

5-28-2015

## The Value of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs Collaboration: Living-Learning Communities at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Kirsten S. Ericksen  
*Norfolk State University*

Jonathan M. Walker  
*Norfolk State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri>

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ericksen, Kirsten S. and Walker, Jonathan M. (2015) "The Value of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs Collaboration: Living-Learning Communities at Historically Black Colleges and Universities," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 2.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol1/iss3/2>

This Best Practice is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Fayetteville State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Research Initiatives by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fayetteville State University. For more information, please contact [xpeng@uncfsu.edu](mailto:xpeng@uncfsu.edu).

---

# The Value of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs Collaboration: Living-Learning Communities at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

## **About the Author(s)**

**Kirsten S. Ericksen**, Ph.D., M.S.W, Assistant Professor, EMPOWER LLC Coordinator, The Ethelyn R. Strong School of Social Work, Norfolk State University, [ksericksen@nsu.edu](mailto:ksericksen@nsu.edu)

**Jonathan M. Walker**, Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Living-Learning Communities at Norfolk State University, [jmwalker@nsu.edu](mailto:jmwalker@nsu.edu)

## **Keywords**

student affairs, academic affairs, learning communities, collaboration



## THE VALUE OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS AND STUDENT AFFAIRS COLLABORATION: LIVING-LEARNING COMMUNITIES AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Kirsten S. Ericksen and Jonathan M. Walker

---

### **Abstract**

Too often Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) function and operate in silos when addressing the academic and social needs of students. Many departments within universities tend to stay in their own lanes and want others to do the same. Both groups realize that collaboration is vital to the success of the institution, but faculty are overwhelmed with the demands of teaching assignments and student affairs professionals are challenged to meet the many demands and needs of students, so the two groups never unite. Acknowledging that a great deal of time and energy is required for true collaboration; the units fail to allocate time to discuss how both groups can best support students' success. In a time of diminishing resources and a move toward performance based funding, it is important for HBCUs to reconsider educational reform efforts that will positively impact retention and graduate rates. Each group (academic affairs and student affairs) has a unique approach to reaching these goals and when they work together, the results will ultimately promote graduation and increase retention.

### **Introduction**

Why do we seek professions in the higher education system? The answer, in part, most likely includes the altruistic goal of working with students and having them achieve their goal of graduation and proceeding on the path to their professional careers. Both faculty and student affairs professionals relate to this goal/experience. Too often HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) function and operate in silos and decentralized efforts to support students in achieving their goals. We "stay in our lanes". While we realize collaboration is vital to the success of the institution, often times faculty are bogged with teaching full course loads and student affairs professionals wear many hats to fill institutional needs. We also acknowledge the time and energy required for true collaboration and time necessary to discuss how both groups can support student success. In a time of diminishing resources and a move towards performance based funding, it is important for HBCUs to reconsider educational reform efforts that will positively impact retention and graduation rates.

Both groups (academic and student affairs) have a unique approach to reaching these goals and ultimately success equals graduation for students. The challenge becomes what does the path to success look like? Is it the same for all students? Are there some things that could be done better than others? Are there some experiences that can influence this path to success and maybe even make it easier? Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) have shown a positive impact on the success of students through the collaboration of academic and student affairs.

Living-Learning Communities includes students who live in a themed residence hall (related to a specific content area, i.e. social and economic justice), enroll in common courses, and participate in academically and intellectually engaging learning activities designed for the

cohort (service learning, mentoring, student organizations, trips, etc.). LLCs help students create a strong link between their lives in the residence hall and learning experiences in the classroom. LLC participants have a unique living experience and meaningful co-curricular activities. It is through these experiences that students develop effective skills for productive lives beyond graduation. Some of these skills include relationship building, appropriate interactions and effective problem solving. LLCs are considered a high-impact educational practice (Brower and Inkelas, 2010), adding the beneficial component of retention for students. Kuh (2008) asserted that high impact practices encourage student engagement. The pairing between faculty and student affairs leads to high impact practices that benefit students!

Tinto (2003) supported the importance of a living-learning collaboration in order to promote a shared learning experience. Involvement in Living-Learning Communities supports student success. Faculty and/or student interactions help students feel supported academically and socially (Brower and Inkelas, 2010). These findings support the value of collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs to develop Living-Learning Communities. While a number of studies suggested positive student outcomes regarding LLC participation (Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, and Leonard, 2008; National Study of Living-Learning Programs, 2004; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005), limited research has discussed the LLC experience and outcomes at a HBCU. This is in part due to the lack of LLC program offerings at HBCUs.

