

Learning Communities: What Does the Research State?

While College of DuPage has had success in expanding enrollment numbers, we still struggle with challenges such as low retention and low rates of graduation, which are typical at commuter campus community colleges. Further, given our size and complexity, many students find themselves somewhat lost and detached, looking for ways to engage with each other and the institution. LCs can help to alleviate these problems and add other positive aspects to the learning process for COD students.

LC Research on a National Level

Overall, an impressive evidence base has been amassed in support of learning communities as a means of fostering deeper, integrated learning and enhancing student persistence and success. Much of this research can be found at The Washington Center at the Evergreen State University: <http://wacenter.evergreen.edu/research-on-lcs>.

A 2004 study by Chun-Mei Zhao and George D. Kuh examined the relationships between participating in learning communities and student engagement in a range of educationally purposeful activities of first-year and senior students from 365 4-year institutions. Their findings indicate that participating in a LC is positively correlated to engagement as well as student self-reported outcomes and overall satisfaction with college. The authors summarize their findings by stating that

Participating in learning communities is uniformly and positive linked with student academic performance, engagement in educationally fruitful activities (such as academic integration, active and collaborative learning, and interaction with faculty members), gains associated with college attendance, and overall satisfaction with the college experience. (132 - 133)

LCs at COD

Recently, we have been reviewing the qualitative and quantitative data that we have for COD specifically to demonstrate similar benefits and patterns as those seen in the national data sets. We have attempted to examine the institutional persistence and retention data, as well as collecting both qualitative and quantitative assessment of students' impressions of the courses.

Qualitative and Quantitative Assessments of Student's impressions of LC courses:

We have collected feedback from students regarding their experiences in LCs, using both our own survey and an online survey developed and normed by The Washington Center, starting in Fall of 2014.

Online Survey of Student Engagement: Fall 2014 – Spring 2015:

When filling out the survey, students were asked to complete a series of scaled items about their experiences in and impressions of their LC course. Items used a Likert type scale where they indicated how often their LC course fulfilled a list of criteria important or common to the design of LC courses. The results for each semester are summarized below.

Fall 2014

In general, we find that for most questions in the Fall surveys, the majority of students responded either “Often” or “Very Often”, suggesting that the LCs surveyed were achieving some success in promoting student engagement and student learning. Some questions that received lower responses may be affected by course design; for example, 10 students noted that they never did peer review of their work during class, which may be due to such activities not being part of the course.

Of particular note are the high responses to questions such as

- Reflect on how these connections lead to new insights or understandings (29 out of 33)
- Use what I am learning to contribute to another class (24 out of 33)
- Think critically and analytically (25 out of 33)
- Work effectively with others to complete assignments/projects (28 out of 33)
- Identify the learning strategies that are most effective for me (24 out of 33)
- Take responsibility for my own learning (29 out of 33)

Spring 2015

As before, the responses for a significant number of questions fall in the “Often” or “Very Often” categories. However, the responses do vary somewhat more widely than the Fall surveys, due to lower numbers of students responding. It is possible that these results will only be assessing one particular LC.

Learning Communities Evaluation Form: Fall 2016 – Spring 2018

In Fall of 2016 the decision was made to adjust the data collection process. One change that was made is that in place of the online surveys. As stated above, surveys were initially administered online at the end of the semester. However, due to low response rates with the online format (a common challenge with online survey administration), starting in Fall 2016 surveys were administered in paper format during one of the last class meetings of the year (a date chosen in each class based on the needs of the instructor and the course).

This change in format also gave us the opportunity to reevaluate the questions being asked of our students, and a decision was made to focus the survey more specifically to reflect the questions related to the LC program here at COD. One goal of the assessment is to increase the appeal of LC courses and to appropriately advertise and recruit students into these courses. Thus, much of the survey seeks to find out how students came to enroll in an LC and what appealed to them about it (as well as what they found challenging). Of particular interest for this report are several questions that pertain to student engagement and the perceptions of the personal benefits of LC courses.

