

Why Living in a Sport Management Learning Community Matters

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Living learning communities (LLCs) improve students' social connection and involvement through intentional planning and relationships with faculty and peers. This case study explored student experiences in an LLC known as the Sport Management and Media Living Learning Community (SMM LLC) at Elon University. Informed by the research about best practice for LLCs (Inkelas, et al., 2018) and the mattering of relationships (Felton & Lambert, 2020), the study explored students' perceptions of living in the SMM LLC. The focus group and interviews revealed students' experiences focused on the importance of relationships with faculty and peers that matter. The findings revealed two themes—the SMM LLC as a place to develop community and friendships, and as a catalyst for involvement. The study offers implications and opportunities for future research and practice for why sport management faculty should implement LLCs at their university to enhance the student experience through an intentional engaged learning design.

Keywords: living learning communities, relationships, student involvement

Introduction

Regarding high-impact practices, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) suggests learning communities are an important avenue for students to be in community with others who share similar interests (Kuh, 2008). Educational practices in undergraduate education that are high-impact

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increase students' engagement, enhance their sense of belonging, and are noted for prompting deeper engaged learning (Benjamin et al., 2019; Kuh, 2008). Briefly defined, living-learning communities are "... a group of students who live together in the same on-campus building and share similar academic or special interests" (Inkelas et al., 2018, p. 1) and can offer such high-impact experiences.

The Sport Management and Media (SMM) Living Learning Community (LLC) at Elon University, a medium-sized private liberal arts institution, invited students who planned to matriculate as first-year students beginning in the fall of 2018 to apply to live in the community. The SMM LLC offers a unique environment for students interested in exploring the study of sport, regardless of their major. Through regular formal and informal activities, SMM LLC residents examine sport by exploring their relative interests and learning more about opportunities in the sport industry.

The purpose of this case study was to explore the experience of LLC students in the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 cohorts to better understand the outcomes and the role of relationships. Research regarding student-faculty/staff interactions and student-student interactions indicates that these are key factors in student learning and success in higher education (Felten & Lambert, 2020). Felten and Lambert (2020) claim that relationship-rich environments can and should exist for all students at all types of institutions and place emphasis on the importance of students' influence in shaping the learning environment for their peers.

There is a need for additional research regarding student experiences in sport management academic programs. This study concentrated on the experiences of students living in a learning community and the relationships that impacted them, therefore adding to the scholarship of LLCs for first-year students interested in sport management. The overarching research question that guided this inquiry was: How did living in a sport management LLC affect students' college experience?

The findings from this study benefit sport management faculty by highlighting various experiences had by students who lived in a themed sport management living learning community. Elon University students living in the SMM LLC explore the study of sport by interacting through regular experiences such as dinners, sport facility site visits, career treks, first-year common reading discussions, and interaction with sport management faculty and guest speakers at on- and off-campus events. SMM residents begin to examine sport by exploring their relative interests and learning more about opportunities in the sport industry. The SMM LLC is affiliated with the Department of Sport Management housed in the School of Communications. The community is open to first-year students with an interest in learning more about sport management and media. The SMM LLC residents are linked to a section of COR 1100, "The Global Experience," a course required by all first-year students at the university. Additionally, we share how

those experiences positively develop community and friendships and act as a catalyst for future student involvement of students interested in sport management.

Review of Literature

Learning communities are defined by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as curricular structures that sometimes focus on a common topic; LLCs are one model for learning communities and are often interdisciplinary, offering opportunities for integration of concepts from different disciplines and ways to incorporate co-curricular experiences (Kuh, 2008). The Learning Communities Association describes living learning communities as:

student cohorts that live together in residence and either a) engage in integrated academic content through an integrative curriculum offered through coursework supported by co-curricular programming or b) participate in residential programming or engage in a residential curriculum co-designed by residence life/housing staff and a faculty partner(s) that complements an academic curriculum. Either approach is represented through clear collaboration between Residence Life/Student Life and Academic Affairs. (NLCA, n.d., para. 5)

The LLC studied meets section A of this definition.

