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Living-Learning

One High-Impact Educational Practice

PERSPECTIVES

THE LIBERAL EDUCATION AND AMERICA'S PROMISE (LEAP) initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) provides substance and direction to President Obama's American Graduation Initiative, which seeks to encourage more students to obtain baccalaureate degrees. The LEAP initiative defines the practical and aspirational goals of an undergraduate degree, as well as the educational experiences that lead to the achievement of those goals. We need this definition; without it, the baccalaureate degree would be simply a credential, and the

success of higher education would be

measured by the least-common-denominator metric of throughput and efficiency—graduating the greatest number of students as cheaply as possible.

LEAP's combination of essential learning outcomes—learning how to learn, how to distinguish good information from bad, how to frame and solve complex problems, how to work with others, and learning about the world and one's place within it—and “high-impact” educational practices outlines straightforward experiences and opportunities that produce the kinds of skills and abilities needed by citizens of the world (AAC&U 2007). Moreover, the high-impact practices not only help all students learn, but they also have compensatory benefits for students from groups that, historically, have underachieved in higher education (Kuh 2008).

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We know more about some of these high-impact practices than others, and enough about a few to provide solid recommendations about how they should be offered. We summarize here what we know about residential learning communities, more broadly called living-learning programs (LLPs), based on results from the National Study of Living-Learning Programs. LLPs create comprehensive in- and out-of-class learning environments that engender the type of student engagement with faculty, peers, and curricula that we hope happens in college (Brower and Kettinger 1998).

A brief history of living-learning programs

LLPs are residential housing programs that incorporate academically based themes and build community through common learning. LLPs range from a handful of students living together because they share common academic interests to a four-year, degree-granting, residential “college-within-a-college” (Shapiro and Levine 1999; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick 2004).

LLPs have historical roots in the “social clubs” of Oxford and Cambridge and their later incarnations at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton; but as intentional communities organized around specific learning objectives, LLPs had their beginning with Alexander Meiklejohn's experimental college, which existed at the University of Wisconsin from 1927 to 1932 (Nelson 2009). LLPs took hold during the expansion of higher education in the 1950s and 1960s, and a few of the early comprehensive programs still exist today, notably the University of Illinois's Allen Hall/Unit One and the University of Michigan's Residential College. With emphasis on the past twenty-five years of partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs (Keeling 2006), LLPs sprang up across the country, and for a period they became a cause célèbre, spawning conferences, directories, and special issues of journals

Successful LLPs might be considered microcosms of what our colleges and universities can and should be

Programs

We Now Know a Lot About



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(Inkelas 2008). As is often the case with causes célèbres, however, LLPs were sometimes adopted without much evidence of their effectiveness.

Based upon our own professional experience with LLPs, as well as our scholarly training as social scientists, we sought to develop a national program of research on student outcomes associated with living-learning programs. In a recent essay, Brownell and Swaner (2009a) emphasized the need for studies that are multi-institutional, use longitudinal designs and mixed methods, and examine complex student outcomes. This is exactly the model we use to study living-learning programs through the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP). Indeed, both Hurtado (2009) and Brownell and Swaner (2009b) cited the NSLLP as a recommended resource in studying collegiate interventions designed to facilitate students' educational outcomes.

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The National Study of Living-Learning Programs

The NSLLP began in 2001 and has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the Association of College and University Housing Officers International, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and College Student Educators International. Following a review of the literature on LLPs, we developed a survey instrument and, in 2003, piloted it on four campuses to test its reliability and validity as well as to refine our sampling and data collection strategies. In the spring of 2004, we administered the survey to undergraduates at thirty-four postsecondary institutions in the United States, obtaining

National Study of Living-Learning Programs

The National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) assesses how participation in Living-Learning Programs (LLPs) influences academic, social, and developmental outcomes for college students. NSLLP is administered annually with both cross-sectional and longitudinal components. It is the only national outcome assessment of these programs. For more information, visit www.livelearnstudy.net.

