

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Good Practices of Living-learning Programmes

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ABSTRACT

This summary is based on a keynote presentation on living-learning programmes and research from the National Study of Living-Learning Programmes (NSLLP) at the 7th International Conference on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (TLHE 2014) organized by the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning, National University of Singapore (NUS). Topics reviewed include the reasons behind the resurgence of living-learning programmes (LLPs) in the United States, the characteristics of contemporary LLPs, empirical evidence regarding LLP effectiveness, a best practices model developed by the NSLLP, and recommendations for institutions interested in assessing their LLP offerings.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 20th and early 21st century, living-learning programmes (LLPs) became very popular on U.S. college and university campuses as American post-secondary institutions struggled to find ways to address public sentiment that the quality of undergraduate education—particularly at large public universities—was eroding. At such large universities, in which students were taking lecture classes with large enrolments, such classes were often taught by adjunct faculty or graduate students, and the tenured/tenure-track faculty were perceived as being much more invested in their own research than to teaching and mentoring students (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2002; Boyer Commission, 1998; Kellogg Commission, 2000). Meanwhile, tuition costs at U.S. post-secondary institutions continued to increase every year, often outpacing the cost of living and inflation rates (Vedder, 2004). In turning to LLPs as the “miracle cure” that will improve the quality of undergraduate education, U.S. higher education attempted to fortify its present and future by looking to its past.

LLPs can be characterized broadly as residence hall-based undergraduate programmes with a particular topical or academic theme (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011). Because they strive to make seamless the in-and out-of-class experience for college students, LLPs are purported to be the ultimate learning experience, attributed with the lofty ability to help students: 1) make a successful transition from home to college; 2) facilitate better academic achievement and retention; and 3) improve student learning and development (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). Moreover, LLPs were identified as a type of “high impact practice” by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, or teaching and learning practices widely believed to be beneficial for college students from diverse backgrounds (Kuh, 2008).

Yet, the concept of LLPs is hardly new: in fact, their lineage can be traced back to the residential colleges of Tudor England. Sometimes termed as the “Oxbridge” model (a combination of Oxford and Cambridge universities), residential colleges included a series of boarding complexes, sometimes called “Houses” or “Colleges,” in which students and instructors alike lived, studied, worked, attended religious services, and socialized together as a community (Ryan, 1992). The residential colleges often offered full-service amenities, including lecture halls, dining rooms, a kitchen, a library, a chapel, unions, common outdoor spaces, athletic fields, and sleeping quarters, so that students in those Houses or Colleges could be fully immersed with their college experiences without ever having to leave their facilities (Alexander, 1998).

The residential college model is still alive and well in contemporary times. For example, Oxford University still runs 38 self-governing Colleges, to which all teaching staff and students belong to at least one. Yale University in the U.S. established residential colleges in the 1930s, and 12 are in operation today. All incoming first year students at Yale are assigned to one of the residential colleges, and each has a tenured faculty member serving as a Master or Dean. Finally, the National University of Singapore (NUS) offers several residential college experiences: three University Town residential programmes (Tembusu College, the College of Alice and Peter Tan, and Residential College 4); the University Scholars Programme (Cinnamon College); and the Ridge View Residential College. In collaboration with Yale University, the NUS ecosystem is also home to Yale-NUS College that provides a fully residential Asia-focused liberal arts educational experience.

Yet, contemporary LLPs encompass so much more than simply the residential college model. This paper contextualizes the state of the modern living-learning programmes, including characteristics of today's LLPs, evidence of LLP effectiveness in facilitating student outcomes, qualities of effective LLPs, and recommended strategies for assessing LLPs.

THE NATIONAL STUDY OF LIVING-LEARNING PROGRAMMES

Before I turn to a summary, however, it is important to briefly describe the study from which I obtained my data. From 1999-2009, I served as the Principal Investigator for the National Study of Living-Learning Programmes (NSLLP), a longitudinal, mixed methods study of U.S. living-learning programmes. The purpose of the NSLLP was twofold: 1) to develop a multi-institutional database of research on LLPs in order to begin a more comprehensive study on a national scale; and 2) to improve practice by providing LLP staff with empirical data about connections between their work and student outcomes. Through generous support from the National Science Foundation, the Association of College and University Housing Officers International, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, and the American College Personnel Association, the NSLLP included four major data collections. The pilot study took place in 2003 on four U.S. college campuses (all large public universities) and included 5,437 students. The goals of the pilot study were to test the reliability and validity of an original survey instrument developed for the NSLLP, and to test different data collection methods. The first national data collection occurred in 2004, encompassing 34 universities and 23,910 students (half of whom lived in a living-learning programme and half who lived in a traditional residence hall setting). There were 297 LLPs represented in the 2004 NSLLP, and survey data collected included

questionnaire responses from students and programme information from LLP staff. In 2007, the second national data collection was administered, this time including 46 institutions, 617 LLPs, and 22,258 students (half LLP and half traditional students). The 2007 NSLLP also included a longitudinal follow-up of 1,509 students from the 2004 data collection. Finally, in 2008, the NSLLP conducted site visits at four universities: the four campuses chosen had students who reported the highest average outcomes from the 2007 survey data.

