

Implementing Learning Communities: The View of the Student Mentor

By

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Abstract

Christopher Newport University, a 5,000 student Virginia state university, is currently completing its first semester of utilizing Student Learning Communities to enhance the transition of incoming freshmen to a traditional, residential college campus. The University has made great strides in the recruitment of high quality students in the last five years but is now having to cope with student retention rates (75-80% in 2004-05) and with developing the academic potential of these new students. This presentation provides an overview of the new program and offers the perspective of a senior-level student serving as a peer mentor in one learning community. The presentation will touch upon the results of the students, as well as, issues that have given concern during the implementation, and offer solutions that have been developed.

Introduction

As a student finishing up her third year, I wanted to enjoy my “last” summer break and embrace my senior year at Christopher Newport University with hard work, new experiences and the fondest of memories. I was truly grateful to be selected by Dr. Peter Carlson and Professor Linda Gordon in assisting them with their learning community in the fall of 2005. Having been a peer mentor in the Learning Communities, established with the Class of 2009, I am honored to have been a part of the University’s academic initiatives. Being a peer mentor enabled me to share my knowledge and academic abilities with fifteen individuals, assisting in the transformation of their study habits and lifestyles of high school seniors into that of college freshmen.

Background

Christopher Newport University is the state of Virginia’s youngest comprehensive university. Beginning as a branch of the College of William and Mary in 1960, CNU has since achieved independent, university status in 1981. Now at the start of the twenty-first century, the university, although it has transformed itself enormously to stand independently, struggles with retaining its students. Whereas typical percentages for retention should be at or above 90%, the freshman retention rate at CNU ranges from 75-80%.

Many factors come into play when one tries to evaluate these percentages. Students leave because: they do not connect with the University, they find it is not what they wanted (University did not deliver), they always wanted to go somewhere else, there is too much work, they received poor grades, poor study habits, they have poor time management skills, they socialized too much, or there was a lack of faculty support..

Taking all of these factors into consideration, CNU implemented new academic initiatives to increase freshmen academics and involvement on campus, starting with the Class of 2009. The Liberal Learning Core (LLC) was introduced to help students learn more analytically and communicate more effectively. Learning Communities (LCs) were one part of Christopher Newport's initiative to increase retention amongst students.

Learning Communities at CNU

The phrase Learning Community can be used very loosely, but in the case of CNU's, is defined as a group of students sharing two general elective courses and housed together. The LCs focused solely on freshmen and included peer mentors who were expected to "coach" the students through their studies. The program was prepared and executed by Dr. David Doughty, Professor of Physics and Computer Science and Engineering. Through his research, he posed that Learning Communities would allow for many familiar faces in multiple settings to ease intimidation, reduce "apparent size" of institution, and allow for instant friends and study groups (4). It was foreseen, therefore, that these kinds of interactions would lead to connections between classes, increasing relevancy and engagement where peer mentors would encourage out of class learning (4).

The University body greatly welcomed the Learning Community initiative. Once the program began to take some direction, professors were approached about tailoring their courses to be taught in conjunction with another professor for LC purposes. Professors were then advised to find an upper-class student to team up with them to be the assigned peer mentor. The professors and peer mentor team were expected to work together and create a system where they all three could meet on a weekly basis and plan out lessons for the week. The mentors were to tutor students for approximately four to six

hours each week, depending on the workload. While there were many guidelines set up for professors and mentors, everyone worked independently and at his or her own pace with their respective LCs during the semester.

As the Class of 2009 entered their rounds of orientation and registered for classes, they, as well as, their parents, were notified of CNU's new academic strategy of the Learning Communities. Pamphlets and letters were sent home, addressed to the students, informing them of the available courses, living arrangements, a list of frequently asked questions, and an application. As many responded immediately, others were later convinced of signing up by professors and students as they registered for courses at the University over the summer.

Over 400 students registered to take courses and live together in an LC. There were a total of thirty learning communities on campus. Twenty-four LCs ranged from four to eighteen students and six President Leadership Program LCs ranged from seven to twenty-three students. CNU accommodated Learning Communities by scattering them across campus and clustering them in specific floors of residents halls.

The Role of the Peer Mentor

The significance of combining the two words "peer" and "mentor" exemplifies exactly the role that the program wished to initiate. A peer, "a person or thing of the same rank, value, quality, ability, etc" (as an underclassman); and mentor, "a wise loyal advisor." My role as a peer mentor allowed me to act as the academic coach for the LC. It was my duty to guide and encourage the students with their studies.

