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## Student Perceptions of First-Year Experience: A Comparison of Participants and Non-Participants in a Learning Community Program and Their First-Year Experiences

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Student Perceptions of First-Year Experience: A Comparison of Participants and non-  
Participants in a learning community Program and their First-Year Experiences

by

Jordan D. Black

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
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Under the Supervision of Professor James V. Griesen

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Student perceptions of first-year experiences: A comparison of participants and non-participants in a learning community program and their first-year experiences

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University of Nebraska, 2013

Adviser: James V. Griesen

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to better understand first-year experiences from a student perspective, while comparing two different student groups: learning community participants and non-learning community participants. First-year experiences studied were defined through intentional conversations with administrators and students to better understand what experiences were believed to be common at the institution studied. An online survey was then administered to determine the perceived value of experiences, followed by interviews with selected participants to better understand their perspectives. The results demonstrated that although there were differences between the perceptions of experiences between the two samples, the reasoning behind the perceptions was similar and provided for a brief understanding of the student experience at the institution studied.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Introduction**

With the increasingly wide range of experiences and academic preparation students bring into college, student success initiatives need to take on an intentional form to best assist students in their transition to the collegiate environment. Purposefully structuring activities to increase the exposure students have to academics gives students a positive start as they begin their academic careers (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, & Kinzie, 2008).

Through structured activities, increased student exposure to faculty has been linked to higher levels of persistence among students (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). Learning communities give students structure as they begin their academic and social transition into the higher education environment and have provided for consistently positive experiences among participants (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003).

Understanding the range of experiences all students are having at an institution, as well as how students perceive those experiences, provides for an idea of what a first-year student will experience when they come to campus. Through this study, the experiences of two sample groups, learning community students and non-learning community students, will be compared to better understand what differences, if any, exist and how students perceive different aspects of their first-year experiences.

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to better understand the differences in student perceptions of first-year experiences in college between learning community participants and non-learning community participants.

## **Research Questions**

The overarching questions this study sought to answer were: What do learning community participants and students not participating in learning communities perceive to be the most helpful and harmful first year experiences and how do these perceptions differ between the two groups? The following specific questions were developed to help answer the main research question.

1. What are the characteristics of learning community participants and do they differ from non-learning community participants in terms of composite ACT score and High School Class Rank Percentile (HSCR)?
2. Does learning community participation have a positive effect on college grade point averages earned?
3. Does learning community participation have a positive effect on student retention?
4. What first-year experiences do learning community participants and non-learning community participants have?
5. Are learning community participants' perceptions different from those of non-learning community participants?
6. How do learning community participants and non-learning community participants describe experiences they identified as helpful or harmful?
7. What do learning community participants and non-learning community participants perceive as the reasons why first-year experiences were either helpful or harmful?

## **Research Design**

This mixed-methods study was conducted at a large, research Midwestern University (MU). The online survey component was sent to 1,302 participants to determine what commonalities existed among their first-year experiences and to look at whether or not they viewed these experiences as positive or negative. Following the online survey, five participants were interviewed to further understand their first-year experiences and to determine if there were common experiences that assisted in the participants' success at MU.

Mixed-methods research was chosen to gain a broad understanding of how participants viewed their experience at MU and to understand how specific experiences may have influenced their success. All participants in both portions of the study participated voluntarily; they consented through a digital form for the online survey or signed a hard-copy consent form for the follow-up interview. Interviews were transcribed using a professional transcriptionist, and statistical analysis was done through the Nebraska Evaluation and Research (NEAR) Center.

## **Definition of Terms**

### **Success**

- Success will be defined by two different methods for the purpose of this study:
  - First-semester grade point average
  - Student retention to the institution after the first year

### **First-Year Experience**

- A first-year experience can be any major or minor activity which a participant has during his or her first year at an academic higher education institution. These

experiences can include attending classes, meeting with a professor, utilizing a resource center, joining an intramural team, going to a party, consuming alcohol or drugs, etc.

### **Significance**

The purpose of this study is to look at what types of experiences first-year students are having at MU, and compare two specific populations: learning community participants and non-learning community participants. The concept behind this comparison was to understand if either of the populations has a significantly different experience than the other population, and if so how that impacts their success and first year at MU.

While much research has been conducted on both general student populations and the success of learning community programs at various institutions, a large scale mixed-methods study to understand both populations and conduct a comparison has not been undertaken. In addition, by conducting a mixed-methods study, information can be generalized about how different populations perceive their first-year experiences and the overlap the two populations has during their first-year.

This study's findings can assist administrators, faculty and staff in determining what impact a learning community is having upon students at MU, and how these students are experiencing their first year of college. Incoming students and their guardians will also find this study useful in understanding potential benefits to the student if he or she chooses to join a learning community and potential impact upon his or her academic and social experiences at MU.

**Delimitations**

Several delimitations exist for this study. Learning community participants for this study were limited to members of the Business, Engineering, or Journalism learning communities from 2009, 2010 or 2011. Membership in these learning communities required a declared major in the respective college. Additionally, the sample generated by the Office of the Registrar was also limited to the Business, Engineering, or Journalism colleges from 2009, 2010 or 2011.

**Limitations**

Several limitations exist in the study. First, this was conducted at a single institution with a specific set of students. Students from other disciplines or at different institutions could have significantly different perceptions of experiences during their first year.