The conceptual framework on which the NSLLP was based was Astin's (1993) Inputs-Environments-Outcomes model, which asserts that student outcomes (e.g., learning) are influenced by both student inputs (i.e., student background characteristics) and college environments (the various educational experiences, practices, programs, or interventions that students come into contact with while in college). The NSLLP instrumentation studied several student outcomes, including students' transition to college, academic achievement, retention, and learning and development. It also accounted and controlled for multiple student inputs, such as students' background and demographic characteristics, their prior academic achievement, and incoming attitudes and values. Finally, in addition to an in-depth examination of living-learning environments, the NSLLP also queried students on other facets of their college experiences, such as their coursework, co- and extra-curricular activities, and leisure pursuits.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TODAY'S LLPs

Unlike the traditional British-based residential colleges, today's LLPs come in all shapes, sizes, and themes. Based on an analysis of over 600 LLPs in the 2007 NSLLP, the modal size of LLPs in the U.S. is 50 students. However, there are some LLPs with over 1,000 residents, and others with less than 10. In 2007, the average budget of LLPs was \$21,000 U.S. dollars, not including salaries. However, 10% of the LLPs in the NSLLP had no operating budget, and 25% had budgets under US\$1,000. Almost half of LLPs were overseen by Housing or Residence Life offices, while 15% were run by an academic department or unit, and 31% were collaboratively operated by a Housing/Academic partnership. Despite the presence of an academic unit in LLP oversight, there was not much faculty involvement in U.S. LLPs: 23% of LLPs in the NSLLP had no faculty involvement at all, and 64% included only one to three faculty members. On the other hand, 85% of LLPs in the NSLLP utilized Housing/Residence Life staff in some meaningful way, typically with administrative tasks, community issues, and participation in social events. Thus, today's LLPs bear only a surface resemblance to their residential college

forebears. Indeed, with the growing popularity of LLPs in the late 20th century and on into the 21st century, new and different living-learning themes have developed to the point where the NSLLP found 41 different types of LLPs in its 2007 data collection, which can be grouped into 17 thematic categories (see Figure 1).

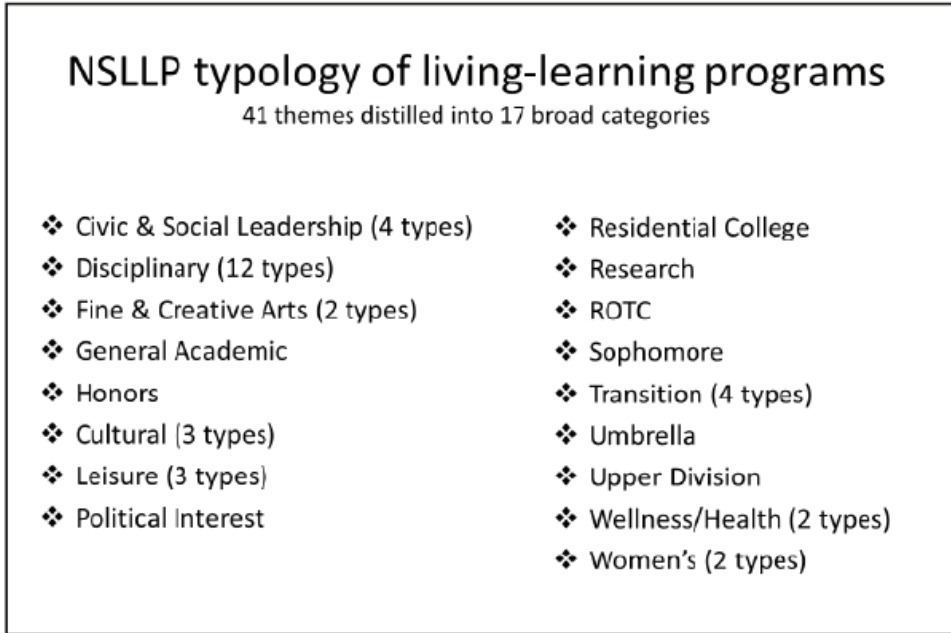


Figure 1. Thematic categories that characterize current LLPs.

