

Building Community Between First-Year Foundation Students on a Commuter Campus

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The transition from high school to college can be very difficult for many students. At an open-access commuter college, these difficulties are often amplified. In order to assist incoming students with just such a transition, the University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College (UCBA) recently established block scheduling and created program-specific Learning Communities in the Applied Graphic Communication (AGC) program. The Learning Communities, implemented through weekly meetings led by peer mentors, support freshmen by addressing college resources, healthy living, time/stress management techniques and study skills. The peer mentors facilitate encourage positive social interaction between students and promote student-faculty communication; they also work closely with faculty to support students who may be struggling academically.

In this paper, we will review the pedagogical role of Learning Communities in the first-year experience and share planning and implementation strategies used at the University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College. We will discuss the impact that cohort scheduling, learning communities, and peer mentoring has had on first-year student retention, morale and academic success. Finally, we'll examine past and present practices, as well as future plans to strengthen the program.

UCBA has an enrollment of approximately 5000 students and is the largest regional campus in the University System of Ohio. It is primarily an open access college; anyone with a high school diploma can enroll in most of its programs. It also has the distinction of being the closest Regional Campus to the main institution in the Cincinnati neighborhood of Clifton, with a proximity of nineteen miles. UCBA is a one hundred percent commuter campus, but more and more students are living in dormitories on the Clifton campus. It has slightly more female than male students, and it is the most diverse college in the University. UCBA students are getting younger every year; the average age at the college is twenty-two, down from twenty-eight just six years ago. About half of its students are first generation college students.

The Department of Art & Visual Communication (AVC) houses the AGC program at UCBA. The AGC program is a two-year Associate's Program with a career track and a one-year transition option to the Communication Design program in the School of Design at the College of Design, Architecture, Art and Planning (DAAP) on the Clifton campus. Each year there are about one hundred students enrolled in the Communication Design program at DAAP, with an additional two hundred in Fine Arts and Art History elective courses.

The average age of an AGC major is twenty years old, which means the program serves a primarily traditionally-aged population. Since only thirty-eight percent of AGC majors are first generation college

students, many of them are better informed student with clear academic and career goals. The program is also open access, resulting in a very broad range academic preparation and skill level at the start of the program. The AGC program graduates about twenty-five percent of its students, which is almost double the rate of the college as a whole. The Applied Graphic Communication program shares an institutional National Association of School of Art and Design (NASAD) accreditation with DAAP. The department faculty participate fully in the reaccreditation process and departmental data is folded into the institutional report.

The AVC is housed in the Sycamore Annex Building, approximately a half-mile from the main UCBA campus. The building is about seventy-five years old. It is on the site of a pioneer church and school (the cemetery is still on site) and formerly housed an elementary school, a municipal building, and a senior center. It has been the home of UCBA's nursing and Emergency Medical Tech programs, but currently hosts courses in Art History, Design, Fine Arts, and Foundations. The Annex also contains UCBA Art Gallery, which annually hosts about six exhibitions featuring regional, national, and international artists, along with regular student shows.

The Applied Graphic Communication program began as the Commercial Art program in 1982, focusing on illustration, publication design, and print production. The introduction of design software in the early 1990s sparked a drastic increase in enrollment, as demand for entry level designers with software skills grew and with many professionals returning to school to get caught up on the new technology. Over the past ten years or so, the availability of industry-standard software, combined with the decline of design support roles, led to a shift in student expectations. Production positions dwindled as much of the process was digitized and/or outsourced, as a result the competition for entry level design employment increased. More and more, our students began to seek further education in the field of design, most with aspirations to transition to the School of Design at DAAP.

In 2010, the University of Cincinnati began the process of converting to a semester schedule; the Blue Ash faculty used the conversion as an opportunity to revise its curriculum. After a long dialog with the faculty and administration of DAAP's School of Design, the AGC program aligned its first year with DAAP's Communication Design (CD) program. Since this collaboration began in 2014, twenty-nine students have successfully transitioned into CD program at DAAP, with additional students going into other programs, such as Industrial Design and Fashion Design.

The University of Cincinnati also used the semester conversion to launch an institution-wide First Year Experience (FYE) program. The foundation of UC's FYE approach is the responsiveness to ongoing student reflection and a common set of targeted learning areas, such as acclimation to college, career and major orientation, and information literacy. Each program was required to add an FYE component to its curriculum, in the form of either: a stand-alone course, content imbedded in existing courses, or as separate learning communities. Initially, the AGC program imbedded the required FYE content into existing courses. But it was quickly evident the content did not fold seamlessly into the courses. Additionally, there was not enough time to present, practice, or assess how effectively the students were learning the FYE material.