Stebleton and Aleixo (2011) suggested more high-impact practices for underserved populations are needed. In fact, Carey-Butler and Myrick-Harris (2008) suggested the recent enrollment management challenges at HBCUs have influenced the lack of support for multifaceted student engagement. Several factors contributed to the successful implementation of a collaborative experience for students, specifically in the development of a living-learning community to promote a holistic approach for sophomore students. Interestingly, Palmer and Gasman (2008) found the history and mission of an HBCU lend a natural amount of social capital (student engagement) and therefore these institutions are poised for student engagement. This suggested that HBCUs may already be practicing high student engagement behaviors and additional high-impact practices might be easier to incorporate due to the current level of acceptance. For institutions (particularly HBCUs) looking to implement LLCs, the following suggestions may provide an effective structure:

**Supportive Administration.** Supportive administration is critical for the success of collaboration efforts.

As Arcelus (2011) suggested “we must be intentional about creating opportunities, rewards, networks, and structures to bridge the cultural divide” (p. 79). It is apparent that intentionality is imperative for success and all must support these efforts.

Institutional resources to support engaging efforts are thought to help increase the implementation of various campus high-impact practices (Carey-Butler and Myrick-Harris, 2008).

This suggests support from administration is necessary for success. A supportive environment encourages interactions, discussions, and adaptations. One way to encourage this collaboration is to focus on students and their particular needs. The chief academic and student affairs officers must express a willingness to partner to ensure LLCs are successful. Once buy-in is established from the top (administration), it will filter down to faculty and staff.

**Advisory Group.** An advisory committee or board is essential to the implementation of a living-learning program. This body should serve as advocates or champions that can assist in creating and sustaining campus buy-in and providing recommendations for resolve when faced with obstacles. This entity should encompass a broad array of constituents such as representatives from enrollment management (admissions and registrar), faculty from the

institution's schools/colleges, student affairs professionals, and most importantly students. It is important to be strategic about who serves on the advisory committee. Committee members should have the authority to make decisions during meetings without having to report up the chain of command. An advisory committee can also ensure the program is aligned with best practices.

**Planning Team.** Once a new LLC proposal has been identified or approved a planning team should be established to oversee the LLC's progression from conception to fruition. This team should include student affairs professionals, faculty and should also incorporate students. Both academic and student affairs can contribute to program planning. Student affairs professionals spend a great deal of time with the students outside the classroom therefore they can offer valuable insights into some of the student needs beyond academics. Students offer their unique perspective to encourage student involvement and support.

**Faculty-Staff Learning Community.** The planning team should become a part of a greater learning community including other faculty and student affairs professionals participating or developing a LLC. They then mimic a learning community by exchanging ideas with others throughout the year during monthly focused meetings, sharing their own successes and failures. During the establishment of this faculty-staff learning community a supportive environment can be created/developed through team building activities like those for the student LLCs. These activities increase the level of comfort and bonding between the members leading to more sharing and involvement. This also increases opportunities for collaboration as some may express similar co-curricular programming ideas.

**Establishing Campus Buy-in.** Working with existing programs on-campus already encompassing components of the LLC model can assist with recruiting new faculty to participate. The institution used a STEM Honors program that existed on campus for more than ten years as a model LLC to replicate. In addition, the piloted program was the Honors College, which hosted a number of co-curricular activities in the residence hall throughout the year. These key individuals can promote the benefits of the LLC experience to additional faculty through sharing of experiences.

**Team Teaching.** Team teaching is paramount to the LLC model, exemplifying a true partnership between academic and student affairs. Teaching faculty and student affairs professionals alternate days of the week and cover specific content in the course. For example, student affairs professionals are experts in the life skills portion of the course while faculty focus on specific content (for example literature). In this manner, the area of expertise for each group, faculty and student affairs professionals, is highlighted and enhance the students' educational experience.

### **Communication**

Effective communication is essential. Learning the appropriate terminology between academic and student affairs shows an appreciation for the others profession and a willingness to learn about their expertise. Faculty at one institution had a practice of referring to the antiquated term "dorm" but now use "residence hall" as a result of the shared knowledge between the two groups. One main necessity in the success of collaboration between academic and student affairs is the mindset of the individuals involved. As a united group the intentional terminology "we" helps solidify the understanding of working together. Being open to learning, brainstorming, discussion, and change is imperative to develop a cohesive, unified approach to reach students in the best manner possible. These are closely related to the idea of effective communication.

Arcelus (2011) referred to the importance of intergroup (between groups) and intragroup (within groups) discussion that supports the idea of effective communication and willingness to

learn from each other. Interactions within and between groups need to be communicated clearly for the desired outcome. Similarly, the value of intergroup dialogue has been associated with greater understanding and appreciation of social justice (Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, and Cytron-Walker, 2007). This modeling of effective communication further demonstrates and enhances the value of true collaboration to students.

### **Strengths-Based Approach**

Lopez and Louis (2009) assert that strengths-based education leads to high levels of engagement and productivity. The strengths perspective suggests taking the best of what each group has to offer to develop an effective, successful student. Furthermore, it is finding the strength/positive in any given situation and choosing to build on this to move forward. This collaboration leads to the most effective use of strengths and a more comprehensive understanding of the students' needs. The shared perspective on collaboration is that neither student affairs nor faculty alone has the ability to reach all aspects of student's development but instead together they can provide a holistic approach to student development (Brown, 2011) which is essential in the current global environment.