Second, no participants were surveyed immediately following their first year, and some had a separation of up to three years following their first year in college. This fact could impact students' responses to survey questions. Participants could have forgotten certain aspects of their first year, misinterpreted their memories or combined experiences from multiple years.

**Conclusion**

As incoming first-year students begin their collegiate careers, there are a myriad of experiences they will encounter and be impacted by. In this study, the researcher examined how participants viewed their experiences and how they were impacted by those experiences as they proceeded through their first year at the institution. In Chapter 2 the researcher provides a relevant review of literature relating to student success,

learning communities, research methods and why cooperation between academic and student affairs is essential for student success.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to better understand the differences in student perceptions of first-year experiences in college between learning community participants and non-learning community participants.

#### **Introduction**

Throughout literature, student success in college is intricately tied to engagement. Higher education institutions utilize approaches, such as learning communities, to enhance student success. Researchers provide an understanding of the benefits of these approaches and how those working with first-year students can best retain them and help them to succeed.

#### **Student Success**

As students enter the collegiate environment, they bring experiences, preparation and motivations that differ across the population. Understanding that not all students need the same support system, institutions may target specific groups who can benefit from certain practices. For example, students who come less academically prepared are more likely to benefit from participating in educationally purposeful activities. Additionally, students from minority backgrounds, for example, Hispanic and African-American, show significant increases in the likelihood to persist to their second year after participating in similar educationally purposeful activities (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, & Kinzie, 2008).

The student's decision to enroll for a second-year at an institution can be attributed to a variety of factors both social and academic. Classroom instruction that

encourages student learning, also called “educational satisfaction,” has been linked to higher levels of retention to an institution. Although these links between “educational satisfaction” and retention have proven strong, there is no method for controlling external variables; thus, there is an importance to a strong academic presence mixed with increased intentional social interaction designed to complement classroom learning (Pascarella, Salisbury, & Blaich, 2011).

### **Learning communities**

Connections between students and faculty are a key component to the success and persistence of students. First-year students need to be able to safely question and understand different viewpoints to further enhance their educational experiences. Through the combination of structured in and out-of-class experiences, students may fully develop thought processes and further engage in the range of learning experiences offered on a campus. Through proper support, students may understand the importance of the collegiate academics in which they are immersed and more fully develop their academic thinking (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006).

Learning communities allow students to find a sense of place within the university, especially for commonly disenfranchised students. Through a multiple case-study methodology, Jehangir demonstrated that first-generation students’ perceptions of their experiences in a learning community were positive in validating their reasoning for joining a learning community and developing a community of trust among other members. Additionally students discussed the development of a sense of self and expressed further confidence in their abilities. Although Jehangir’s findings were significant, a wider use of students’ quotes to validate the central themes would have

demonstrated additional benefits of the program and given further validation to the research findings. Beyond this, the researcher demonstrated that there were significant benefits of the program for student populations that tend to be less successful in the collegiate environment (Jehangir, 2009).

Researchers have looked at several different models of learning communities to determine where students experience the greatest impact. Through the utilization of Astin's I-E-O model, researchers reported the impact that various forms of learning communities had upon a single campus. Inkelas & Weisman noted that although all learning communities had a positive impact on student experiences of the control group, transitional and honors communities tended to have the greatest impact on students. The demonstration that multiple models can be successful on a single campus provides validation to different approaches (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003).

Studying the broader impact of learning communities at a wide range of schools has demonstrated higher levels of student engagement. The National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) was used for both studies and demonstrated a strong correlation between learning communities and student success (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Specifically, students who entered college less academically prepared and joined a learning community had grades nearly identical to their peers who entered college more prepared academically (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011).

The impact of first-year programs can vary depending on the student populations served. Jamelske discovered through a quantitative study that although there was a consistently positive impact on first-year students, the impact was greater on less academically prepared students than on those who entered more academically prepared.

The impact can be seen throughout intensive intervention programs mixed into the first-year experience provided to students. In addition, the combination of a first-year experience program with living on campus demonstrated an even higher rate of success for students. This information lead Jamelske to recommend the institution to study if the two experiences could be further linked to better understand their relationship and potential impact on student success (Jamelske, 2009).

### **Research Strategy**

Commander and Ward (2009) pointed out that an abundance of data demonstrating the value of learning communities that has been gathered quantitatively, but the use of qualitative data could help to strengthen existing programs. The holistic view provided by mixed-methods design could offer greater insight into the impact of learning communities on students and their development at institutions. Students in the study did not see greater gains in retention or GPA, but students expressed perceived gains when asked about their first-year experience through a learning community and believe they had a more positive experience. Although there is little discussion of any relevant results by the researchers, the consistent urging of a broader scope for research projects demonstrated the need for more comprehensive research on learning communities using mixed-methods to best understand both the quantitative and qualitative benefits of learning communities (Commander & Ward, 2009).

### **Academic Affairs and Student Affairs Cooperation**

Different collegiate environments may develop learning communities that vary from a simple model with co-enrolled courses to a complex series of faculty and staff interaction and programming with students. Stassen, (2003) reported the consistent notion

of increased success for those students who enrolled in a learning community of any kind. Stassen's study model of learning communities showed that even a modest attempt at linking courses and the residential experience considerably helped students to succeed and further their academic progress at the institution. Additionally, Stassen reported that all learning community models demonstrated a student connection with both peers and faculty in discussing academic ideas and thoughts that was stronger than for students not enrolled in a learning community.