There was no way for me to anticipate the group since their decisions were entirely up to them and their families. I did not know if they were: the first of their family

or siblings to attend college; from out of state; athletes, the list could go on. The anticipation grew as the summer came to an end. I had been in leadership positions before, but being accountable a first-year's grades was a whole different feeling. As an English major, minoring in government, I was able to review a good deal of each syllabi: English 123: "First-Year Writing Seminar" and Government 195: "Morality Ethics and Justice." Consequently, these put into perspective the responsibility of tutoring fifteen freshmen. The thought was completely unnerving.

Keeping in touch with the professors eased my tension. I was able to e-mail my professors and arrange for a proper time to meet with the class. Before meeting with my LC, I was able to participate in a three hour training session along with the other professors and peer mentors participating in the program. The meeting offered a brief background of Learning Communities and why they are viewed as a suitable solution for the University's concerns. Dr. Doughty led the discussion and proceeded to explain to the students how and why they were chosen, leading us into what was expected from us. The role of the peer mentor was greatly emphasized to encourage students in their studies and their engagement with the University. Peer Mentors were also to support students as they work on assignments and help prepare them when writing papers, as well as, taking tests and exams. The roles and guidelines were self-explanatory, the next step was to meet the students.

The initial meeting with the students went extremely well. I introduced myself to the 9:00 a.m. English class so the LC could match my name with my face and I passed out a seven question survey for them to return to me by the end of the week. On the survey, I asked them to submit their: birthdays, major, favorite snack and food, any study habits I should know about (studying with music, time of day etc.) or suggestions on how

to conduct the study sessions, class schedule, other course being taken during the semester, and anything I had left out. The responses were given in a timely manner and from that point I was able to construct two, two-hour meeting times conducive of everyone's class schedule.

The two weekly meeting times were made permanent throughout the entire semester. I managed to reserve a study lounge in the LCs residence hall. The Learning Community program was able to establish halls in three particular residence halls on campus. This enabled the students to live together and also be around other students in different LCs. All the students sounded enthusiastic to be in the LC and looking forward to the study sessions. I was beginning to really look forward to the meetings.

Consequently, the first study group did not go exactly as I had planned. Two out of my fifteen students made an appearance at the English study session. Three showed up for the Government meeting the next day.

It had not been made clear to me that the students were not required to attend all study session. Even when I was informed of this, I was still disappointed with the turnout. I started taking attendance using an Excel spread sheet I had created. I e-mailed the group and instant-messaged them, reminding them of the study groups but only the same two or three would come to the study sessions. Other peer mentors did not seem as wrapped up in the fact that their students did not show because honestly, we were still being paid for our time and we could study for our own classes at our designated locations. Once papers and exams began to be assigned, however, I was able to grow familiar with more faces.

About three weeks into the semester a handful of students had me look over their English papers. They all worked very diligently on the assignment and once their papers were returned their grades reflected their efforts. Although they work-shopped their

papers in class with each other and some submitted their paper to the professor, many still attributed me a great deal with their grades. It was a wonderful feeling and from this point on I was well aware that having such student mentees would only encourage other students to join in the LC.

The theory worked. Once a few students began to tell other students how helpful study sessions were, more students started to come to the meetings. They initiated the discussions and ways in which a particular session would be held. Nearly all the students of the LC attended the meetings, ultimately one might miss a session because of an unforeseen engagement, but they all learned the benefits of having a designated study time each week for two courses. Many had noted on their survey that they liked to study alone and in quiet environments, but studying in a group proved to be beneficial to all as they compared notes and engaged in discussion relating to the course work.

As I was able to work off the enthusiasm of the students, my hopes were lifted for their success. I realized that many of them came from different backgrounds: Two students were from out of state, two were athletes, more than a handful wished to double major, another wanted to graduate in three and a half years to get a jump start on graduate school. Most of the students also became involved with student organizations, two from the group were even elected as freshmen senators to represent their class in the Student Government Association. The group began to grow as a large support system. All of the students were involved with each others' activities and while in class they were all outspoken and attentive to what their peers had to say. While the students warmed up with each other academically, it did not go unnoticed by their professors. The class discussions became very dynamic and their papers, as well as test taking abilities, developed accordingly.

Study Sessions

Throughout the semester I was able to tailor the study groups according to the week's assignments. If there was a paper due that week I would post a sign up sheet divided with ten minute meeting blocks for a student to sign up for. The ten minutes were used for each student to bring me their paper and inquire about any questions or concerns they may have with it.

