

**Together We Can Live and Learn**  
*Living-Learning Communities as Integrated Curricular Experiences*

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**Abstract**

This article briefly outlines the history of living-learning communities (LLC) in colleges and universities. It details conceptualization, design, implementation and assessment of such programs. Model recreation and leisure LLC are highlighted and discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** *Living-learning communities, recreation and leisure studies learning communities, assessment of learning communities*

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In contemporary higher education, living-learning communities are commonplace, difficult to define succinctly, and include a broad spectrum of configurations. Examples range from students living together in a residence hall community centered on a common theme to a fully integrated curriculum complemented by co-curricular activities designed to support, augment, and reinforce learning. In this volume, Anderson describes the purely academic models of integrated curricula elsewhere in this special edition, illustrating their variations and the roles of faculty and staff. This article explores living-learning communities as examples of curricular integration in which learning, both curricular and co-curricular, is situated in a living environment. Literature related to LLC's history, use, and educational benefits for students and faculty is synthesized and discussed to present a detailed picture of their purpose and utility. The design, implementation, and assessment of these communities present their own challenges and opportunities—similar to those highlighted by Anderson. These will also be discussed. Finally, it is crucial to consider and identify the desired outcomes from living-learning communities and to determine the extent to which they are achieved.

The literature on living-learning communities is extensive and does justice to the breadth, depth, specificity and variety of these programs and their outcomes (e.g., Garrett & Zabriskie, 2004; Inkleas, Daver, Vogt & Leonard, 2007; Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen & Johnson, 2006; Jessup-Anger, Johnson, & Wawrzynski, 2012; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; McCabe, Boyd, Cranford, Slayden, Lange, Reed, Ketchie, & Scott, 2007; Pike, 1997; Purdie & Rosser, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon, Soldner, & Inkelas, 2007; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Tinto, 2003). It does not, however, clearly define exactly what a living-learning community must be and should contain. Some authors argue that to impose such a definition would limit the healthy conversation about them (Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008), but for the purposes of this article, living-learning communities will be defined as structured programmatic interventions that bring students and faculty members together in meaningful ways and include students living together.

## **History**

Higher education in the United States began with the founding of Harvard in 1636. Modeled primarily on the English system exemplified by Oxford and Cambridge, the notion of students and faculty living and learning together was pedagogically central to how the institutions were structured (Thelin, 2004). Founders of Harvard believed that living together, in residency, was essential in having an effect on the character of young men enrolled (Cohen, 1998). While it is often assumed that colonial colleges were all founded on some form of the "Oxbridge" model, in reality early influences came from across Europe (Cohen, 1998). The unique physical and social conditions of a new nation ultimately mandated the creation of a higher education system specifically meeting the needs of this place and these people, although the British model continues to appear through the evolution of U.S. higher education (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Chapman, 2006).

The late 1800s through the 1920s saw a renewed interest in the English ideal and values of a residential college. William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, and Woodrow Wilson, president of Princeton, both embraced this model at their respective institutions. They used the development of student housing as

a means to improve the life of students outside the classroom as well as to extend formal education into the time and place where students spent the majority of their out-of-class time (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). Wilson described the collegiate ideal as a community with students learning with faculty both in and out of the classroom (Veysey, 1965). In subsequent decades Harvard and Yale followed this lead, creating the house and college systems (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Nelson, 2001).

When exploring the history of living-learning environments, it is important to discuss the work of Alexander Meiklejohn and his development in 1927 of the Experimental College, at the University of Wisconsin (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Stasson, 2003). The Experimental College brought students together with their advisors, living and working in Adams Hall. His goal was closer ties—intellectual and personal—among community members (Nelson, 2001). Like his fellow educator John Dewey (Dewey, 1932), Meiklejohn believed that the purpose of liberal education was to awaken the interests of each student with the ultimate goal being progressive social change. His work was a response to the increasing fragmentation of the curriculum as specialization became the norm. He, and others, believed undergraduate education was being neglected in the face of the rise of the research university. His solution was an integrated curriculum designed to foster the knowledge, skills, and relationships necessary for learning and civic engagement (Smith, 2003). It is interesting to note that the current movement to respond to curricular fragmentation and specialization through integration of the curriculum is not new. Contemporary educators advocating the use of LLC, as further integration, echo Meiklejohn's goals of greater intellectual and personal ties supporting learning.