Wawrzynski, Jessup-Anger, & Yao (2011) reported that faculty are often driven to find different methods of reaching students and most effectively helping them in the academic world. With faculty's further integration into student life, faculty can often struggle to manage the balance of how to utilize opportunities to reach students without being overwhelmed by too many commitments on their time. With the increasing amount of time faculty are spending on student development, in addition to their teaching duties, developing an understanding of how to utilize their student affairs colleagues does not always rank high in their priorities (Wawrzynski, Jessup-Anger, & Yao, 2011).

In addition to faculty support, peers play an important role in college students' experiences. First-year students who are provided greater contact with upper class peers are able to better approach these upper class students when they have problems or questions they may not feel comfortable discussing with a faculty or staff member. In addition to providing support for first-year students, upper class peers are able to assist in the process of developing independence within the first-year student population (Latino & Unite, 2012).

A study looked at how colleges and universities that are creating new ways for faculty to integrate learning with student living environments use the potential benefits to justify the resources allocated to implementing such programs. Through program integration of faculty, staff and students, there is an inherent need for each stakeholder to be seen on an equal playing field in order to give all parties a proper sense of ownership. Through dialogue between stakeholders after events, faculty indicated they were able to better connect with students on a more meaningful level and further understand the perspectives students were bringing to different educational experiences. Even with this study being limited to one university, it demonstrated the profound impact that could be felt among faculty and the noticeable difference in student participation and learning which could occur with further student and faculty contact (Ellett & Schmidt, 2011).

Through an understanding of different structures of learning communities at different institutions, determinations about some of the most effective ways of reaching students become possible. Three distinct classifications were identified that varied from a residence life push to an equal partnership between academic and student affairs. A significant finding was that as program scope increased, there was an increased need for an equal partnership between student affairs and academic affairs in order to have the greatest impact on student growth (Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008).

Although students frequently leave high school without being academically prepared to attend college, social factors play an increasingly important role in student success. First-year transition programs play an important role in allowing students to transition smoothly from high school to college through developed support mechanisms specific to that population. Fowler and Boylan (2010) argue that developing these

programs needs to be done intentionally to support the specific student populations at any given institution.

**Conclusion**

Researchers continue to study student success in higher education, and their results are increasingly relevant as institutions continue to look for ways to help students thrive. Learning communities are a specific method for working with students, and have demonstrated a consistently positive impact on student engagement and retention to the institution.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to better understand the differences in student perceptions of first-year experiences in college between learning community participants and non-learning community participants.

#### **Research Questions**

The overarching questions this study sought to answer were: What do learning community participants and students not participating in learning communities perceive to be the most helpful and harmful first year experiences and how do these perceptions differ between the two groups? The following specific questions were developed to help answer the main research question.

1. What are the characteristics of learning community participants and do they differ from non-learning community participants in terms of composite ACT score and High School Class Rank Percentile (HSCR)?
2. Does learning community participation have a positive effect on college grade point averages earned?
3. Does learning community participation have a positive effect on student retention?
4. What first-year experiences do learning community participants and non-learning community participants have?
5. Are learning community participants' perceptions different from those of non-learning community participants?



6. How do learning community participants and non-learning community participants describe experiences they identified as helpful or harmful?
7. What do learning community participants and non-learning community participants perceive as the reasons why first-year experiences were either helpful or harmful?

### **Research Design**

This mixed-methods study was designed to understand entering student characteristics, student participation and perception of common first-year experiences, and why students held certain perceptions about specific first-year experiences.

### **Research Site**

The research site was a large research Midwestern University (MU), with an undergraduate student population of 19,103 students during the year the study was conducted (Institutional Research and Planning, 2012). During the three years studied (2009, 2010, 2011) that the research participants entered MU, the first-year student populations were 3,986, 4,075 and 4,093 respectively (Institutional Research and Planning, 2012). MU currently offers 150 different majors through ten different colleges (Office of Admissions).

### **Learning community**

A learning community is a first-year experience designed to combine students' residential and academic experiences to increase success at the institution. Learning communities in the higher education institution studied share the following characteristics:

- Each learning community is composed of a group of self-selected first-year students living together on the same residence hall floor(s), organized around a common academic interest.
- Students take between two and three classes together during their first semester at the institution, specific to their community.
- Students are provided a range of academic and social programming to help them adjust to the institution, in addition to the regular programming already provided.
- Each learning community has at least one upper-class student mentor who can answer questions pertaining to courses, the university, or other areas where the students feel they need assistance.
- Learning communities each have a faculty or staff sponsor who dedicates time to working with the students and assisting them in establishing different connections to the university.

### **Population**

The sampling method employed within this study is a combination of different strategies. The initial sample of learning community participants will utilize criterion sampling. The researcher worked with University Housing to obtain information about students who had participated in the Business, Engineering and Journalism learning communities during the 2009, 2010 and 2011.

In addition to the learning community participants studied, the researcher also worked with the Office of the Registrar to obtain a comparable group of participants who mirrored the characteristics of the learning community participant population.

Participants were chosen for this comparison group based upon their entering academic

term and their entering college. The number of participants obtained for this portion was twice the amount of learning community students to allow for a sufficient response from the non-learning community students.