EVIDENCE OF LLP INFLUENCES ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

With such a proliferation of LLPs, it begs the question as to whether these programmes are the “miracle cure” they have been purported to be. Despite what appears to be restricted budgets and faculty involvement in LLPs based on the NSLLP data, prior research has found limited evidence that LLP participation can lead to positive student academic and learning outcomes, such as stronger academic performance (Purdie, 2007; Stassen, 2003), increased retention (Pike, Schroder, & Berry, 1997; Purdie, 2007), self-perceived gains in intellectual development (Inkelas et al., 2006a, 2006b; Kohl, 2009; Pike, 1999), enhanced faculty interaction (Garrett & Zabriskie, 2003; Inkelas et al., 2006b), and a smooth transition to college (Inkelas & Associates, 2004; Inkelas & Associates, 2007). Moreover, LLP participation has been linked to non-academic outcomes as well, including: increased peer interaction (Inkelas et al., 2006a; Pike, 2002), positive perceptions of the residential hall

social climate (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Inkelas et al., 2006a, 2006b; Johnson et al., 2007), reduced alcoholic consumption (Brower, Golde, & Allen, 2003; Brower, 2008), appreciation of diversity (Inkelas et al., 2006b), and sense of civic engagement (Rowan-Kenyon, Soldner, & Inkelas, 2007).

However, with the exception of the NSLLP, most research on LLPs are single institution and often single programme studies with limited generalizability. Moreover, a closer examination of the extant research intimates that the strongest outcomes among LLP participants were related to traditional first-year activities typically associated with being a new college student in the U.S.: reductions in excessive alcohol consumption, interacting more with peers and faculty, and establishing a sense of belonging to the institution. On the other hand, LLP participants exhibited positive, but marginally better results in comparison to traditional residence hall students among the loftier student learning outcomes, such as: intellectual development, critical thinking, and love of lifelong learning. This is not to say that LLPs are ineffective: on the contrary, they work particularly well in helping new college students make the adjustment to college, a particularly important task at hand. However, given that LLPs were developed as a reaction to increasingly vocal concerns about the quality of undergraduate education and student learning, they may not be as successful in facilitating some of the higher-order intellectual goals.

QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE LLPS

The depth of the impact of LLPs on student outcomes notwithstanding, those who run LLPs are largely interested in identifying effective practices that are associated with student growth and development. Using the results from the two NSLLP survey data collections and the four-campus site visits, there were common traits among high-performing LLPs that formed the basis of a best practices model developed to guide program enhancement. The best practices model is based on the concept of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, which asserts that human transcendence toward self-actualization relies upon several needs that build upon one another. For example, in order to simply survive, humans need to attend to their physiological needs (food, sleep, air). Once those needs are met, they can focus on higher-order needs, such as safety, until they reach the highest-order needs that lead to self-actualization, such as morality and creativity. The hierarchy is often depicted as a pyramid, with higher-order needs built on top of more basic needs.

The NSLLP living-learning best practices model (see Figure 2) is similarly based on a pyramid, with "building blocks" representing LLP components that build upon one another, relying on previous layers for support.

LLP best practices building blocks

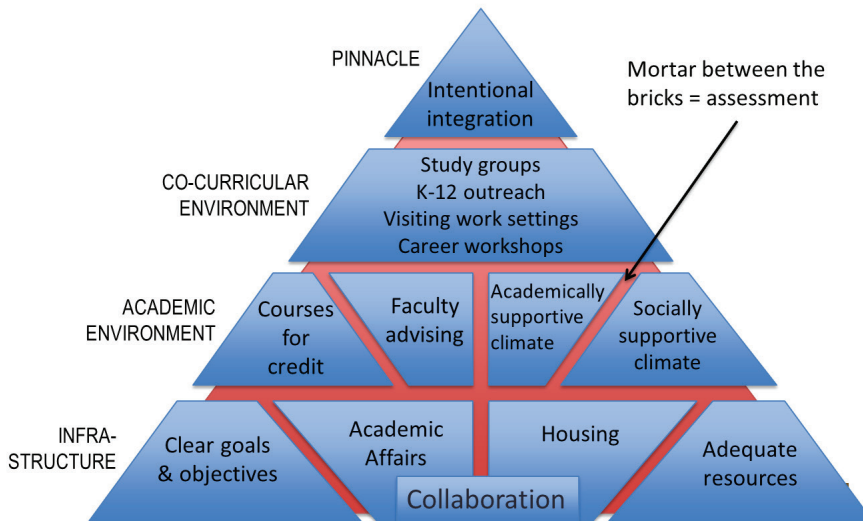


Figure 2. The NSLLP living-learning best practices model.

