LEARNING COMMUNITIES AS A RETENTION AND PERSISTENCE STRATEGY

Key Question: How well are learning communities supporting students’ retention and persistence?

Retention and persistence studies provide some of the most critical information needed to determine how well students are meeting milestones along their pathways to completion. These studies and the resulting information are often the backbone of a viable strategic enrollment management (SEM) plan (Dolence, 1993; Tinto, 1999). An SEM model contains five main pillars: 1) college readiness, 2) marketing and recruitment, 3) retention and persistence, 4) completion and success, and 5) post-college follow up. This brief focuses on the third pillar: Retention and Persistence.

Retention (completion of a course with any grade notation), and persistence (typically either continuous enrollment from one term to the next, or from fall term to fall term) are key indicators of the impact of cohort-focused interventions and support services such as those found in many learning communities can be. Although the structure of learning communities vary from college to college, this pervasive enrollment management strategy comprises both cohort strategies and support services that are largely focused on retention and persistence. Since most colleges have invested substantial resources into developing and sustaining learning communities, it stands to reason that good evidence is needed to support the impact on student retention, and success.

Understanding which learning community has the greatest impact, on which population of students can provide information for effectively replicating a successful learning community, both its content and its social structure. For example, what is it about a particular learning community that makes it so effective with a particular population of students? Which wrap-around support services are the most impactful? Which cluster of courses is most or least effective? Which populations of students gravitate to learning community environments? And which tend to stay away?

At one college in Southern California, the number and variety of learning communities has grown exponentially in the past ten years, and has proven effective as an SEM strategy. This increase has led to the need to conduct deeper analyses in order to uncover the impact of learning community participation on completion. Since one of the key objectives of learning communities is to increase student engagement and to promote a sense of belonging, evaluating the impact of these learning communities has become integral to improving student retention. San Diego City College in Southern California produces a benchmark report on their learning communities each year that contains information on enrollment and outcomes, with comparisons among all of the learning communities at their college, and to non-learning community cohorts.
1) How to identify the learning community cohort.
   a. Identify the common link shared by students in order to qualify them as a learning community. Typically, this will include either a set of clustered classes or a specific program (e.g., MESA, FYE, Puente or DSPS). If there is no existing data flag for the cohort, it will be necessary to obtain the student IDs of those in the cohort (e.g., when learning community classes include non-learning community students). For students who are enrolled and/or participate in multiple learning communities, you will need to make the decision as to whether or not to include them in each learning community of which they are members, or assign them to only one learning community based on a particular set of criteria. For example, a student who is in an FYE cohort may also participate in Puente and receive DSPS services. Determining which cohort to place them into will likely be guided by the questions you are seeking to answer through the research. It is also possible to group learning communities and then disaggregate according to the bundle of learning communities in which the student participates (e.g., FYE students that receive EOPS services, or MESA students that receive DSPS services).

2) How to conduct disaggregated headcount and enrollment analyses of learning community cohorts.
   a. Obtain learning community cohort data and analyze enrollment and outcome trends. Disaggregate on equity variables.
   b. Access multiple terms of raw data or data tables on your learning community cohorts (headcount, enrollment, demographics, grades, retention rates, success rates and persistence rates) either via your local college source (e.g., research office), or, if available, an external source such as the Chancellor’s Office website, or CalPASS Plus.
   c. Once you have your dataset or data tables, note term over term, as well as first term to last term difference including proportional changes by the demographic variables. Begin to answer the research questions about where the changes or differences have occurred. It is always a good idea to share this information with the subject matter experts (e.g., faculty or learning community coordinators), in order to help explain anecdotally the changes you uncover. For example, a learning community coordinator or faculty might be able to explain the trends as a result of program budget cuts, increase in outreach, or recent addition of support services.
   d. Report the average percent of total college headcount or enrollment by learning community to determine scope or impact on the total population of students, and don’t forget the percent change over time.
   e. Report the average percent and percent change by ethnicity, gender, and age compared to the non-learning community students to determine proportionality and the populations being served.

3) How to conduct disaggregated retention and persistence analyses of learning community cohorts.
   a. Retention rates are calculated quite simply by using the total number of students who received a grade other than W-withdraw, and dividing this by the total number of students enrolled as of first census. Retention rates can be further disaggregated based on gender, ethnicity, age or any other variable in which you can group students. Examining retention rates for a learning community cohort would follow the same simple calculation.
   b. Persistence rates go one step further than retention rates by examining the term to term (fall to spring) or annual (fall to spring to fall) continuous enrollment. In other words, if a student completes a fall term and subsequently enrolls in the spring term, this could be factored as term persistence. The persistence rates require tracking students from term to term, which involves matching students on a common
identifier (e.g., student college ID numbers, SSN, or student address) across the terms. A cohort of learning community students could be compared to a cohort of non-learning community students by flagging the students as such, and then tracking them across terms for comparison purposes. Further disaggregation can be done by age, gender, ethnicity or other demographic variables to determine disproportional impact (see the ASK Disproportionate Impact brief for more information on methods for determining disproportionate impact).

(c) Once you have the retention and/or persistence rates for your learning community cohort, examine the highest rates and lowest rates to help target best practice strategies and interventions, and areas for improvement.

(d) For those learning communities that have a specific subject or discipline focus (e.g., MESA), track the cohort persistence rates within the targeted course(s), and compare to non-learning community students in the same courses. For example, cohorts that are enrolled in a prerequisite English class, can be tracked for persistence or subsequent enrollment into the college or transfer level English class.

4) **How to share disaggregated results of learning community cohorts.**

   a. Once you have results from your research on learning community cohorts, it’s important to share with stakeholder groups. You will find that sharing the information can yield some interesting and important insights into your research that you may not have considered.

   b. Sharing the research result via a collaborative inquiry approach in which the discussion is structured, inclusive and purposefully facilitated for taking action is often the best approach. This approach allows for a focused discussion, yet one that strives to bring in diverse perspectives. Preparing some guiding questions that beforehand, along with a logical sequence of information that answers the important questions will generally yield a productive conversation.
References


San Diego Community College Distinct Learning Communities Report: http://research.sdccd.edu/Student-Outcomes/miscellaneous.cfm

Taking Student Retention Seriously: Rethinking the First Year of College, V. Tinto (1999).