When a long reading had been assigned the group would read the story or article together and discuss key points and issues. If there was an upcoming test, the students chose to refresh by playing a game such as jeopardy. For the finals, each student in the LC participated with the study guide and the last session was extremely productive. Everyone wanted to contribute their information to the others and even after the study session was over, the students continued to study with one another in their rooms.

They would also divide amongst themselves reading and notes to collaborate with one another a study guide. The student was responsible for his or her section and would e-mail me their typed up response. It was then my duty to prepare a study guide for the students. At the following meeting the students who participated in the study guide would receive a copy. The students decided that if one of their peers did not collaborate with them, he or she would not get to see the groups' combined efforts.

Outcomes

At the time that this paper was written, the Learning Communities could not be completely assessed. There was a great deal of positive feedback from learning

community students, some went as far as to say they wished all freshmen students were required to participate in an LC. In regards to retention, however, a survey compiled by Residence Life on campus indicate that 9.6% of the Learning Community students decided to leave or transfer by not returning to their residence hall while 18% of non-Learning Community students admitted to leaving the University.

Problems Identified as Concerns

A. Late identification of some faculty and mentors

Some of the Learning Communities were put together rather quickly towards the end of the summer. Due to schedule changes some professors were notified that they would be teaching a LC only a few days before classes started. Therefore, some of the peer mentors did not know with whom they would be paired. The relationship I maintained with both professors was extremely productive. Both were very committed to their students, making it easy for me to be active in my work with the LC. Since the Learning Communities have made such a mark on the University's campus, it is my hope and expectation that other students will want to take part in such a rewarding, leadership position on campus.

B. Mix of LC and non-LC students in class

One major setback I observed when working with the Learning Community is how students outside of the LC felt. There were a few students in the English and Government classes who were encouraged to attend study sessions but never came. It is my belief that non-LC students, even students who were not in LC classes at all felt left out. While many students feel as though they do not need to participate in the Learning

Community program, it was apparent that quite a few students felt left out and at a greater disadvantage for not being in a LC.

C. Over-achieving the first year

There was only one conflict that I ran into with students during my semester of peer mentoring. It was very difficult to explain to them that their courses in college are not the same of high school. Many felt as though they took more classes in high school, as well as, play sports and be apart of more extra-curricular activities. Those who did not put in extra effort in their studies at the beginning of the semester struggled a bit while trying to juggle all their new activities.

Problems Identified as Concerns

Reflecting on my experience as a peer mentor, I urge, with my strongest recommendation, that Learning Communities be implemented on university campuses for the benefit of the incoming freshmen. As students leave high school where they are taught in a more structured fashion, they enter college where they are challenged to think and learn in all sorts of directions. A counselor at the Office of Student Life on campus advised me of this when I told her I was concerned with one of my students' study habits and attitude. The student's change and performance did not go unnoticed by the professors either. However, as I was able to study with the student in a low key environment I was able to question how he felt about assignments. Other students gave him feed back and how they were tested for learning disabilities and how he might want to consider the option as well. The student was able to go home for Thanksgiving break to evaluate his conditions as he admitted that he thought that college might not be right for him. He also revealed that CNU was his second try at going to college. There was a

great deal of trust built around the issue. Finally, in this student's case, making professors aware, as well as, himself of his insecurities, the learning community proved to be informative and supportive as everyone approached the situation accordingly.

Another issue arose with a female student. During later study sessions it was very obvious that some students would ostracize this woman, sneering at her whenever she spoke and so forth. If she happened to leave early they sighed or rolled their eyes. I managed to get the women of the LC together and ask about the one student's behavior and all were quick to criticize her on her eating habits, socializing, sleeping pattern, etc. With considerable discussion, however, the group was able to come to the conclusion that this woman needed help and did not need to be ostracized. In the end the students approached the hall director of their residence hall to talk about the woman. A few accommodations were made for her and they were able to notify their resident assistant who had overlooked the woman's issues. The other women in the group received a lesson in the negative dynamics of group behavior, saw the result of their cynicism and learned some degree of tolerance of others' deficits. They all seemed to realize that there could be many more issues at hand and all were re-sensitized to the need for group civility.

Personal Reflection

Overall, the experience of being a peer mentor allowed me to give back to younger students. It gave me a chance to contribute to a University that had been my home for the past three and a half years. I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to serve as a mentor, especially since it was only in its first stages. I would like to see the peer mentor position become more competitive as upper-classmen students

are made aware of it and wish to commit themselves to the academic success of incoming freshmen and the future of CNU.