It is evident that, in some form, learning communities are as old as higher education in the United States. Critiques of postsecondary education in the 1980s and '90s challenged those in institutional leadership to seek ways to increase community, respond to an ever more diverse student population, and expand access to postsecondary education as an option for all. The response, in part, led to a resurgence of living-learning communities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). It is important to note that while there was pressure, there was also a great deal of support from a number of federal and private funding agencies, as well as from national associations (Smith, 2001). While this resurgence was noted in the 1980s and '90s there were also educators reporting on earlier programs in the 1960s and '70s (Brown, 1972; Ogden & Springfield, 1971) along with idealized versions of communities where holistic learning was central (Greeley, 1966).

Summary data on living-learning programs from 2007 show that the majority of programs are relatively new (Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008). In an effort to make large institutions small, give students and faculty opportunities for connection outside the classroom, create a structure for more intentional learning, and establish intellectual and social support systems, living-learning programs are experiencing a renaissance (Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008). Arguably these programs have become institutionalized as colleges and universities put significant financial and personnel resources into them, asking them to achieve important goals for undergraduate education (Inklas, 2008). The ultimate goal is to improve undergraduate education (Smith, 2001).

## **Examples of Learning Communities**

College and university residence halls, often referred to as dormitories, provide the setting for living-learning communities. Typically directed by professionals with graduate degrees in college student affairs administration, counseling or related fields and staffed by undergraduate paraprofessionals trained in programming, helping skills and conflict resolution, residence halls house living-learning communities that support learning outside the classroom. Living-learning communities add this residential component (Shapiro & Levine, 1999), typically in a discrete portion of a residence hall, or in some cases, the entire building. These programs reflect variations in focus and design. Students may live together based on a theme (e.g., the environment, social justice, fine arts, or foreign language), based on academic major with classes in common, or built around a wholly integrated curriculum (Brower & Inklas, 2010). Typically a co-curricular component provides activities related to theme and purpose. Community service projects, multicultural programming, service-learning, and cultural events are common examples (Petracchi, Weaver, Engel, Kolvoski, & Das, 2010; Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008). These co-curricular educational program examples are often the work of student affairs staff members from the residence halls or related functional areas, such as multicultural student programs, leadership or civic engagement, housed in the broader student affairs division. This is one of many instances of student affairs educators providing direct support for the academic mission through collaboration with academic units.

Living-learning communities specific to recreation and leisure studies are found at institutions diverse in mission, type, and size. Emphases vary and reflect the range of purposes and outcomes programs can meet. All programs mentioned below highlight learning outcomes, some shared among all living-learning communities on their respective campus and others aligned with the individual program's mission. Not all of these LLC house programs with integrated curriculums. They provide a variety configurations of curricular and co-curricular learning. Some programs, such as the Recreation and Fitness Living-Learning Community at the College at Brockport, State University of New York, are specific to students planning careers in recreation and leisure ([www.brockport.edu/llc/fitness.html](http://www.brockport.edu/llc/fitness.html)). While there is no curricular component, an extensive list of co-curricular events allows students to engage in relevant activities with students pursuing similar career opportunities. Conversations and meaning making around these activities tend to happen naturally in a living-learning community.

Miami University's Outdoor Leadership Living-Learning Community ([www.rec.muohio.edu/outdoorpursuit/llc/about.html](http://www.rec.muohio.edu/outdoorpursuit/llc/about.html)), while not designed specifically for majors, encourages students to explore possible career options in outdoor education and recreation. This living-learning community includes a well-developed set of learning outcomes that are primarily co-curricular. Despite this focus there is a faculty leader and strong emphasis on holistic education. This is a strong example of intentional educational experiences delivered through co-curricular activities offered collaboratively.

The Outdoor Adventure Living and Learning Center at Baylor University ([www.baylor.edu/oallc/index.php?id=40204](http://www.baylor.edu/oallc/index.php?id=40204)) includes one common class each semester.

While its not necessary to be a recreation and leisure services major at Baylor the LLC is designed to help student discover the major and learn whether or not this career is one they want to pursue. Similar to other programs, such as the one at the University of Waterloo ([uwaterloo.ca/housing/living-learning/communities/recreation-leisure-studies](http://uwaterloo.ca/housing/living-learning/communities/recreation-leisure-studies)) emphasizes the opportunity to live with students with similar passions, interests and values. The University of Waterloo program is notable for its use of peer leaders and peer mentors in supporting and guiding community members as well as serving as a bridge between faculty and students.