Within the framework of a strengths-based perspective, academic affairs contributes to the content knowledge for courses, integration of content into co-curricular activities, academic abilities of the students, and the creative methods to teach the content. In regards to student affairs, knowledge of the system, effective co-curricular events, areas that influence students: relationships, outside classroom dynamics and influences (residence hall programs, family impact, individual status, etc.), general skills necessary for success (time management, stress management, relationship, budgeting) are contributions to the collaboration. Together, these concepts can be incorporated into the curricular and co-curricular events to infuse the information and encourage ongoing avenues for growth. The more frequently students encounter the same information using different methods, the more likely the information will be retained and the more success they will experience increasing the retention of students. It may not be a surprise that limited resources can become a challenge in collaborative efforts. Some of these can include time, people power, and financial ability. These realities need to be addressed as they arise.

### **Conclusion**

In higher education we all have the same goal...to best prepare the next generation of students. When academic affairs and student affairs work together to embrace each other's strengths it is possible to develop tremendous support and strength for the success of the students including retention and better graduation rates. Collaborative partnerships can energize all involved individuals. It is exciting to be part of creating something to benefit students who will excel due to the experience. Living-Learning Communities are one of the proven high-impact endeavors that promote success in higher education (Kinzie, 2010; Kuh, 2008). Particularly, first-year students have reported having a smoother transition from high school to college as a result of participating in an LLC experience (Stassen, 2003). First-year students enrolled in a piloted program at an HBCU indicated that because of their participation in an LLC, their awareness of on-campus resources were improved in addition to the enhancement of the quality of their overall experience at the University. Furthermore, participants stated the LLC experience impacted their interest in continuing their education at the institution. As one LLC participant shared, "Overall, participating in a LLC has been truly rewarding! Although I am only a rising sophomore, I feel connected to the University, I am knowledgeable about the various campus resources, and have built strong relationships with key faculty and staff within the campus community. Participating in a LLC, has allowed me to easily work with my peers on

classroom assignments and form effective study groups.” We offer these recommendations in hopes that other institutions, particularly HBCUs, consider this valuable collaboration at your institution.

### References

- Arcelus, V. (2011). If student affairs-academic affairs collaboration is such a good idea, why are there so few examples of these partnerships in American Higher Education? Transforming Our Approach to Education: Cultivating Partnerships and Dialogue, *Contested issues in Student Affairs: Diverse Perspectives and Respectful Dialogue*, Stylus Publishing, LLC., Retrieved: <http://contestedissues.wordpress.com/>
- Brower, A.M., & Inkelas, K.K. (2010). Living-learning One high-impact educational practice. *Liberal Education*, 36-43.
- Brown, R.D. (2011). Educating the whole student: Our heritage and future challenges. *ACPA Developments*, 9(1).
- Carey-Butler, S. & Myrick-Harris, C. (2008). Faculty’s Role in student success: Engagement in and outside the classroom, Faculty Resource Network, New York University.
- Inkelas, K. K., Soldner, M., Longerbeam, S. D., & Leonard, J. B. (2008). Differences in student outcomes by types of living-learning programs: The development of an empirical typology. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 49(1), 495-512. doi: 10.1007/s11162-008-9087-6.
- Kinzie, J. (2010). Student engagement and learning: Experiences that matter. In *Taking Stock: Research on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (139-153).
- Kuh, G.D. (2008). High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Lopez, S. & Louis, M. (2009). The principles of strengths-based education. *Journal of College Character*, 5(4), 1-8.
- National Study of Living-Learning Programs (2004). *Report of findings*. Retrieved From [http://www.livelearnstudy.net/images/NSLLP\\_2004\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.livelearnstudy.net/images/NSLLP_2004_Final_Report.pdf)
- Palmer, R. & Gasman, M. (2008). It takes a village to raise a child: The role of social capital in promoting academic success for African American men at a black college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(1), 52-70.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Stassen, M. L. (2003). Student outcomes: The impact of varying living-learning community models. *Research in Higher Education*, 44(5), 581-612.
- Stebbleton, M., & Aleixo, M. (2011). Reflecting on the past: Shaping the future of student affairs, *CSPA-NYS Journal of Student Affairs*, 11(2), 6-26.
- Tinto, V. (2003). Learning better together: The impact of learning communities on student success. *Promoting Student Success in College*, 1-8.
- Zuniga, X. Nagda, B., Chesler, M. & Cytron-Walker, A. (2007). Intergroup dialogue in higher education: meaningful learning about social justice, *ASHE Higher Education Report* 32(4), Wiley Periodicals, Inc. A Wiley Company, John Wiley & Sons Inc., Hoboken, NJ.