responses from nearly 24,000 students. On each campus, all or a random sample of LLP participants were surveyed, along with comparison samples of students who lived in traditional residence halls. The comparison students were matched as closely as possible to the LLP students by gender, race or ethnicity, and year in school. In the spring of 2007, we followed up with the respondents from 2004 to provide longitudinal data on the long-term effects of LLP participation, as well as administered a new baseline survey on forty-six campuses. In both 2004 and 2007, we also administered a survey to campus practitioners that queried them on the structural and programmatic components of their LLPs. Finally, in the spring of 2008, we produced case studies of four campuses with exemplary LLPs based on the results from the survey data.

The “inputs-environments-outcome” (I-E-O) model developed by Alexander Astin (1993) serves as the conceptual framework for the NSLLP. In the I-E-O model, student *outcomes* result from both student *inputs* (or precollege characteristics) and college *environments* (various classes, programs, policies, etc. with which students come into contact while in college). Astin asserts that studies of the impact of college environments on student outcomes will be biased unless they control for student inputs. Moreover, studies that only investigate the role of one college environment (for example, the major) on student outcomes will overestimate the impact of that one environmental element if the potential influence of other college environments is not studied simultaneously. Thus, the I-E-O model utilized for the NSLLP includes several inputs, environments, and outcomes (see fig. 1).

Figure 1. NSLLP constructs

Inputs

- Demographics
- High school achievement
- Pre-college assessment of the importance of college involvement and perceptions of self-confidence

Environments

- Academic major
- Peer interactions
- Faculty interactions
- Cocurricular involvement
- Study-group interactions
- Alcohol-related experiences
- Use of residence hall resources
- Perceptions of residence hall climate
- Diverse interactions
- Time spent on leisure activities

Outcomes

- Academic and social transition to college
- Perceptions of intellectual abilities and growth
- Perceptions of self-confidence
- Appreciation of diversity
- Sense of civic engagement
- Alcohol use and behaviors
- Persistence/drop-out risk
- College GPA self-reports
- Overall satisfaction and sense of belonging

- Residential college
- Research
- Upper division (juniors or seniors only)
- Reserve Officers' Training Corps
- First-year transition
- Umbrella (many themes under one banner, such as foreign-language halls)
- Wellness or health
- Women

There were some interesting structural trends among the LLPs as well: the typical size was around fifty students, and programs were usually housed within one discrete portion of a residence hall. For nearly half of the LLPs in our study, oversight and affiliation of the LLP director were vested in offices of housing and residence life. Of the remaining programs, 21 percent were directed by someone in an academic department, 13 percent were codirected by an individual each in academic affairs and student affairs, and the rest were governed by boards or through some other arrangement.

Despite the aims of LLPs to foster better-integrated in- and out-of-class experiences for students, many did not provide any academic component. Slightly over half of the LLPs in the NSLLP did not include any form of academic coursework, and of the remaining programs 28 percent offered only one course. Similarly, faculty involvement was, overall, quite low among the LLPs in the study. Twenty-three percent included no faculty participation whatsoever, and 64 percent utilized somewhere between one and three faculty members. Teaching courses and offering academic advising were two of the most common forms of faculty involvement in the LLPs.

On the other hand, student affairs staff members were present in 85 percent of the LLPs in the study. The most common forms of participation included performing administrative duties, organizing social events, mentoring, and supervising live-in student staff. Most LLPs did not require students to participate in any cocurricular activities, although 11 to 23 percent required that students take part in community service, academic advising, team-building activities, group projects, and orientation. The most popular optional cocurricular activities in LLPs included cultural outings (79 percent), multicultural programming (77 percent), and study groups (75 percent).

What do LLPs look like across the country?