Programs at Calvin College in Michigan, the University of Wisconsin, LaCrosse, and Carroll University in Wisconsin include sustainability and/or environmental components as a complement to outdoor recreation ([www.calvin.edu/housing/housing-options/living-learning-communities/van-reken-hall/](http://www.calvin.edu/housing/housing-options/living-learning-communities/van-reken-hall/); [www.uwlax.edu/recsports/OutdoorRecreationLLC.htm](http://www.uwlax.edu/recsports/OutdoorRecreationLLC.htm); [www.carrollu.edu/campuslife/pdfs/OutdoorRecEnvLLCAgreement.pdf](http://www.carrollu.edu/campuslife/pdfs/OutdoorRecEnvLLCAgreement.pdf)). Other program variations include sponsorship by campus recreation offices, such as the program at Boise State (<http://housing.boisestate.edu/livinglearningcommunities/communities/lifetime-recreation/>) and partnerships with campus recreation offices with a focus on wellness, open to all students, as in the program at Clemson University ([www.clemson.edu/campus-life/campus-recreation/fitness/welnessllc.html](http://www.clemson.edu/campus-life/campus-recreation/fitness/welnessllc.html)). The possibilities for collaboration, integration, program design, and desired outcomes are vast.

### **Program Planning, Design, and Implementation**

Academic initiatives, such as living-learning communities, are proposed for many reasons. They may be the solution to an articulated problem. They may be a response to a student need. Their genesis may be in a faculty idea about creating environments where learning happens organically. For many pondering these problems, needs, and possibilities, there is a fundamental goal of increased learning. Living-learning communities, designed to improve learning outcomes, are a popular initiative and a common response to questions of how to invigorate undergraduate learning (Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam & Leonard, 2008). The variation in living-learning communities by type, structure, staffing patterns, goals, and institutional entity initiating them makes their creation and implementation complex. Determining where and how to begin brings a multitude of questions. The work of Karen Inkelas and a number of collaborators through the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) provides useful assistance in a number of ways. As is evident throughout this article, this large, national study of U.S. living-learning programs provided abundant data related to many aspects of living-learning programs, both structural and outcomes based (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas, 2008; Inkelas, Szelenyi, Soldner & Brower, 2007; Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson, D., 2006; Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008).

A study grounded in data from the NSLLP provides a useful empirical typology that can be used to consider the complexities of beginning a living-learning program (Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008). Detailed analysis of programs represented in the survey uncovered three structural types. These included "Small, Limited Resourced, Primarily Residential Life Emphasis," "Medium, Moderately Resourced, Student Affairs/Academic Affairs Combination," and "Large, Comprehensively Resourced, Student

Affairs/Academic Affairs Collaboration” (pp. 502-503). Although researchers found that the learning outcomes were generally stronger at the larger programs, there were no significant differences between those programs and the small programs with limited resources that were staffed through residence halls and had little faculty involvement. The authors caution that more empirical research needs to be done in this area, but initial data indicate that programs of various sizes and types can have a positive impact on student learning (p. 508).

If living-learning communities are to thrive and fulfill their promise, all stakeholders must come to consensus about purpose (Smith, 2001). When a learning community is considered, one of the first questions asked must be, “What do we want to accomplish with this program?” This leads naturally to further questions. What are our goals? What is the overarching vision? What will our learning outcomes be? Once the overall goals are clear, there must be conversation about the group of students that this program is designed to reach. If the goal is retention from first to second year, for example, the group is obvious. Other goals may present the opportunity to think broadly about how students could experience and benefit from the program. In recreation and leisure-oriented programs, students majoring in the field might deepen their understanding of leisure across the lifespan through community service activities, or they might have a goal of increasing the campus appreciation of leisure through sponsoring activities to introduce other students to new leisure pursuits.

After initial design, structure, and program goals have been addressed and answered, further questions can help planners articulate a more detailed vision of living-learning programs. These include program oversight, role of faculty, and integration of resources (Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008, pp. 498-499). Will the program be managed by student affairs or academic affairs? How will the intersection with student affairs, particularly student housing, be structured and sustained? What role will faculty play? What role will student affairs/housing play? Who will be responsible for programmatic and staffing functions? How will communication be structured to insure effectiveness? What is the funding source? What does the reporting structure, both academic and residential, look like? Finally, how will the outcomes be assessed?

These are all issues and questions that must be discussed, answered, agreed upon, and clarified to the satisfaction of all involved. These collaborations function most effectively when there is clarity of purpose and a strong understanding of the roles played by all involved. It is especially important to remember that each player, academic affairs and student affairs, brings expertise and perspective crucial to the success of the community (ACPA/NASPA, 2004).