Table 1

*Learning community target population*

Entering College			
Entering Year	Business	Engineering	Journalism
2011	43	89	14
2010	46	92	13
2009	44	77	16

Table 2

*Non-learning community target population*

Entering College			
Entering Year	Business	Engineering	Journalism
2011	86	178	28
2010	92	184	26
2009	88	154	32

Due to small numbers, the two target populations, learning community students and non-learning community students had information from all years and colleges combined to create two separate samples for the online survey. Of those who chose to

participate, 67 were from the learning community sample, and 103 were from the non-learning community sample.

Table 3

*Online survey sample*

Sample	Invitations Sent	Participants
Learning community	434	67
Non-learning community	868	103

Participants selected for the qualitative portion of the study self-identified by choosing to share their contact information at the end of the online survey. From the students who chose to share their information, the researcher was able to interview participants from all entering years and from each discipline. Of the five participants interviewed three participants who had been in a learning community and two who had not been in a learning community.

### **Student Characteristics**

Using these lists, the researcher worked with the Office of the Registrar to gain a quantitative understanding of the characteristics of the students who participated in learning communities as well as the characteristics of those in the random sample. Table 1 and Table 2 show the number of participants whose information was used in the analysis. The specific information gathered consisted of: high school rank percentile, ACT composite score, residency status as they entered the institution, first-semester grade point average and current enrollment status.

## Online Survey

**Survey Instrument.** The survey instrument for the quantitative portion of the study was developed through intentional conversations the researcher had with faculty, staff, administrators and students. If an experience was mentioned by at least three separate individuals, the researcher included the experience in the online survey. This was done to allow for a holistic understanding of what was perceived as common first-year experiences at MU.

Each question was then put into a common template which first asked participants whether or not they had participated in the indicated activity. Subsequently, if students had participated, they were asked to rank the activity on a scale of one to five, with one being the least helpful, and five being the most helpful towards their success during their first-year (Appendix G).

**Deployment and Analysis.** The survey was sent by the researcher, using Campus Labs, to all potential participants identified in the two samples (Table 1: learning community participants and Table 2: non-learning community participants). The survey was sent in two separate deployments, one for learning community students and the other for non-learning community students. This was done to determine if there was differing perceptions about first-year experiences between the two samples. A single reminder was sent to those who had not completed the survey four days following the initial deployment.

The researcher analyzed the information from the survey to determine which experiences learning community participants and non-learning community participants perceived to be the most helpful and most harmful towards their success. Information

from participants was analyzed to determine whether or not there were substantial differences in how participants from each sample viewed first-year experiences. The three most helpful and three most harmful activities were then noted for each sample and utilized in the qualitative portion of the study.

### **Participant Interviews**

Following the online survey, there was an open ended question asking participants if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview to expand upon their perceptions of first-year experiences. The participants who indicated they would be willing to participate were sent an email to determine if they were still interested in participating in the interview and, if so, to schedule a time for the interview. The researcher worked with each participant to determine a secure location where the participant would have optimal privacy and comfort to ensure that information was not shared with any other individuals not involved in the research project.

The interview protocol (Appendix K, Appendix L), began with an explanation of the process, reasoning and a reminder to participants that the interview could be stopped at any given time if the interviewee were uncomfortable or did not wish to proceed further in the study.

The first portion of the interview was dedicated to the participants' notions of the first year at MU and major events or occurrences. This portion allowed participants to discuss all that was particularly helpful or harmful towards their success in relation to any area of their first year and to not be constrained by a particular script. Follow-up questions were asked to determine how the participant viewed these experiences, and

whether or not the participant perceived the experiences to have had an impact upon the participants' successes at MU.

During the second portion of the interview, the researcher asked questions specifically about the three most helpful and three most harmful activities, as determined by the online survey. The structure of this portion mirrored the structure of the online survey in that participants were first asked whether or not they participated in the first-year experience, then whether they viewed it as either helpful or harmful towards their success. Following their determination of the experience as either helpful or harmful, participants were asked to explain why they viewed a particular experience in that manner. This gave further insight into the student experience and how the individual student was viewing his or her experiences.

### **Institutional Review Board**

The researcher completed the Consortium for IRB Training Initiative in Human Subjects Protections (CITI) for certification in human subjects research. Additionally, the researcher received approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the study began (Appendix A).

Prior to taking the online survey, students were asked to consent to the study through the first question (Appendix F). At the conclusion of the online survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview, and if so they were asked to provide contact information. Participants were then sent an email (Appendix H) asking if they were still interested in completing the interview and if so to arrange a time to meet with the researcher.

At the interview, participants were given a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix I) to review and sign, and an additional copy was given to each participant. In the IRB process, the researcher stated that the goal would be to achieve a total of nine participants for the qualitative portion of the study, but due to a lack of interest from potential participants, the researcher only conducted five interviews.

Confidentiality was maintained by assigning participants pseudonyms, and keeping all information, including both contact information and transcriptions, in a locked room on an external hard drive. The participants were also informed that the information shared in the interview would be used as part of the researcher's thesis and could potentially be published in a journal or presented at a relevant conference. Initial information for participants to complete the online survey was provided through the Office of the Registrar, and access to learning community participant rosters was provided through University Housing (Appendix B and Appendix C).