On the base layer (or what Maslow termed as “basic needs”), our model asserts that effective LLPs need to have a solid Infrastructure consisting of: 1) clear goals and objectives understood by faculty, staff, and students alike; 2) adequate resources; and 3) some type of formal collaborative organizational structure between the Housing/Residence Life Office and an academic department or unit. The next layer of the pyramid, the Academic Environment, cannot thrive without the support of the base layer, or Infrastructure. The Academic Environment consists of LLPs needing: 1) courses for credit, 2) faculty advising, and 3) an academically and socially supportive climate. We found that the academic mission of an LLP is fortified by official course offerings, and having for-credit courses increases the legitimacy with which students treat the significance of the class. We also found that, while students are interested in interacting with faculty, they tend to seek out faculty advice on traditional matters, such as course selection and assistance with assignments. Thus, we recommend that LLPs incorporate regular faculty advising in their programme offerings. Finally, in order for students to feel supported and comfortable in their surroundings so that intellectual activities can flourish, the residence hall climate needs to be academically and socially accommodating.

The third layer of the pyramid consists of the Co-Curricular Environment. Again, the Co-Curricular Environment relies upon the Academic Environment and consequently rests on top of the academic realm of the pyramid. While the most effective co-curricular activities are necessarily tailored to the theme, goals and objectives of each unique LLP, the NSLLP research findings showed that four co-curricular activities in particular were most often associated with stronger student outcomes: 1) participating in study groups, 2) outreach to area primary and secondary schools, 3) visiting work settings, and 4) workshops regarding career issues. The top of the pyramid, or the “Pinnacle”, is characterized as intentional integration, and concerns the extent to which all of the other blocks on the pyramid are coordinated with one another. It is simply not enough to sponsor an LLP with all of the “bells and whistles” (i.e., all of the other blocks on the pyramid); LLP staff should strive to have each element of the programme integrate with one another. For example, the instructors teaching the LLP courses could take advantage of the co-curricular activities sponsored by the programme. In addition, faculty advisors should dialogue with students on career issues and then recommend that they attend the career workshop. Finally, the “mortar between the bricks,” or the glue that holds the pyramid together is Assessment. LLPs must regularly and consistently assess their programming to ensure that their offerings are still having the impact they intend for their students.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES FOR ASSESSING LLPs

The mortar of the pyramid brings us to the question of how institutions should assess their LLP offerings. Here, the NSLLP can once again offer some guidance. The Astin (1993) Inputs-Environments-Outcomes conceptual framework that the NSLLP relied upon can be useful for any LLP assessment: the goals and objectives of the LLP should serve as the “outcomes” to be assessed. Naturally, the primary point of interest is the extent to which one particular “environment” (i.e., the living-learning programme) has an influence on the “outcomes,” but institutions and programmes should keep in mind that students do not simply live in a living-learning “bubble:” they also participate in a myriad of other college environments unrelated to the LLP (e.g., different peers, classes, organizations) that could also affect the same set of outcomes. Finally, a strong assessment would also control for student background characteristics (or “inputs”) that would affect students’ “outcomes” as well as how they might participate in their college “environments.”

The second recommendation based on the NSLLP’s research design is to utilize a quasi-experimental design when assessing one’s living-learning programmes. Like a true experiment, quasi-experimental designs investigate

the effect of an intervention by having one group (the experiment group) experience the intervention while the other (the control group) does not, and then comparing the outcomes of each group. However, the two groups (experimental and control) in quasi-experimental designs, unlike true experiments, are not randomly selected. Indeed, most institutions cannot randomly determine which of their students will participate in a LLP and which will not. Thus, instead, the best alternative is to select a control group that matches the LLP group's demographic and academic characteristics to the best extent possible. Using a quasi-experimental design is strongly recommended when the purpose of an LLP assessment is to demonstrate the "value-added" aspect of the programme, or extra benefits conferred to living-learning participants that typical, traditional residence hall students may not receive.

Finally, the mixed method research design of the NSLLP proved to be beneficial in generating data to understand the living-learning effect from different perspectives. The student survey provided a broadbrush depiction of student outcomes and how undergraduates experience their LLPs as well as other college environments. The LLP staff programme information survey allowed us to learn more about the structural and organizational aspects of the programmes that students may not fully recognize and thus could not respond to reliably on a survey. In addition, the qualitative case studies offered a deeper glimpse into high-functioning LLPs that no large quantitative data collection could ever provide. Together, these different types of data collections allowed the NSLLP to view the living-learning experience from multiple vantage points, which ultimately led to our ability to develop the best practices building blocks model (Figure 2). Therefore, LLPs interested in assessing their own effects should consider using several different data collection techniques—whether it be a combination of surveys, interviews or focus groups, observations, and/or document reviews.

CONCLUSION

Although LLPs were developed in the late 20th century as a way for U.S. colleges and universities to address public criticism of their undergraduate educational offerings, they are not a panacea for all that ails higher education. Similarly, LLPs have come a long way from their residential college predecessors. Yet, a growing body of research, led primarily by the NSLLP, has laid the groundwork for identifying important components of LLPs that can lead to effective and successful programmes.

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