## **Assessing Living-Learning Programs**

### **Program Outcomes**

Numerous studies conducted on the effectiveness of living-learning communities highlight their contributions to meeting stated learning outcomes. Some of the most compelling findings are related to the importance of faculty involvement. Data from the 2007 National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) support the role living-learning programs play in retaining students, both male and female, in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) disciplines. The study, involving students at 46 U.S. institutions, also supports the positive role faculty interaction plays in student

persistence (Garrett & Zabriskie, 2004; Soldner, Rowan-Kenyon, Inkelas, Garvey, & Robbins, 2012). Shushok and Sriram (2010) conducted a single institution study and found similar results with students in an engineering and computer science living-learning center. The environment, constructed through an academic affairs and student affairs collaboration, supported increased faculty/student interaction, peer interaction related to academics, and greater satisfaction with the residential environment. Again, this single institution study mirrors the results of the previous study. Factors leading to persistence in STEM fields were fostered through the living-learning program. While not always easy to accomplish, the benefits of faculty collaboration in living-learning communities are integral to creating meaningful communities beyond the traditional classroom (Ellett & Schmidt, 2011).

Since each living-learning community is different, developing assessment strategies can be vital in demonstrating a specific program's effectiveness and impact. As described above, planning for assessment begins with a clear understanding of the program's purpose, alignment with institutional mission and goals, and intended program and student outcomes (Barham & Scott, 2006). Once those are in place and the program is being implemented, formal assessment and evaluation strategies should be incorporated throughout the year, in addition to informal observations of successes and needs (Keeling, Wall, Underhile, & Dungy, 2008). Both the program itself and its effects on students should be assessed to create a comprehensive understanding of program outcomes (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2012; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

### **Theoretical Framework**

A frequently used framework for the assessment of living-learning programs is Astin's I-E-O model (Astin, 1991; NSLLP, n.d.a.; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). This "'inputs-environments-outcomes' college impact model...holds that pre-college **inputs** and elements of the college **environment** interact to produce a range of **outcomes** (students' characteristics after exposure to college)" (NSLLP, n.d.a.). According to Upcraft and Schuh (1996),

The primary purpose of Astin's I-E-O model is to identify and estimate institutional effects on how students grow or change during the college years. In particular, this model is a useful tool for identifying and estimating effects of those college experiences over which institutions have some programmatic or policy control, such as student experiences, which can be shaped to educational advantage through an institution's programmatic or policy actions. (p. 219)

This framework reflects the fundamental rationale for living-learning programs: that through developing them, the institution structures the environment in such a way that the students are affected in intentional and desirable ways. Because the environment itself, or involvement in specific aspects of it, serves as the intervention in this model, assessment of its effects must include at least two data collection points (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). In other words, to understand how students change as a result of the experience, it is essential to assess them both before they enter a living-learning program and at the end of a cycle, generally an academic year. Such an assessment

model helps control for the possibility that positive outcomes are a result of students who already possess those characteristics self-selecting into the program (Wawrynzski & Jessup-Anger, 2010). Creating opportunities for longitudinal assessment of students after they leave the program as they continue their collegiate experiences, and even beyond, can further an understanding of the lasting effects of living-learning programs.

### **Assessment of Student Learning and Development Outcomes**

Increasingly, professionals across higher education are being called on to demonstrate the learning and developmental outcomes resulting from student involvement in their programs and services. Several professional organizations such as the American Association of Colleges and Universities, ACPA: College Student Educators International, NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, have published sets of learning outcomes for use across higher education (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2012; ACPA/NASPA, 2004; Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2012). While there are differences between them, there is also considerable overlap represented by constructs such as intellectual and personal skills, or personal and social responsibility (AAC&U, 2012). *Learning Reconsidered* (2004), a joint publication of the two major student affairs professional associations, further emphasized the whole campus as a learning community, suggesting that students are affected by the social, academic, and institutional contexts in which they live and study (ACPA/NASPA, 2004). This interconnectedness of learning, exemplified in living-learning communities,, enriches the collegiate experience while simultaneously presenting challenges to assessment of its specific elements. However, since “no single arena of experience is solely responsible for producing these college outcomes” (ACPA/NASPA, 2004, p. 20), areas like living-learning communities are perfect opportunities for collaboration and integration of curricular and co-curricular learning. Statements of student learning and development outcomes such as those identified above can provide a strong foundation for cross-disciplinary discussion of appropriate and relevant outcomes.