Students who live in a themed community tend to be more engaged at the university as well as self-report positive outcomes and overall satisfaction with their college experience (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Previous research specifically supports the importance of LLCs in student participation (Rehak, 2018), belonging (Spanierman et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2018), positive impact on developing critical thinking, reading, and writing skills (Kilgo et al., 2015; Walker, 2003), and student success (Tinto, 2003). Thoughtful considerations concerning key components of an LLC, application of the Best Practice Model for Living-Learning Communities (BPM) (Inkelas et al., 2018), and exploration of peer and faculty relationships and student involvement are important to best understand the lived experience of students in a themed learning community.

Describing best practices is integral in understanding the intricacies of what makes a strong LLC. The BPM is organized as a pyramid made up of four levels (Inkelas et al., 2018). Like Maslow's Model, the basic conditions must be met before moving up the pyramid: (a) infrastructure on the bottom, (b) academic environment, (c) cocurricular environment, and (d) the pinnacle (see Figure 1). The model highlights critical elements of LLCs and offers a structure for guiding the creation of LLC programs. Both learning and community are clearly emphasized through the BPM.

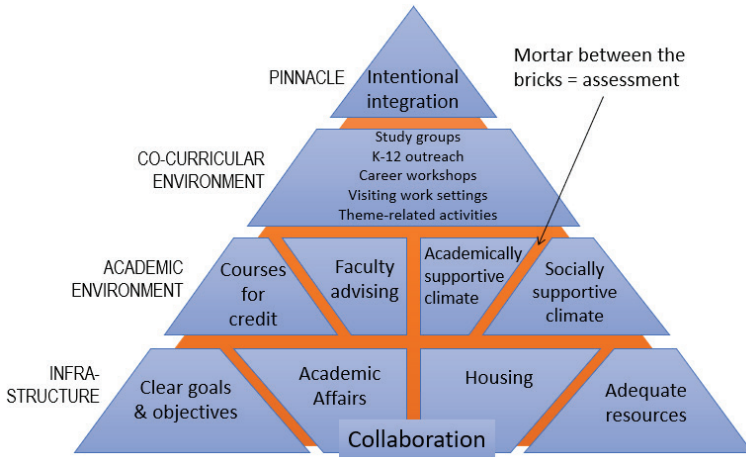


Figure 1. Best practices model for living-learning communities.

Community within the LLC sets the stage for the development of valuable relationships. Drawing on nearly 400 interviews, Felten and Lambert (2020) uncovered four interlocking relationship-rich principles that guide both effective programs and generative cultures at colleges and universities. Every student must: (a) experience genuine welcome and deep care, (b) be inspired to learn, (c) develop a web of significant relationships and (d) explore questions of meaning and purpose. Strayhorn (2019) and others (Ribera, et al., 2017; Spanierman et al., 2013) support that peer interactions can produce or inhibit sense of belonging. It is critical for college student educators to encourage positive interactions among students through conditions that really matter in college, ranging from advising networks to cocurricular involvement, from learning communities to peer mentoring (Kuh et al., 2005). Strayhorn (2019) believes positive interpersonal, peer interactions increase students' sense of belonging, which leads to student success, so "those charged with increasing college student success should think just as much about campus climate and policies governing social interactions as they do about predictive analytics, intrusive advising, curricular alignment, and early alert systems. It all really matters" (pp. 2–3). Strong relationships with faculty and peers benefit students in finding meaning and influence student involvement. Desirable outcomes regarding high-impact practices are viewed in relation to how students change and develop as a result of being involved in co-curricular learning environments (Astin, 1985). To create a culture that values engagement, there needs to be institutional intentionality, which LLCs represent.

Methods

This qualitative case study explored the essence of first-year students living in a sport management-themed LLC (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). A case study approach was appropriate because the LLC is a “bounded system.” According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “for it to be a case study, one particular program ... selected on the basis of typicality, uniqueness, success, and so forth, would be the unit of analysis” (pp. 37–39). Because few programs like the SMM exist, this LLC served as a “uniqueness” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 39) that is worthy of study.