We learned that a wide variation exists among LLPs based on their structures and programming. Our 2007 data collection included participants in over six hundred different LLPs around the country. Absent a comprehensive typology of LLPs in the literature, we performed a content analysis of these programs in order to group them into similarly themed categories. This process resulted in seventeen program themes:

- Civic and social leadership
- Disciplinary
- Fine and creative arts
- General academic
- Honors
- Sophomores only
- Cultural
- Leisure
- Political interest

Which essential learning outcomes do LLPs facilitate?

Results from the NSLLP demonstrate that LLP participation promotes the type of student learning outcomes identified as essential by AAC&U's LEAP initiative. Again, our comparisons were based on students from the same colleges and universities who either did or did not live in LLPs, and who were demographically similar by gender, race or ethnicity, and year in school. Further analyses revealed the LLP and non-LLP students in our study did not differ by high school grades, ACT or SAT scores, or type of financial aid received. Moreover, these results represent the effect of living in an LLP averaged across the entire spectrum of LLPs—from those that were comprehensively resourced with very strong programming, to those with few resources and programs. As we summarize below, recommendations can be offered by isolating effects from the strongest programs.

Students who lived in LLPs applied more critical-thinking skills (such as thinking critically about what they read and developing opinions by analyzing the pros and cons of an argument) and took advantage of opportunities to apply knowledge to new settings (such as applying what they learned in one class to their work in another class). They expressed more commitment to civic engagement, and they acted on their commitment by volunteering or taking service-learning courses more frequently. Finally, students in the LLPs felt they made a smoother transition to college, both academically and socially. LLP students did not show differences in their appreciation for racial and ethnic diversity on their campus, nor did they say that they grew more than their non-LLP peers in terms of cognitive complexity, liberal learning, and personal philosophies.

Participation in LLPs also promotes other positive outcomes—for example, better behaviors and consequences related to drinking



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alcohol (Brower 2008) and smoother college transitions for first-generation students (Inkelas et al. 2007). In addition, we found that the presence of LLPs in residence halls had positive “second-hand effects” on non-LLP students living in those same halls (Longerbeam, Inkelas, and Brower 2007).

What LLP practices are associated with positive student outcomes?

Table 1 provides a summary of the LLP environmental elements that were statistically significant and positively associated with specific student outcomes: studying with peers, holding academic or sociocultural discussions with peers, interacting with faculty members on course-related matters, and students’ feelings that their residence hall climate is socially supportive and tolerant. Moreover, students’ perception of their residence hall climate as academically supportive was positively related to all of the student learning outcomes we examined.

Thus, consistent with Kuh’s (2008) explanation of why high-impact educational practices are effective, we found that the more often students interacted with peers and faculty, and the more strongly they felt supported academically and socially by their residence hall environment, the stronger was the likelihood that they achieved the learning outcomes.

Further, we found that LLP students planned to engage in other high-impact practices. They planned to do research with faculty, to study abroad, and to complete senior theses and capstone experiences. Thus, students’ potential to reap the benefits of high-impact practices only increases as a result of their LLP participation.

What are the lasting benefits of living in an LLP?

From our longitudinal analyses, we found that even a one-year LLP experience generated lasting effects on students. Those students who had lived in an LLP during their first year in

Table 1. LLP environmental elements that predict selected student learning outcomes

LLP Environment	Critical Thinking	Application of Knowledge	Commitment to Civic Engagement	Smooth Academic Transition	Smooth Social Transition
In peer study group			✓	✓	✓
Academic/vocational discussions with peers		✓	✓	✓	✓
Social/cultural discussions with peers	✓	✓	✓		
Course-related faculty interaction	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Academically supportive residence hall climate	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Socially supportive residence hall climate		✓	✓	✓	✓

college had higher levels of academic self-confidence, were more likely to be a mentor for other students, and remained more committed to civic engagement *three years later*. Since the living-learning programs captured by the NSLLP ranged across the entire continuum from those that we would consider high-quality and comprehensive to those that we would not, these lasting impacts are even more remarkable.