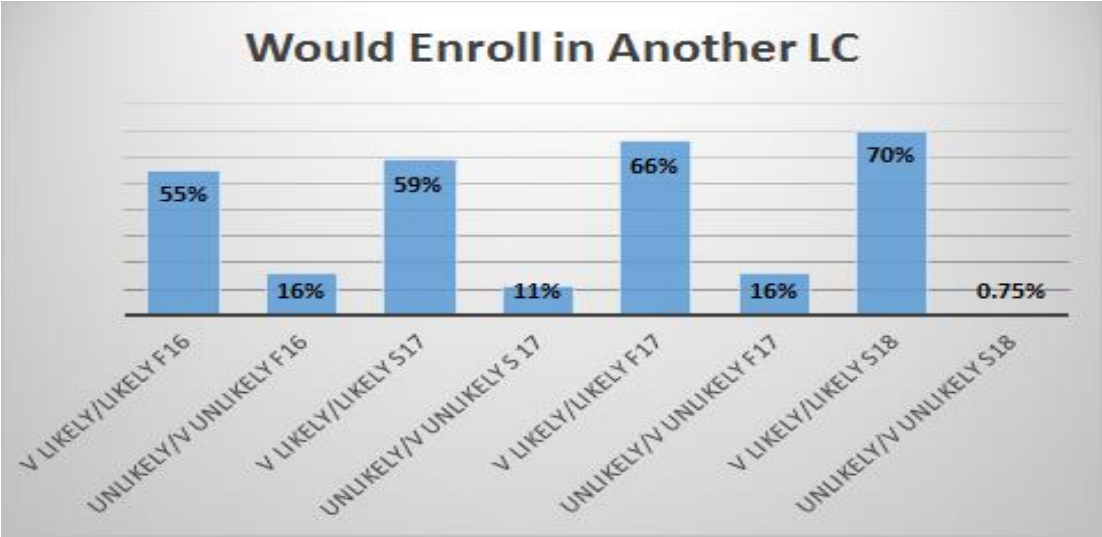
One question was “Now that you’ve nearly completed this semester, what did you find most valuable about taking courses in a Learning Community format?” Students were given 4 response options and were instructed to circle all answers that applied. These response options reflect some of the most important elements of LC courses.

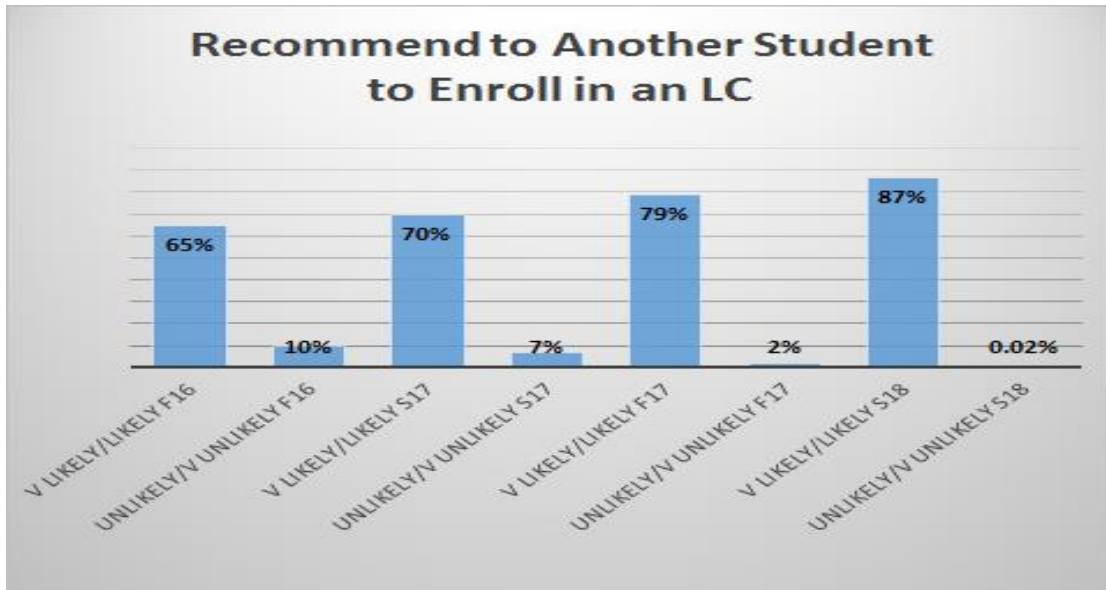
LC Course Characteristics Students Found Most Valuable			
N = no. of surveys returned	Spring 2017 (N = 38)	Fall 2017 (N = 111)	Spring 2018 (N = 46)
Integration of course subjects and material	25 (66%)	74(67%)	31(67%)
Greater interaction between myself and my classmates	30 (79%)	69 (62%)	26(56%)
Greater interaction between myself and my professors	15 (39%)	53(48%)	21(46%)
Integrated/overlapping coursework (common assignments, texts, exams, etc.)	18 (47%)	55(50%)	20(43%)

Notes: Our Fall 2016 version of the survey posed this prompt as an open-ended question; thus, no clear numbers emerged. We adjusted the question for subsequent surveys. Because students could choose more than one response, the total number of responses exceeds the number of students who completed the survey in each semester

Another question of interest pertains to the students’ willingness to enroll in an additional LC course and to recommend such courses to other students. It can be assumed that students who viewed their LC courses as more enjoyable or valuable are going to be more likely to repeat the experience or to recommend it to other students.

For the question “How likely would you be to enroll in another Learning Community?” and “How likely would you be to recommend to another student to enroll in a Learning Community?” the data is presented in two form. The graphs shows the comparison between the combined affirmative responses (very likely and likely were combined) and the negative responses (unlikely and very unlikely). For visual simplicity, neutral responses (not sure) are excluded from this graph. However, the specific counts for each of the five response options are available in the tables that follow.