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher worked with the NEAR Center to provide accurate and pertinent information in relation to student background characteristics and how that impacted first-semester student success. To complete the analysis, a multiple regression model was established to control for both composite ACT score and HSCRIP of learning community participants and non-learning community participants. This regression model was used to determine the impact of learning community participation on student grade point average and the probability of a student to be retained by the institution. The following variables were used to determine both GPA and potential retention to the institution, through the utilization of the factors obtained by the researcher through the Office of the Registrar:



LC + Year + ACT + Percentile

The researcher consulted with the NEAR Center to determine if there was sufficient data to provide an analysis of the survey information. With the number of participants, the NEAR Center advised the researcher to look for substantial differences which could be determined through generalized data instead of modeling and testing the information.

Survey answers were collected and analyzed by the researcher to determine any substantial differences between the two samples. The mean and percentage of participants who answered given questions was specifically determined to understand the consensus from each sample of whether the particular experience was helpful or harmful, and then further to understand what percentage of those who responded had that particular experience.

The researcher utilized a professional transcriptionist to convert the recorded interviews into text. The researcher proceeded to read each interview a first time to understand basic content and meaning. A second reading was then conducted to further provide for familiarity with the interview. During the third reading, the researcher made notes, and underlined specific portions of the interview to demonstrate key passages or specific meaning within the context of a question.

Following this process for all five interviews, the researcher condensed the notes and underlined passages from all five interviews into a single document. Interviews were organized based upon random assignment of a font color. Themes emerged as information was condensed.

**Researcher Reflexivity**

The researcher had a vested interest in the project through his initial role as a graduate assistant to learning communities at MU and a subsequent role as University Housing learning community Coordinator as the research and report were conducted. In addition, the researcher conducted each of the follow-up interviews with the voluntary participants. Through this employment, the researcher would want positive results and impact of the learning communities program.

The researcher utilized populations that he had worked with minimally to allow for a greater degree of freedom when analyzing data. While the researcher had not worked with any of the populations during their time as a first-year student, two of the participants interviewed were current staff members supervised by the researcher. Additional emphasis was given to these two participants to ensure that they knew they would not see negative repercussions or additional positive treatment based upon their answers in the interview. Answers from these participants may have been misinterpreted by the researcher or they could have altered their answers knowing the researcher on a professional level.

**Verification Strategies**

Although the researcher made efforts to remain unbiased and detail-oriented with both data collection and analysis, he sought additional support to establish the validity of the results.

The researcher utilized an outside department to conduct statistical analysis of both the demographic and online survey data. This provided for not only a more in-depth look at the information, but an unbiased source to look through the information and

provide an additional analysis. A breakdown of the information is provided in Chapter 4 to allow an external reader the ability to understand the process and determine whether the same information would be useful for populations with which they work.

The follow-up interviews were first transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, which did not have a connection with the research project. Following the researcher's coding of the information, all codes and transcriptions were verified by an external auditor. In addition to having the information verified by an external auditor, the researcher utilized quotations from the participants throughout both Chapters 4 and 5 to allow individuals reading the information to determine whether or not the information is applicable to their program or institution.

## **Conclusion**

The focus of this chapter was to understand the methodology of this study. Initial IRB approval was conducted to allow the researcher to conduct the study while still remaining compliant with all relevant rules. Determining a population and analyzing background information played a role in understanding student success during the first year. Additionally, student perspectives were sought to better understand how learning community participants and non-learning community participants viewed their experiences. The data analysis in Chapter 4 will discuss the findings from each of these phases and the results about first-year experiences of participants in both populations.

## Chapter 4

### Results

#### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to better understand the differences in student perceptions of first-year experiences in college between learning community participants and non-learning community participants.

#### Participants

**Online Survey Participants.** The online survey was sent to 1,302 participants; 434 learning community participants, and 868 non-learning community participants. Of the 434 learning community Participants, the breakdown is listed by entering year, college of enrollment in Table 1, in Chapter 3. The 868 non-learning community participants were broken down by entering year, and college of enrollment in Table 2, in Chapter 3.

Of the 1,302 participants, 67 had invalid email addresses and were unable to be sent the link to the survey. From the learning community participants, 67 of the 434 students completed the survey for a response rate of 15.44%. From the non-learning community participant survey, 103 of the 868 students completed the survey for a response rate of 11.94%.

**Interview Participants.** From the online survey, 14 participants indicated they would be willing to complete follow-up interviews, six learning community participants, and nine non-learning community participants. The researcher contacted those who indicated they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview, and seven indicated they would participate. Of the seven, two participants failed to show up at the

scheduled time and location, and five interviews were conducted. Three interviews were conducted with learning community participants and two were conducted with non-learning community participants.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching questions this study sought to answer were: What do learning community participants and students not participating in learning communities perceive to be the most helpful and harmful first year experiences and how do these perceptions differ between the two groups? The following specific questions were developed to help answer the main research question.

1. What are the characteristics of learning community participants and do they differ from non-learning community participants in terms of composite ACT score and High School Class Rank Percentile (HSCR)?
2. Does learning community participation have a positive effect on college grade point averages earned?
3. Does learning community participation have a positive effect on student retention?
4. What first-year experiences do learning community participants and non-learning community participants have?
5. Are learning community participants' perceptions different from those of non-learning community participants?
6. How do learning community participants and non-learning community participants describe experiences they identified as helpful or harmful?

7. What do learning community participants and non-learning community participants perceive as the reasons why first-year experiences were either helpful or harmful?

### Information Presented

#### Results for Research Question 1

Selected statistics for the target populations are presented in Table 4. learning community participants had a higher percentage of non-residents among their population than non-learning community participants. Additionally, entering learning community participants had a lower mean composite ACT score, as well as class rank percentile than their non-learning community peers.