It was in the fall of 2015 that we first implemented the peer mentor program and started scheduling first-year AGC students into set cohort blocks of studio courses: Two-dimensional Design, Three-dimensional Design and Foundation Drawing 1. Students enrolled in each cohort block, which we refer to as learning communities, are also required to attend a 50-minute, zero credit, pass/not pass meeting with their learning community each week of the term. A peer mentor facilitates these learning community meetings and we, as faculty, do our best to stay out of the meetings in order to preserve the unique dynamic which occurs between peers.

Goals of the learning community meeting include: easing transition from high school to college, building a supportive community between students, explaining the major and program expectations, introducing students to the college and university and honing student success skills. Introducing students to the university includes informing students about organizations and clubs, campus and college events and university and college resources such as the library, writing center, math lab and campus psychologist, to name a few. Study skills, time management and stress management are examples of the topics covered to strengthen student success skills.

Peer mentors are hired the summer before they begin working. They are typically second or third-year students who have demonstrated academic achievement in first-year studio courses, leadership skills and the ability to work closely with faculty and peers. During the fall semester in which they work, peer mentors are responsible for between eight to ten hours of work each week. These hours include a 50-minute meeting with their learning community, a one-hour check-in meeting with other peer leaders and a faculty advisor, two to three hours of office hours and four to five hours preparing lesson plans, mentoring, and/ or communicating with faculty.

While the peer mentors facilitate meetings plans that explore subjects such as note taking or time management in the learning communities, they are also very ingenious and creative in developing lessons that help students manage stress and connect with one another. They have taken field trips, carved pumpkins, hiked through local parks, learned to meditate and have relieved stress through by playing balloon tag. One lesson that worked very well to introduce students to the critique process was when peer mentor asked them to decorate cupcakes and then discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the visuals created in the icing. This was great low-stakes critique since the students were not overly attached to their cupcake creations and they did not feel pressure to be cake decorating experts.

While most of the focus of this paper is on the benefits first-year students gain from being in a peer mentored learning community, it's important to also mention the benefits to the peer mentors themselves. Over the years, we have witnessed peer mentors build confidence in public speaking, become more compassionate to their peers, better understand foundational design skills through teaching them and become more connected to our school and faculty.

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning reveals numerous benefits associated with learning communities. According to Zhao and Kuh (2004), student involvement in learning communities can be positively linked with academic performance, collaborative learning, gains in attendance and overall satisfaction with the college experience.¹ Additionally, researchers such as Lenning and Ebbers (1999) have concluded that a well-designed learning community emphasizing collaborative learning results in improved GPAs, higher retention and higher satisfaction for undergraduate students.²

A variety of other desired student outcomes can be supported, as well³. Several studies link learning communities to increased quality and quantity of learning, increased involvement in college, greater engagement in learning, improved social connectedness, more complex thinking, and a greater openness to diverse ideas. In fact, learning communities may influence students beyond the first year. Zhao and Kuh (2004) found that introducing students early in their college years to activities associated with learning communities, such as interacting with faculty members and cooperating with peers on learning tasks, may encourage them to continue these activities throughout college.⁴

The concept of learning communities is not new. Forerunners began in the 1920s and emerged again in the 1960s. Contemporary communities have been prevalent since the 1980s, but most are implemented at four-year institutions, rather than in two-year programs such as ours at UCBA.

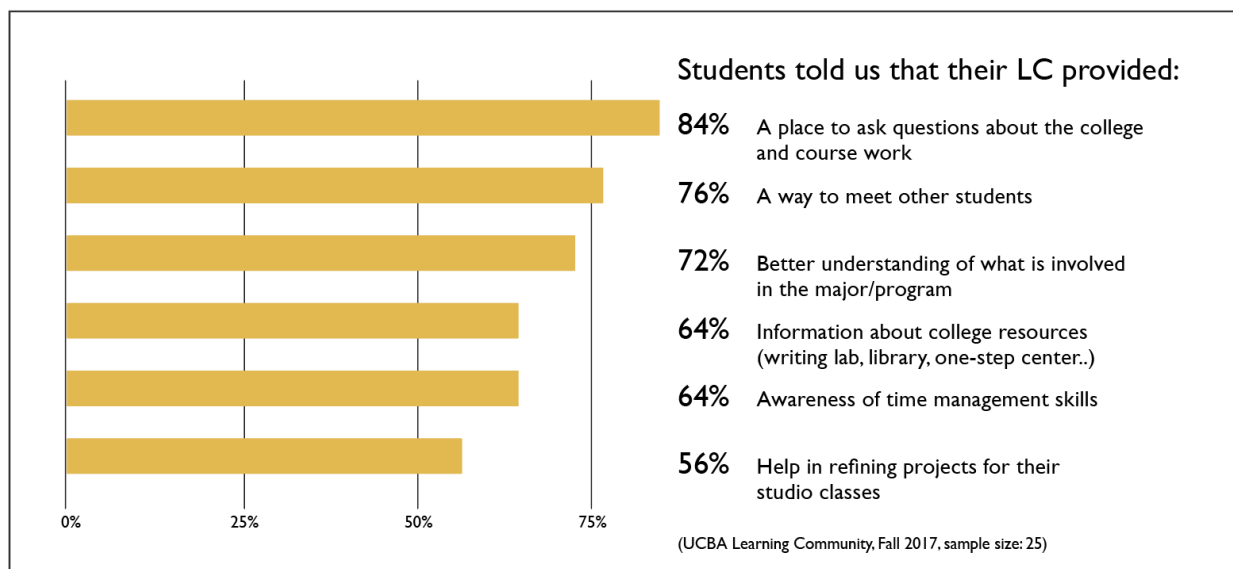
Learning communities may take different forms – curricular-based, classroom-based, residence-based and student population-based⁵, according to Lenning and Ebbers (1999). Our learning communities at