Would You Enroll in Another Learning Community?

	Very Likely	Likely	Not Sure	Unlikely	Very Unlikely	Total
Fall 2016 (n = 53)	11	16	14	5	3	53
Spring 2017 (n = 38)	10	16	7	4	1	38
Fall 2017 (n = 111)	40	34	29	17	1	111
Spring 2018 (n = 46)	12	16	9	0	3	46
Fall 2018 (n = 40)	8	16	6	5	1	36
Spring 2019 (n = 49)	23	18	2	1	5	49

Would You Recommend to Another Student to Enroll in a Learning Community?

	Very Likely	Likely	Not Sure	Unlikely	Very Unlikely	Total
Fall 2016	14	18	12	2	3	53
Spring 2017	12	14	4	3	0	38
Fall 2017	44	44	17	3	0	111

Spring 2018	25	14	5	0	1	46
Fall 2018	19	11	3	4	2	39
Spring 2019	30	11	3	2	3	49

As can be seen in both the graphs and tables, even though many students a large majority of students are finding the experience in their LC courses rewarding enough not only to consider taking another but encouraging other students to do so as well. For the majority of the students, the course they were enrolled in when completing this survey was their first LC course (49, 34, 91, and 40 respectively).

Interestingly, when asked if they were aware of what LCs were when enrolling in the class, the majority of students were not clear on what makes something an LC course. Students were given the response choices of yes, no, and not sure. Across the four years, between 60 and 80 percent of the students gave an answer of no or not sure. This suggests that even though most students are not enrolling in LC courses purposefully, a majority see value in these kinds of courses.

In addition to the quantitative data, at the end of the survey students were given an open-ended item where they could share their general impressions of the LC course. To get a general impression of students' responses to the LC model broadly, we reviewed the open-ended responses and separated the general comments from the course specific comments which referenced the topics, assignments, or instructor of a particular LC course. The general comments on the surveys were extremely positive. (The only critical comments given at all were in the group of course specific comments, and those were very much in the minority of those responses). Many of the general comments speak directly to the power of LCs to foster a greater sense of belonging at the college. Below are a selection of these open-ended responses:

- LCs help you understand the subject a bit better, connecting it to books and real life
- Lots of amazing perspectives and discussions
- It is great! You're able to tie together all of the coursework and complete multiple classes during one period
- I loved that what we did in one class helped me in the other class
- Incredibly engaging. Every class should be in this format!
- Learning communities are valuable and help classmates get to know each other unlike my 50 minute classes.
- I like that there is a great chance to bond with peers and professors.
- I really see the value in learning communities because you get a lot more out of them than just taking the classes separately.
- I think it's helpful to have integrated material because it gives a better insight on the information at hand.
- They are very heavy work-wise, but I've never learned more about the same subject in one semester before
- I think they are great and very helpful to have two classes that were together, so it made my first semester easier and prepared me for the rest of my college experience.

- The design of the learning communities format should be applied to regular courses as the integration of those courses helped me to apply the information I learned to my work.
- I would highly recommend anyone to take a learning communities course because it exposes you to more than you would be provided with in a regular course.
- They rock! They allow for a better understanding of the way real world topic/work because of the crossover of info. They make you feel like you've mastered a topic more due to time spent in class.
- I enjoyed getting to know my classmates very well and working with them
- It was overall a good learning experience for myself and what I value
- It definitely had more of a family feel than any other class
- This has been one of the best classes I have been in and I feel like I have really taken in a lot from this

As this data suggests, in each semester, a large percentage of students found the LC experience engaging enough to want to enroll in another one. Even more, a considerably high number of students would be inclined to tell other students to enroll, thus increasing the appeal of these offerings through one of the most influential sources—their peers.

Quantitative Analysis of Institutional Data:

While one goal of our data analysis is to demonstrate directly the impact of LC course participation on retention and persistence, past the current time we do not have the quantitative data to be able to evaluate whether our outcomes in these areas mimic the national data trends. Our use of the Institutional data is limited by the small sample sizes of students in the LC courses as compared to large number of students who have taken other courses. Even in the semesters with the largest number of LC students, these are comparisons between hundreds of students and thousands of students. Thus, a direct comparison of persistence or retention is not feasible at this time.

What we have been able to establish using the institutional data that is part of the college's AQIP accreditation process that began in 2006. Quality Improvement Project (QIP) #6B examined first time/first term student retention looking at a single LC; within term and Fall to Fall terms, retention was both reported at over 92%. Overall, within-term retention is also strong across LC courses for the four most recent semesters.

In-Term Retention Rates:

Term	10th Day Enrollment	End of Semester Enrollment	In-Term Retention Rate
Fall 2016	94	80	85%
Spring 2017	75	71	95%
Fall 2017	182	156	83%
Spring 2018	66	62	93%
Fall 2018	63	52	82%
Spring 2019	83	75	90%

Respectfully submitted (May 2019),

The Learning Community Committee

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Works Cited

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