Table 4:

#### *Characteristics for target population*

	Learning community (n=434)	Non-learning community (n=868)
Percentage non-residents	24.19%	20.39%
Mean composite ACT score	26.502	27.342
Mean class rank percentile	75.108	77.917

#### Results for Research Questions 2 and 3

Non-learning community participants outperformed their learning community peers for first-semester GPA. In addition, non-learning community participants were retained at a higher rate than their learning community peers to the institution.

Table 5:

*First-year performance for target population*

	Learning community (n=434)	Non-learning community (n=868)
Mean first-semester GPA	2.883	3.075
First-year retention rate	74.71%	79.15%

Generalized information is helpful to see trends among the different samples, the researcher controlled for both entering ACT Score and class rank percentile in a stepwise multiple regression model to create a more complete picture of the experience of learning community participants and non-learning community participants. Year of entry (year), learning community participation (LC), composite ACT score (ACT), and HSCR P (Percentile) were entered as predictor variables. The extent to which these factors predict college grade point average (GPA).

$$\text{GPA} \sim (\text{LC} + \text{Year} + \text{ACT} + \text{Percentile})$$

Through this test, it was determined that year was not a significant predictor of GPA and was therefore dropped from the model. Of the remaining predictor variables

$$\text{GPA} \sim (\text{LC} + \text{ACT} + \text{Percentile})$$

Learning community membership was demonstrated to have a -0.124 impact on college GPA using a 4.0 scale. Additionally, both ACT and HSCR P were shown to have positive impacts on college GPA of 0.023 and 0.021 respectively for both target populations.

An additional stepwise multiple regression model was constructed to determine if year, learning community, ACT score or HSCR P were predictors of retention.

Ret ~ Year +LC +ACT + Percentile

Using this stepwise multiple regression model, ACT and HSCRП had positive impact, and participants who started college in 2011 saw a significant factor as well.

### **Results for Research Questions 4 and 5**

Table 5: summarizes the results of the online survey, separating the information between learning community participants and non-learning community participants. Differences in participation rates between the two populations seen can be most strong in the following areas: participated in a study group, failed a test, talked to parents at least once a week, budgeted money, participated in a volunteer activity, was lost on campus and met alumni from college. With the exception of, participated in a volunteer activity, the learning community participants had consistently higher participation among each of these areas.

In addition to the differences among participation rates between learning community participants and non-learning community participants, there were six areas with the strongest mean differences: attended a professor's office hours, participated in a study group, failed a test, held a part-time job, met with their academic advisor, and met alumni from college. Of these differences, learning community participants viewed meeting alumni, meeting with their academic advisor, and failing a test more positively than their peers. Additionally, non-learning community participants viewed holding a part-time job, participating in a study group and attending a professor's office hours in a more positive light than learning community participants.

A summary of answers from both learning community participants and non-learning community participants is provided in Table 6 to give context to what



percentage of students participated in each activity and how they ranked the activities with 5 being the most helpful and 1 being the most harmful.

Table 6:

*Activity participation rates, by participant type*

Question	Non-Learning Community Respondents			Learning Community Respondents		
	M	SD	Participation Rate n=103	M	SD	Participation Rate n=67
Lived in a Residence Hall	4.07	0.99	89.58%	4.30	0.87	98.36%
Learning Community	3.78	1.48	27.08%	3.98	1.20	96.72%
Attended a Professor's Office Hours	3.97	1.01	77.08%	3.66	1.17	81.97%
Participated in a Study Group	4.20	0.95	70.83%	3.76	0.99	80.33%
Talked academics outside classroom	4.28	0.82	95.83%	4.21	0.72	95.08%
Failed a test	1.90	1.10	63.54%	2.21	1.36	70.49%
Used alcohol	3.47	1.30	64.58%	3.26	1.31	68.85%
Used marijuana	2.57	1.75	29.17%	2.30	1.53	32.79%
Used a Resource Center	4.03	1.11	76.04%	3.81	1.19	77.05%
Involved in a campus group	4.37	0.96	83.33%	4.40	1.01	78.69%
Held a Part-Time Job	3.88	1.31	44.79%	3.48	1.45	44.26%
Asked a question during class	3.99	0.94	90.63%	3.98	0.95	86.89%
Stayed up Late doing homework	3.22	1.25	93.75%	3.44	1.25	94.72%
Avoided homework	3.26	1.05	87.50%	3.04	1.15	83.61%
Talked to parents at least once a week	4.33	0.78	86.46%	4.19	0.93	95.08%
Budgeted money	4.05	0.95	73.96%	4.06	1.03	86.89%
Changed major	3.69	1.67	40.63%	3.36	1.68	40.98%
Worked on group project	3.54	1.22	92.71%	3.68	1.15	93.44%
Met with their academic advisor	3.89	1.31	94.79%	4.25	1.03	96.72%
Recommendation from a professor	3.36	1.57	45.83%	3.44	1.45	44.26%
Participated in a Volunteer activity	4.32	0.99	65.63%	4.14	1.27	59.02%
Ate alone in a dining hall	3.17	1.26	88.54%	3.36	1.09	95.08%
Was Lost on campus	2.33	0.98	43.75%	2.34	1.04	67.21%
Made a friend in course	4.46	0.69	97.92%	4.49	0.87	100.00%
Met alumni from college	3.50	1.52	37.50%	3.92	1.18	59.02%