Over its five-year history, the SMM LLC has included 89 males and 15 females. The LLC offers a unique environment for students interested in exploring the study of sport. Through regular LLC activities such as dinners, career treks, common readings, interaction with faculty and guest speakers and on- and off-campus events, SMM residents examine sport by exploring their relative interests and learning more about opportunities in the sport industry. At the beginning of the fall semester students receive a syllabus that includes community expectations and a schedule of required events. Students are required to attend three to four dinners during a semester at the dining hall that provide opportunities to meet peers, faculty, and industry professionals, and campus-wide events featuring speakers connected to the first-year common reading as a cohort. Special events that occur throughout the year expose students to alumni and professionals working in the sport industry (Internship Forum, Women Influencers in Sport Forum, and the Sport Symposium). There is a dinner at the LLC faculty mentor’s home during January and a trek in spring to Duke University to meet with alumni and visit various athletic facilities. In addition, to required events, informal events occur with faculty and peer mentors such as ice cream socials and attending athletic events together as a large group.

The SMM community is affiliated with the School of Communications and Department of Sport Management. The community is open to any student with an interest in sport management and media. Interviews for the study were from the 2021-2022 (16 students; 4 females/12 males) and 2022-2023 (22 students; 2 females/20 males) cohorts. All students in the LLC live on the same floor and are roommates; the residence hall is located next door to a dining hall and the main School of Communications buildings where the majority of sport and media courses are held. Students who live on the floor and did not apply to be in the LLC can meet with the faculty advisor about joining the community.

In addition to their participation in activities noted, residents in the LLC were linked to a first-year foundations course, COR 1100, “the Global Experience” liberal arts course taught by a sport management or communications faculty member during their first semester. The course is capped at 21 students

per section. If the number is lower or higher than 21 students then one section would have non-LLC students added as was the case for the 2021-2022 cohort. If there are more than 21 students there would be two sections linked by School of Communications faculty with additional students as was the case for the 2022-2023 cohort. The course is a first-year seminar examining personal and social responsibility in domestic and global contexts. The course shares three learning goals: curiosity and questioning, communication, and critical thinking focused on contemporary issues (Elon University, n.d.). A former resident of the LLC serves as a peer mentor to the COR 1100 course and Sport Management Society to provide a direct connection to curricular and co-curricular experiences.

Students were invited to participate via email. The lead author, who also serves as the LLC faculty mentor, invited students to participate while the author not employed at the institution (Benjamin) conducted the interviews. Students were asked to respond directly to the interviewer if they were willing to participate. While six students responded, only five ultimately participated in the interviews. All interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Students were interviewed either in a focus group or individually. Three students from the 2021-2022 cohort participated in a 45-minute focus group. Two students from the 2022-2023 cohort participated in individual interviews, lasting approximately 30 minutes. Three of the participants stated they were currently majoring in sport management, and two others stated that they planned to, indicating they entered the LLC without a declared sport management major. While students were not asked to identify their gender, one student referred to herself as a “girl” and another identified herself as a “female.” Based on comments made by the students, it might be assumed that three participants identify as male and two identify as female. All participants were considered “active” members of the community because of their participation in multiple LLC activities.

Participants were asked why they chose to join the LLC, what they expected to gain, what activities they participated in as part of the LLC, and how/ if the LLC affected various elements of their college experience such as social interactions, academic efforts and outcomes, and overall Elon experience. They were asked if anything about the LLC helped them build relationships at Elon. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were emailed to the students for their review. One student responded to affirm the information. Using descriptive words and phrases as codes, researchers identified patterns in the data resulting in categories. These categories described the “uniqueness” of the LLC experience.

Qualitative research relies on trustworthiness to indicate rigor (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and trustworthiness was demonstrated in this study. Methods of establishing credibility include triangulation and member checks (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985), both of which were used. Schwandt (2015) noted that triangulation includes examining information from multiple perspectives, which occurred through multiple data sources (interview transcripts from multiple students). Participants were invited to review transcripts, confirm accuracy based on their recollection of the interview, and offer clarifications for member checking. Reaching saturation also contributes to credibility. Saturation is the point at which no new information is provided, which occurred in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability is generally assumed when credibility is confirmed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, transferability results from thick description of the program and student experience, which provides readers with sufficient information to determine if the findings are transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Two primary themes emerged from the interviews: community and friendships, and the LLC as a catalyst for involvement. Each finding is described below.

