

Using Learning Communities to Improve Student Persistence, Progression, Engagement, and Completion

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Problem:

Are learning communities, as they exist at Saint Paul College, a viable, sustainable and duplicable engagement and retention strategy?

Team Charge:

- Evaluate existing learning communities at Saint Paul College to determine if they, in fact, are increasing student persistence, progression, engagement and completion
- Recommend ways to improve existing learning communities
- Provide recommendations on possible additional learning communities for Career and Technical Education programs, developmental education classes, and general education students, with special consideration given to underserved and non-traditional students.

Key Findings:

- One-semester learning communities can have long-term impact. Assessment results vary widely, but there are generally modest gains in overall credits earned by students who participate in a learning community and participation can boost graduation rates.
- Students who participate in these programs do generally feel a greater sense of engagement and develop a stronger support network amongst their cohort.
- Learning communities are very expensive to operate and require a great deal of administration support, thus making them very challenging to operate as a campus-wide effort.
- The most successful learning community programs operate at a very high level of curricular integration, making these programs particularly hard to establish and maintain without significant staff time and expense.
- If the goal is to improve outcomes for developmental education students, approaches far more comprehensive than a one-semester learning community may be required to see more dramatic changes in retention, persistence, etc.

Conclusions and Recommendations (based on the research):

We have determined learning communities, as they exist at Saint Paul College:

- are viable,
- are sustainable, and
- are duplicable if a similar structure and resources to the Power Of You program are allocated.

Additionally, the project goals were to determine if learning communities at Saint Paul College did the following:

- do/do not increase student persistence
- do/do not increase student progression
- do/do not increase student engagement
- do/do not increase student completion.

Unfortunately, Saint Paul College does not have the complete data required to be able to definitively answer whether this program does or does not increase persistence, progression, engagement, and completion. The plan we have presented would allow Saint Paul College to collect this data and determine the appropriate outcomes.

Recommendations:

- Develop division-specific learning communities
- Pair Composition 1 with another general education course that all programs (within a specific division) require
- Learning community pairings could possibly fill in the Business, STEM, and Liberal Arts divisions
- Understand how learning communities fit into the overall strategic plan and how they might support the academic plan and/or mission.

Leadership Lessons Learned:

- Clearly set goals and objectives
- Manage time effectively
- Distance and varying schedules can make it difficult to reach objectives, but technology can be used to assist
- Ask questions continuously
- Action learning is very challenging

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