

Required Learning Communities for Undecided Freshmen

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Introduction

The University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD), which enrolls approximately 9,200 undergraduate students, is a comprehensive regional university offering thirteen baccalaureate degrees in seventy-seven fields. Undergraduate students are admitted to one of five undergraduate collegiate units including the Labovitz School of Business and Economics, the School of Fine Arts, the College of Education and Human Service Professions, the Swenson College of Science and Engineering, and the College of Liberal Arts. The latter three units provide the option for students to enroll in the premajor of *undecided*.

The College of Liberal Arts (CLA) initiated a learning communities program for undecided students in the fall of 2002. The program supports first-semester undecided students during their initial term of enrollment by placing them in close repeated contact with the same group of students, a student leader, and a faculty member or an academic advisor. The program values student development, student learning, student-to-faculty interactions, collaborative learning, and accurate, timely information and support.

Background

CLA has an established history of supporting undecided students entering the university. While undecided students may gain admission to UMD through three of the five undergraduate collegiate units, the majority of students choose to enroll through CLA. More than half of CLA's freshman class enter with the premajor designator of undecided and CLA's Student Affairs and Advising Center houses professional advisors designated to work with undecided students.

An increased demand for undergraduate courses and lower retention rates for first-year undecided students led to the development of the CLA Learning Community Program (LCP). Beginning in the mid-1990s, UMD experienced a sizeable enrollment increase. Between fall semester 1998 and fall semester 2001, UMD's undergraduate enrollment grew from 7,208 to 8,181 students. This trend has continued, resulting in a current undergraduate student enrollment of approximately 9,200. The resource implications of this increase are significant, among which is the university's capacity to plan for and offer the courses necessary for timely degree progress. While academic departments are able to predict courses needed for students enrolled in their majors, this task is more complex for undecided students who have a wide spectrum of academic interests. In the fall of 2001, an ad hoc group was formed to explore prescribed scheduling for undecided students. At that time, first-to-second-year retention of CLA undecided students generally ranged from 68–71%, which was 5–6% lower than UMD's overall retention rate. Exploration of best practices at other institutions led to the recommendation that learning communities be implemented in order to support undecided students during their transition to the university and as a means for predicting the majority of courses in which these students would enroll their first semester.

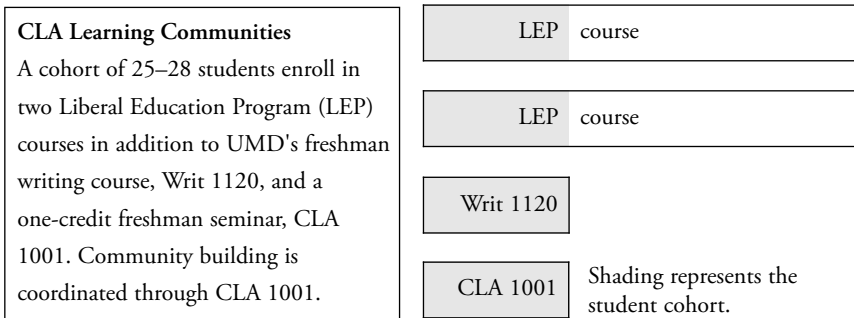
Among one of the most helpful resources we utilized during development of the program was the Washington Center, housed at The Evergreen State College. The Washington Center's comprehensive Web site, <http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project.asp?pid=73>, provided resources and research related to the topic and allowed us to identify a learning community model that fit our needs.

CLA's Learning Community Program is predicated on a number of goals, including: supporting greater intellectual stimulation by looking at connections between different subjects, perspectives and ideas; promoting cooperative learning among students; providing undecided freshmen with a connection to an academic community; facilitating major exploration through thematically linked liberal education courses and in-class activities; increasing integration of student academic and nonacademic college experiences; increasing faculty-to-student interaction; improving freshman-to-sophomore retention of undecided students.

How the Initiative Works

All incoming undecided CLA freshmen are required to participate in the LCP during their first term of enrollment. Twelve learning communities are typically offered each fall semester, enrolling 25–28 students each.

CLA learning communities follow a version of what the Washington Center identifies as a cohort model. A small cohort of students enrolls in a common set of classes. The instructors of these classes do not coordinate course content. Intellectual connections and community-building takes place in an additional integrative seminar.



The LEP courses are paired around a general theme. Examples from fall semester 2008 include:

Social Issues, Social Change

Soc 1201, Sociology of the Family

Mu 1005, Jazz Studies

Global Awareness

Geog 1202, World Regional Geography

Anth 1604, Cultural Anthropology

The Great Debaters

Phil 1001, Introduction to Philosophy

Comm 1112, Public Speaking

American Media & Literature

Engl 1001, Great American Authors

Comm 1500, Media & Society

The core learning community courses amount to 10–11 semester credits. Students select one to two additional LEP courses outside their learning community to achieve an average credit load of 15 semester credits.

Besides an excellent set of courses, the learning community structure provides students with a link to an academic community by connecting them to students with common academic interests. Each learning community includes enrollment in CLA 1001, LC Integrative Seminar. CLA 1001 is designed to facilitate integration of learning community courses and collegiate academic expectations. Furthermore, the seminar supports successful transition to the college environment within the context of academic goal setting, major exploration, academic success skills, and collaborative learning. Teaching assistants coordinate required study groups and out-of-class social activities.