Table 7:  
Summary of answers from online survey

Question	Non-Learning Community Respondents					Learning Community Respondents						
	Harmful		Helpful		n=103	Harmful		Helpful		n=67		
	1	2	3	4		5	1	2	3		4	5
Lived in a Residence Hall	2%	7%	4%	39%	32%	10%	0%	4%	4%	21%	29%	1%
Learning Community	4%	0%	4%	7%	11%	66%	3%	6%	6%	17%	25%	2%
Attended a Professor's Office Hours	3%	3%	10%	33%	23%	21%	5%	2%	9%	22%	11%	11%
Participated in a Study Group	1%	4%	6%	25%	30%	26%	3%	1%	10%	25%	9%	11%
Talked academics outside classroom	0%	4%	11%	32%	43%	4%	0%	0%	10%	25%	21%	2%
Failed a test	26%	19%	7%	5%	2%	32%	18%	9%	5%	7%	3%	17%
Used alcohol	7%	6%	16%	17%	15%	33%	7%	3%	11%	14%	7%	18%
Used marijuana	14%	1%	3%	3%	7%	66%	10%	2%	2%	4%	2%	39%
Used a Resource Center	3%	6%	8%	25%	29%	22%	4%	3%	5%	20%	14%	14%
Involved in a campus group	2%	3%	6%	21%	46%	13%	1%	3%	3%	10%	30%	13%
Held a Part-Time Job	4%	3%	4%	15%	17%	50%	5%	2%	2%	11%	7%	31%
Asked a question during class	3%	1%	16%	39%	26%	7%	2%	2%	6%	27%	15%	8%
Stayed up Late doing homework	7%	20%	21%	21%	17%	6%	4%	12%	11%	17%	14%	2%
Avoided homework	2%	22%	17%	32%	8%	12%	4%	15%	12%	15%	5%	10%
Talked to parents at least once a week	0%	3%	7%	32%	39%	13%	0%	5%	5%	21%	25%	3%
Budgeted money	0%	6%	12%	25%	26%	24%	2%	2%	8%	19%	20%	8%
Changed major	9%	0%	3%	8%	18%	53%	7%	1%	2%	6%	9%	33%
Worked on group project	4%	18%	12%	31%	21%	6%	3%	8%	7%	24%	14%	3%
Met with their academic advisor	8%	7%	10%	26%	38%	4%	2%	2%	7%	16%	31%	2%
Letter of Recommendation	10%	3%	7%	9%	15%	50%	6%	0%	3%	12%	6%	33%
Participated in a Volunteer activity	3%	0%	4%	22%	32%	32%	4%	0%	2%	11%	18%	24%
Ate alone in a dining hall	11%	14%	24%	19%	15%	9%	1%	12%	21%	11%	12%	3%
Was Lost on campus	8%	17%	11%	4%	1%	51%	10%	12%	16%	1%	2%	19%
Made a friend in course	1%	0%	4%	36%	50%	0%	2%	0%	3%	17%	38%	0%
Met alumni from college	7%	1%	6%	8%	14%	58%	3%	0%	8%	11%	14%	24%

Responses may not equal 100%

### Results for Research Questions 6 and 7

Through the follow-up interviews, participants revealed three common themes and seven subthemes about their first-year experiences, all shown in Table 7. The “How I succeeded” theme relates to what students felt they had to do personally to succeed at MU and is broken down into two subthemes: a. “Attitude,” and b. “Adapting to change.” The “What I found” theme discusses how although students had an idea of their direction when they began their education and how new opportunities challenged those ideas. The theme is broken down into three subthemes: a. “Exploring my options,” b. “Narrowing my focus,” and c. “Professional connections.” The “What I’m still learning theme” addresses areas where students would make changes to their current and past experiences to have a perceived better end result. The theme is broken down into two subthemes: a. “Personal challenges,” and b. “Academic challenges.”

Table 8:

#### *Themes and subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
1. How I succeeded	a. Attitude b. Adapting to change
2. What I found	a. Exploring my options b. Narrowing my focus c. Professional connections
3. What I’m still learning	a. Personal challenges b. Academic challenges

**Theme: How I succeeded.** Participants worked to find success at MU and addressed a few different areas which influenced their success. For example Jane state:

I was always really interested in school and I know that I need the degree, and it's, it's always just been one of my personal goals to get a degree so I wasn't gonna quit on it, it was just which one I was gonna get.

Jane began college determined to succeed and used her future as a motivator persist in her academic career. Each participant went over a variety of experiences they had mentioning various ways in which they felt they had succeeded and made it through their first-year.

**Subtheme: Attitude.** Each participant frequently mentioned how important it was for them to have a positive outlook as a foundation for their success. Troy mentioned:

If I could do anything differently it would be to get rid of that negative attitude because that, that didn't serve me. Um, it didn't serve me at all, and I, I feel like I have gotten rid of it now, so that's, I think that's why I'm succeeding in that I've just had a more positive outlook on, on life and on academics.

Although a positive attitude did not ensure student success, it demonstrated that students were able to learn more about themselves when they approached a situation thinking they would succeed. Susie said:

I think I would be less ambitious with my gen eds requirements. I, um, had to take a couple of science classes so I was like I'm gonna take Biology because I, you know, didn't do that good in high school but I'm gonna ace it now. And it didn't work, and, it just, I didn't care about it and so it, there was no point. I could have

taken a really easy science class because I didn't have to take biology, but I took the hard one because I wanted to challenge myself and then I didn't care cause I don't care about Biology, so.