Theme 1: Community and Friendships

Universally, students identified community and friendships as both expectations for and realities of their LLC experience. When asked about reasons for joining the LLC, students identified it as a good way to get to know other students with similar interests, which aided their transition to the institution. While not all students entered the LLC with a sport management major, all had an interest in sport. Most participants focused on the benefit of living in proximity to peers who shared common interests or “like-minded people.” While the LLC was a one-year experience, students intentionally continued the community element of the LLC as three of the five students shared they continued to live or planned to live with their LLC peers after that one year. Students identified the LLC as a good starting point for transitioning to and connecting on campus. Steve remarked, “... I thought that [the LLC] would help me ease into college,” while Nia noted, “immediately there is ... this bond that I wasn’t expecting.” Multiple students also stated that, knowing they were transitioning to a campus where they would likely not know anyone, they saw the LLC as a support or, as Carrie put it, “a good stepping stone.”

Participants called the LLC a community they could count on, referencing it as a family and a safe space. Nia said of the LLC, “I came in here, and I immediately felt supported. I immediately had this community I knew I could kind of fall back on.” Tom used the same phrase, stating, “It was always just good to have a community to fall back on.” Carrie called it “a safe place I could always come back [to].” The sense of stability, security, and comfort was both

an expectation students had prior to arriving and something they experienced as part of the LLC.

Students benefitted academically from the community experience as well. Some students took advantage of the opportunity to study together and consult peers when they needed academic assistance. Both Steve and Nia felt that living in proximity to classmates helped with accountability. According to Tom, “It felt like a community where it wasn’t just we were all hanging out. But we were also all like working to excel academically at the same time. So it’s not ... necessarily easy to find a group of ... friends that do both.” Tom also noted that he could not rely on his peers for support in the same way as a sophomore due to no longer living near his classmates.

Along with recognizing that they would be living with other students who shared similar interests, participants identified the potential for developing friendships. Steve anticipated “having a sort of built in friend group” through the LLC and stated, “I’ve made friends with people who I wouldn’t have otherwise.” David mentioned, “I was definitely nervous about ... how I was going to meet new people and to develop relationships, and ... I thought that just being able to live with people who are similarly interested in sport would be a good opportunity for me to develop relationships to meet new people.” He shared that these students were still his primary friend group. Carrie considered her LLC community her “best friends ... right down the hall.” While the shared interest in sport was a draw, what students mentioned as being primary reasons for joining and benefits of the LLC centered around community and making friends in their new environment.

Theme 2: LLC as a Catalyst for Involvement

In addition to living together, students participated in various activities that were part of the LLC program. Experiences such as dinners with faculty, sport facility site visits, and informal ice cream outings were cited by participants as valuable events they attended. While such activities further contributed to the sense of community, they also served as opportunities for students to be actively involved in the LLC and as gateways to further campus involvement.

The LLC served as a connecting point for involvement outside of the LLC. Through interactions with faculty as well as information provided during activities such as LLC dinners, students learned about involvement opportunities of which they took advantage. Tom credited the LLC with providing connections that led to his further involvement as a Communications Fellow and his study abroad opportunity, unique as a first-year student. Steve noted that some members of the Sport Management Society attended one of the dinners, which served as an introduction to the organization. Nia also highlighted her introduction to members

of that organization through the LLC, which further led to her participation in Women Influencers in Sport (WINS). She also shared that her connection to the Sport Management Society resulted in informal mentorship by other students in the organization. Multiple students referenced the Sport Management Society in particular, and in many ways they conflated the student organization activities with those of the LLC. About the LLC and the Sport Management Society, Nia claimed that “they kind of do very similar things,” and David stated, “those two things sort of lump together.”

Having the LLC as a starting point for new students resulted in them developing strong connections with the academic program and institution, valuable given that campus involvement can lead to student success. The fact that students saw the LLC and one of the primary discipline-based student organizations as conflated offers potential continuity as the students transition out of the LLC.