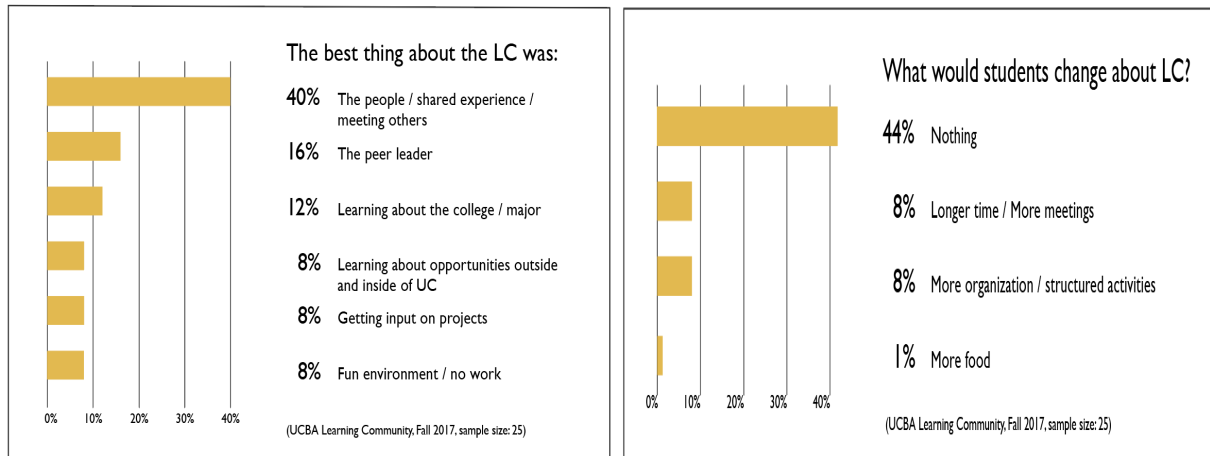
UCBA are based upon a curricular model; students of each community are co-enrolled in three shared foundation classes, plus a weekly meeting.

Regardless of form, learning communities share a common set of principles. According to Schroeder and Mable (1994), learning communities are generally characterized by 1) small, cohesive units with a common sense of purpose and powerful peer influences; 2) the four I's of student interaction: involvement, investment, influence, and identity; 3) a shared space that supports ongoing interaction; and 4) a community that is primarily student centered, not staff centered, to promote student learning.⁶

At UCBA we have witnessed a growth of community and studio culture with the implementation of learning communities. Within these, we have strived to create a strong peer-to-peer network and an open environment of care, respect, safety and fairness. Active, collaborative and shared goals contribute to more meaningful and enjoyable learning, and the community has allowed commuter students to connect with others socially and academically. As mentioned earlier, as instructors we try not to interrupt the peer engagement in the communities, so we rarely step foot into the classroom during the weekly meeting times and activities.

Although we have just begun to collect data on our learning communities at UCBA, our initial results support the positive evidence surrounding learning communities. Below is a brief glimpse into the results of our survey:





In the future we plan to continue to build upon the success of the learning community program at UCBA. Upcoming plans include: maintaining class size and meeting time for learning communities, adding the learning community as a formal requirement for the AGC program, continuing peer mentorship of learning communities, linking the peer leader experience with the UCBA Honor’s Program, developing more lessons plans / activities, and cultivating additional funding for the program.

Notes:

Should you have questions about learning communities, or if you are interested in starting a similar program at your institution, please feel free to contact the authors of this paper.

References

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