“Connections with other arenas [of campus] are crucial to create a coherent experience for students” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 328). Collaborative programmatic initiatives must lead to collaborative assessment of their outcomes. While understanding whether students are satisfied with their experience may reflect something about their propensity to participate and to stay involved, it does not demonstrate what they have learned or how they have changed as a result of the experience. Focusing assessment on learning and development can yield an understanding of the role of such experiences in a student’s holistic growth. A variety of assessment tools can be used to assess learning and development; those recommended in *Learning Reconsidered* (ACPA/NASPA, 2004) include the following:

formal written inventories, questionnaires and web surveys; faculty, staff, and mentors’ observations of student behavior; peer assessments; individual interviews, presentations, journals, and portfolios; and data gathered from group work, focus groups, and case studies. Co-curricular transcripts can provide a record of experiences designed to promote and assess various leadership skills. Particular consideration should be given to creating and



using rubrics, which provide comprehensive, detailed descriptions of what students have or have not learned. (p. 23)

All of these are grounded in the assumption that intended learning and development outcomes have been clearly specified and that the living-learning program and its elements have been structured intentionally to lead to them.

A review of a list of research publications based on the National Study of Living-Learning Programs data (NSLLP, n.d.c.) shows studies focused on outcomes including high-risk drinking, transition to college for first-generation students, student perceptions of intellectual growth, sense of belonging for students in different racial/ethnic groups, sense of civic engagement, and experiences of LGBT students. The NSLLP 2007 Report of Findings reveals a number of positive outcomes related to participation in living-learning programs. These include a smoother academic transition to college than students living in traditional residence halls, better social and academic transition for first-generation college students, greater enjoyment of challenging academic pursuits, increased openness to new ideas, and, for those in programs emphasizing service, a stronger sense of civic engagement (NSLLP, 2007). However, while positive, these outcomes are broad and based on an inclusive definition of what constitutes a living-learning program; specific, campus-based assessment must be conducted to inform the local situation (Inkelas, 2008).

Beyond the specific nature of living-learning programs, some factors which are common elements in such programs have been found to be significant in creating outcomes such as self-authorship, “the capacity to internally define their own beliefs, identity, and relationships” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. xvi), and enhanced student engagement (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010). Such elements include membership in diverse communities, interaction with others different from oneself, involvement in community leadership, academic challenge, collaborative learning (including learning in communities), student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and a supportive campus environment. Being purposeful about incorporating such features into the design of a living-learning program can enhance its overall effectiveness.

### **Program Assessment**

In addition to examining the student outcomes of involvement in living-learning programs, it is vital also to consider the experiences that led to them. Depending on institutional goals, programs may target outcomes such as retention, co-curricular involvement, or participant GPA. While these are desirable and may reflect some effect of the program, they should be used sparingly and interpreted with caution, since it is not possible to isolate influences, particularly without controlling for inputs (Astin, 1991; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). If studied at the conclusion of the program or academic year, and examined in isolation, they offer correlation information only; however, identification of a comparison group not participating in the living-learning program can offer a way to gain further insight about the impact of participation.

Maintaining a focus on outcomes is a way to ensure that the program reflects the intentions of its designers. Bresciani (2006) provides a comprehensive overview of outcomes-based program review:

Outcomes-based assessment program review is a systematic process in which program faculty and/or professionals articulate the intended results of the cumulative contribution of their program. In outcomes-based assessment, faculty and co-curricular professionals articulate what the program intends to accomplish in regard to its services, research, student learning, and faculty/staff development programs. The faculty and/or professionals then purposefully plan the program so that the intended results (i.e., outcomes) can be achieved; implement methods to systematically—over time—identify whether the end results *have* been achieved; and, finally, use the results to plan improvements or make recommendations for policy consideration, recruitment, retention, resource allocation, or new resource requests. This systematic process of evaluation is then repeated at a later date to determine whether the program improvements contribute to the intended outcomes. (p. 14)

She further notes that institutions or divisions may have their own approaches to program review with which programs must comply, but that the basic tenets of the approach remain applicable.

### **Conclusion**

“Unquestionably, though, through the coming together of an intellectually diverse and unique academic community, we have put together a learning outcomes imperative that honors the unique contributions of faculty, the developmental aspirations of the staff, and the learning of our students” (Stewart, 2008, p. 61). Living-learning programs bring faculty and student affairs staff together to provide students with an environment that integrates curricular and co-curricular learning, in community with others, and so offers a particularly rich milieu in which to foster student learning and student development.

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