Recommendations for structuring LLPs

The strongest LLPs were those that produced the strongest learning outcomes in students. Strong LLPs demonstrated a clear presence for their student affairs–academic affairs partnership; had well-conceptualized, academically oriented learning objectives; and took full advantage of their community setting to promote learning whenever and wherever it occurred (see fig. 2).

Comprehensive programs that incorporate high-impact practices are the antidote to the view of higher education as a degree mill

It may come as no surprise to see that strong outcomes are produced by comprehensive LLPs for which every programming detail has been thought through. Strong LLPs are those that anticipate, nurture, and value learning opportunities in and out of the classroom. It

may also come as no surprise that LLPs produce the strongest outcomes when rich opportunities exist for students to practice the skills required to achieve the desired learning outcomes. Positive outcomes are strongest when the LLP is rich with the kind of research, internship, and service-learning opportunities that allow students to practice integrative learning skills. Outcomes are also strongest when the LLP provides ample opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to collaborate in ways that allow for practice in working with others and when faculty, staff, and students are able to take on a variety of roles together. Indeed, our findings are consistent with the “components of success”

Figure 2. Three characteristics of successful LLPs

LLPs with the strongest outcomes are most likely to

1. Have a strong student affairs–academic affairs presence and partnership:
 - Program objectives value vital, well-defined, multiple roles for faculty, staff, and graduate students.
 - Communication among all faculty and staff leaders is excellent and frequent.
 - Budget and program oversight are shared.
2. Identify clear learning objectives with strong academic focus throughout the program:
 - At least one credit-bearing course taught specifically for LLP participants is offered as part of the program.
 - Study space is provided as part of physical facilities.
 - A healthy dose of cocurricular activities is academically focused—internships, service learning, collaborative research, career-focused workshops.
3. Capitalize on community settings to create opportunities for learning wherever and whenever it occurs:
 - High engagement and intentionality are key, throughout all aspects of the program.
 - Learning by doing—through programming, staff training, budget decisions, student discipline, hall governance, etc.
 - Physical characteristics of the program mirror objectives.
 - Faculty, staff, and students can take on variety of roles—instructor, mentor, advisor, etc.
 - Faculty and teaching assistants are helped to make best use of the residence-hall environment, which can be an unfamiliar setting for them.

that Brownell and Swaner (2009a) outlined in their work on high-impact practices.

It takes continual work and self-examination to realize the potential of LLPs. In our site visits, we heard story after story from both staff and faculty members about the pressures of routine campus life crowding out continual discussion and planning, as well as faculty-staff differentials in the broader campus overshadowing the collaborations necessary to make LLPs function well. It takes vigilance for all involved to remain in active communication and to acknowledge the valuable roles played by others in the LLP. The rewards are worth it, of course, but we do not want to sugarcoat the effort involved.

LLPs as microcosms for the best of higher education

LLPs exist within the culture of their institutions. Their budgets, staffing, and programming have to be sustainable within the budgets, staffing, and programming of the institution as a whole. Yet because they cut against institutional grain, key elements of successful LLPs can be described as the envy of the rest of the institution. Successful LLPs require collaboration among faculty and staff, which often rebalances typical faculty-staff power differentials. Successful LLPs require continual coordination and communication among all aspects of programming, which is not easy to achieve within typically decentralized modern institutions. And successful LLPs equally value, and are equally intentional about, learning that occurs both in and out of the classroom.

In short, successful LLPs—those that produce students who achieve the LEAP essential learning outcomes—might be considered microcosms of what our colleges and universities can and should be: intentionally designed learning environments that work doggedly to maximize student learning, and particularly student learning related to the high-order skills and abilities that allow students to become citizens and leaders of the world.

The accumulation of results from the NSLLP provides us with evidence that high-impact educational practices work, and can be programmed into learning environments in productive ways to produce students who achieve the essential learning outcomes. Comprehensive programs that incorporate high-impact practices are the antidote to the view of higher education as a degree mill. If we are

serious about student learning, these comprehensive programs should be the centerpiece of higher education. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors' names on the subject line.

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