LC as freshmen will be compared with students who matriculated at the same time and are not participants in any type of live and learn community. Comparisons will be made from the data based on a variety of statistical methods including t-tests of independent means, ANOVAs, and multivariate regression analysis.

The independent variable of interest in this study was whether or not a student was participating in a LC have increased retention, GPA, timeliness of admission to the college of education, increased engagement in campus activities, and graduate within a 4-4.5 year timeline.
Intervening variables that may play a role are student demographics (gender, age, race, etc.), socioeconomic status as measured by Pell Grant eligibility, high school class rank and entrance exam scores (i.e. SAT, ACT). Student demographics will be included in the questionnaire for this study.

Dependent variables include:

Retention Factors would be measured through possible use of:

1. National Survey of Student Engagement,
2. GPA
3. PPST scores
4. admission to College
5. graduation date
6. semester course schedules of non-linked courses
7. rubrics of skill development in Speech 110 and English competencies
8. maintenance in the appropriate course major sequence
9. major changes

The impact of the LC on residence life would be measured through:
1. Reduced room changes
2. Reduced policy violations
3. Increased participation in residential hall programs
4. Increased visits to the residence faculty partner

What results did you obtain?

a. Retention: 86% retention rate of freshman, only one academic dismissal
b. GPA: Mean GPA 2.9
c. Ten students successfully passed all three portions of the PPST.
d. Eight students have passed two portions of the PPST.
e. Two students admitted to professional education during Fl 05. (early)
f. Seven students changed their major away from education in the first year including both minority students. One of the minority students also transferred from UWW.
g. Less policy violations occurred in Lee Hall than other residence halls of similar size.
h. Qualitative samples from student: “My first impression of UWW is pride. I’m proud of my college because of all the help they have given me. I don’t think I’ve ever experienced such a strong support system before!” “Out of everything on campus I’m most excited about all the opportunities to succeed. This campus is out to help anyone achieve their dreams and goals. I really have a good chance to have a successful career.”
Some analyses are pending such as point of graduation, PPST score comparisons due to the longitudinal nature of this project.

3. *What do you believe these results add to your discipline’s understanding of teaching and learning?* Nationally the trend in teacher education is to place increased emphasis on the core content knowledge provided to future educators. This model illustrates how teacher education programs can facilitate maximum use of and support for the general education curriculum sequence. In addition, it continues to support the efficacy of learning communities in promoting retention and engagement in freshman. Future data may also support increased use of learning communities beyond the freshman year. Finally, the use of integrated curriculum to foster increased content mastery was demonstrated through the link in Speech 110 and Speced 205. Building connections in knowledge is currently the primary focus of the Carnegie Scholars. This project supports this national initiative and suggests changes to the general education core to promote student mastery of the content.

4. *What do you believe your work adds to our understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning as a perspective on student learning?* Pedagogical research is critical for addressing a variety of outside factors in higher education including HLC accreditation, NCATE in teacher education, and justification of curriculum to budget overseers/legislative bodies. SOTL work provides an evidence base for making changes to university curriculum and structures. The learning community project does provide evidence that the change in structure does promote positive student engagement, higher GPA’s and retention of freshman. These structures also cost the university additional sections of courses, at times loss of department SCH if a smaller class size is needed, and a level of collaboration across the university system that is rare. Without data it would be hard to create the system of support university wide to continue such a large endeavor.