Discussion and Implications

Findings from this study extend the literature on the lived experiences of students in a sport management LLC. The structure of the LLC and the findings here support the importance of each level of the BPM for student success. In particular, student comments indicate the importance of all elements of the BPM for providing a solid foundation for their first year on campus. The academic affairs and housing collaboration (Infrastructure Level) was evidenced through their regular statements about the value of the shared living space. The first-year seminar course for credit provided an additional venue for building relationships, and other common courses provided opportunities for students to study together or help each other academically (Academic Level). This led to an academically supportive environment, while both the courses and living in proximity to each other offered a socially supportive environment. Students highlighted theme-related activities such as dinners (Co-curricular Level) as beneficial for interacting with faculty in particular, and they cited field trips to athletic facilities as unique LLC opportunities. Finally, intentional integration was acknowledged through the living arrangement, course experiences, and co-curricular activities. These elements also served to integrate the students into the academic department and major, evidenced by the fact that students at times could not distinguish between LLC programs and those of the Sport Management Society. The unique combination of elements resulted in students finding community and friendships that are important to their college commitment and involvement opportunities, particularly those related to sport management, that further integrated them into the major/department, university, and their intended professional field.

This exploratory understanding of students in a sport management LLC provides several implications to consider and future research opportunities.

Entering students typically are concerned about developing friendships and establishing a community of support on a residential campus, and LLCs provide a structure for that. Students in this study both saw this as a possibility when applying to the LLC and realized it as they experienced the LLC. For recruitment purposes, LLCs can tout this as a benefit that students experience immediately upon entering the program. For sport management LLCs in particular, given that a high percentage of majors are men, this messaging may help to recruit women. Furthermore, participants experienced this community as a stable support, one on which they could depend, which provided them with a sense of grounding or a “home base” at their new institution.

Students also found the LLC to be a venue for gaining information about and opportunities for involvement. Given the benefits of involvement for student growth and development (Astin, 1985), this pathway to involvement is noteworthy. Finally, even after their official participation in the LLC concluded, many students had or planned to mirror the LLC living structure by continuing to reside with their LLC peers. Their comments suggested that interactions remained similar, with former LLC students still gathering together and even living in apartments that were proximate to other former LLC students. While these students made this decision on their own, there may be value in highlighting that although their official LLC involvement will conclude at the end of the first year, students can continue the experience on their own through choices such as where they live or creating a regular gathering opportunity similar to the LLC experience. Additionally, their involvement in sport-related organizations, like the Sport Management Society, provides a structure for continuity and transition. The transition to the sophomore year can be challenging, as students may be viewed as not needing the same support they did as first-year students, even though they may still feel like new students (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2007). Since sense of community is a critical element for sophomores thriving (Eidum et al., 2020), providing guidance or structure for continued connection to LLC peers may be beneficial.

Findings from this study extend the existing literature on the lived experience of students living in learning communities, specifically sport management-themed communities. Future research on LLCs for sport management programs is warranted. A deeper dive into the various intersections of identity of students served in these environments needs further examination. Additionally, studying how living learning communities influence recruitment, retention, and student success is imperative.

Limitations

Limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, this study was conducted with one LLC at a specific institution. While qualitative studies do not attempt generalizability, the transferability of these findings must be determined by individual readers. Additionally, although saturation was achieved, this study provides a limited perspective on the LLC experience with the stories of only five students. Finally, this study is unable to make any stable claims regarding exactly how students should experience their time in a living learning community. Future research may provide additional information for sport management LLCs.

Closing

Overall, there is a need for additional research to understand experiences of students living in learning communities connected to academic disciplines and the potential of these programs to be used as recruitment strategies for students to major in sport management. It is vital for academic affairs, along with their student affairs partners, to pay attention to the BPM Model to provide an environment that challenges and supports students while also creating experiences for students to see themselves as college material and excited about the adventure to continue on at the university. The intentional design of an LLC positively contributes to a student's engaged learning experience. There is a responsibility to understand the intricacies to better serve, develop, and mentor students during their time at the university to create an environment where students have an opportunity to belong—by building community and friendships and avenues to get involved.

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