Instructors of CLA 1001 provide a unique personalized faculty connection during students' first semester of enrollment. By facilitating classroom activities and discussions that promote integration of liberal education topics, instructors launch academic growth and broaden student perspectives as to the value of the liberal education core and their college degree as a whole. When possible, CLA 1001 instructors also teach one of the required LEP courses of a community or serve as students' academic advisor.

Work Processes and Resources

The LCP is coordinated by the director of CLA New Student Programs and Advisement. This individual is responsible for creating the communities, communicating learning community choices to new students, collaborating with academic departments to reserve seats in each learning community course, recruiting and training teaching assistants and instructors, and assessing program effectiveness. The program is funded by CLA with an annual operating budget of \$25,000, which does not include the coordinator's salary.

Primary expenses include faculty stipends in the form of professional development funds (\$750/section), teaching assistant stipends (average \$350/section), social activity funds (\$150/section), and printing and other program expenses.

Program Assessment

Assessment takes place through a student survey, retention tracking data, and verbal and written feedback from CLA 1001 instructors and teaching assistants.

An online survey is conducted during the last two weeks of the fall semester. The survey compares CLA learning community participants with CLA non-learning community students. (It should be noted that CLA non-learning community students, i.e. students entering CLA with a major declared, are required to enroll in UMD's freshman orientation courses, Introduction to College Learning.) Survey results indicate a number of positive trends for learning community participants. Learning community participants are 15% more likely to report studying with other students outside of class; nearly 95% report that their overall academic experience was positive; and just shy of 80% indicate they gained a better understanding of college majors and careers during their first semester. Two thirds of participants indicate that they developed a network of other students as a resource group, which compares to just 50% for non-learning community participants. While there is still room for improvement, the cumulative outcomes of these data trends support the conclusion that the overall programmatic goals specific to promoting cooperative learning opportunities, providing a connection to an academic community, facilitating major exploration, and integration of student academic and non-academic college experiences are being met.

Since implementation of the LCP in 2002, first-to-second year retention rates for CLA undecided students have shown improvement. In 2001, retention of first year CLA undecided students was 70.9%. Since the program was implemented in 2002, retention rates have varied between 72.3 and 76.9. UMD's retention rates for non-learning community students have remained fairly stable during this time, ranging from 75.1 in 2001 to a high of 76.8 in 2005.

Feedback from CLA 1001 instructors and teaching assistants is systematically collected and used on an ongoing basis to seek improvements to the overall program. CLA 1001 has been adapted and will continue to be adapted based on this input as well as survey and retention data.

Program Challenges

While numerous positive outcomes are recognized, the CLA Learning Community Program has not been without challenges. Among the most significant challenges is that it is a required program. The vast majority of students accept this requirement without concern; however, roughly 5% contest the requirement. These students will often comment that they “do not need” the program or think the community options are too limiting. There is also a small subpopulation of students who are admitted as CLA undecided due to inadmissibility to their first choice of major. (UMD's Swenson College of Science and Engineering uses a higher admission criterion than the other four undergraduate colleges.) No matter the reason for the protest, students are reminded that their learning community courses fulfill part of UMD's Liberal Education Program requirement and are advised to select a community that best fits their interests.

Another challenge has been to find the appropriate balance between the instructional and developmental needs of CLA 1001. The course was first offered in a 15-week course meeting twice per week. Instructors and teaching assistants' feedback indicated that the thirty formal meeting sessions were too many and that by the latter half of the semester the course began to feel similar to a high school study hall. In addition, university policy specifies that a one-credit course requires just fifteen contact hours. Based on this feedback and the desire to continue to frontload the experience, the course was changed to an 8-week course still meeting twice per week. Unfortunately, our retention data indicates that this change has had a negative impact. From fall 2002 through fall 2004, learning community participants were retained at between 75.2-76.9%, a significant improvement over the pre-learning community rate of 70.9%. When CLA 1001 was changed to an 8-week format in fall 2005, retention fell to 72.3 and continued at 72.6 the following year. In an effort to correct this downward trend, CLA 1001 was again adapted for fall 2007.

The course now meets twice per week during the first 8 weeks, but an additional component of two class sessions during the last 7 weeks has been added. These two sessions are scheduled for two high-stress times—registration for spring semester and prior to finals week. Feedback from instructors and teaching assistants indicate that these sessions were very well received by the students. While official data is not yet available, preliminary retention data is positive and indicates that learning community participant first-year retention will be in the 75-77% range again.

Applicability

Learning communities exist on many campuses and in many different formats and have been recognized as being a positive factor in improving student retention and learning. While many campuses offer learning communities, few require participation as we do. Simply allowing already highly motivated students to self-select into participation is unlikely to result in the overall retention improvements most campuses seek. More campuses should consider how they can use learning communities to impact a larger, more at-risk student population.

Future Status

The CLA Learning Community Program has become an established retention program on the UMD campus. The Office of Admissions uses the program as a recruitment tool, easing apprehensions of students starting college without a designated major as well as the concerns of their parents. The program will continue to adapt based on feedback and data and will strive for continuous improvement.

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