Student experiences such as Susie's demonstrated that although a student may have a particularly negative experience in a course, there is the ability to learn about one's self during that time.

Susie further reflected on her difficulty in Biology, "and so I guess, just introducing the, I guess there's times in your life where you're not gonna care or try, which isn't something that happened to me before."

***Subtheme: Adapting to change.*** Participants frequently mentioned changes they made throughout their first-year. Jake spent time talking about how different high school was and how time was an important change he didn't realize he would have to adapt to by saying, "And 8:30 class was a killer for me. I thought I could do it cause it was later than I had to wake up in high school, no." Jake then went on to say, "I think I took too many advanced classes my first semester freshman year, uh, that I technically had the credit for, but, uh, should not have been taking them all at once my first semester," demonstrating how overwhelmed he felt at first before making changes to his course load and scheduling his classes at times more compatible with his sleep schedule.

**Theme: What I found.** Although participants had expectations for college, each person found different ways of connecting through different experiences they had after their arrival at MU. Jane explains:

Well, med was always like my first choice but I really like math and science so that played into choosing engineering and pre-med. I like engineering a lot, so I

considered changing around in engineering and kinda dropping the med thing but that was always my goal so I kinda stuck with it just for that reason.

Jane's curiosity with other paths demonstrated that students may be able to find new opportunities as they enter which they previously did not know existed.

***Subtheme: Exploring my options.*** Participants found ways to understand and search through a variety of options as they entered MU. Jake discussed his thoughts about leaving MU and the process he went through to determine if he was on the correct path by saying,

There were times when I would just get caught up in everything, maybe get a little bit depressed, um and question whether college in general was good for me. Um and also I, I'm a business student and I have contemplated acting before, and so, second semester was also a time of figuring out what I wanted to do, if I wanted to stay in school for business or if I wanted to, uh, move somewhere where acting would be more prevalent, a school that would have a stronger acting program.

His experience of being unsure which direction he wanted to go and process of contemplating options was common throughout each of the interviews and demonstrated the uncertainty he particularly felt as he entered with his major.

***Subtheme: Narrowing my focus.*** During their exploration, participants realized there were ways they did not feel connected and honed their focus to embrace the ideas and areas most important to them. For example, Mary used the sorority she had joined to find new ways to be connected and shared, "they were the ones who helped me get into like other organizations, get a job, like find out what I'm passionate about and continue

doing that.” Mary goes on further to say that the primary benefit she experienced from this connection was to:

Probably figure out what I was like really cared about and stick to that instead of, kind of, you know how you like waste your time with certain organizations that don’t really matter or that you like don’t fully understand what they do?

Similarly, Jake elaborated on some of his first-year involvements by saying, “I mean, there were some other [involvements] freshman year but I gave up on them.”

***Subtheme: Professional connections.*** Through their different connections at MU, the experiences participants mentioned most often were those that related to their professional interests and future plans. Susie explains:

My teacher in that [honors] class is now my thesis adviser for my honors thesis, and she helped me find one of my internships. And she, just taking that seminar with that teacher and that class just has really had a domino effect on a bunch of things.

Likewise, Jake emphasized:

Faculty were pushing for me to get internships and stuff so I went and did that, that was a really valuable experience. So I really think what it came down to was faculty, just meeting with them, you know, having little conversations with them, after class or in their office.

The connections with different faculty and staff demonstrated how students became connected with those who had a significant impact on their academic careers.



**Theme: What lessons I'm still learning.** Each participant spent time talking about different areas they would have changed and what changes they are still making to their lives to fully adapt to the university environment. Jake discusses how he needs to learn to, "play to your strengths," when choosing classes and working on different projects so he does not overwhelm himself. A specific lesson he talked about was accurately recognizing his strengths:

Even if you can coast, it is always safer to read the book, and I thought that I didn't have to read the book because it wasn't required for class and that has turned out to be my biggest downfall so far and something that I, I am still having to, uh, check myself with and make sure that I'm doing.

**Subtheme: Personal challenges.** Of all the participants, Mary spent the most time discussing that the changes she made did not particularly impact her academic life, but instead focused on social decisions she made during her first year. She explained:

I wouldn't say they were bad experiences necessarily, they were just like mistakes that I realized that like I didn't need to do and that like my life's better without them. Like looking back, it's not like they damaged me in any way, I just think I could have been like a better person.

Her recognition of an experience she would change, even though no harm was done, demonstrated how she is reflecting on different experiences and has altered her current lifestyle.

**Subtheme: Academic challenges.** As participants progress through their college education, they are continually modifying strategies when approaching a class and

bringing new experiences to the classroom. Jane mentions, “Um, and I probably would have gotten started planning my classes, like from for now, like back then, because scheduling has been crazy since my freshman year.” This attitude towards planning ahead was common among participants as they spoke about changes they would have made in their academic careers.

### **Specific Experiences and their Perceived Value**

In addition to open ended questions pertaining to participants’ first-year experiences, participants discussed seven different prompts, as determined by the online survey of particularly harmful and helpful experiences from their perception Table 6.

Table 9:

*Experiences and their perceived value*

Experience	Perceived value
1. Failed a test	a. A new challenge b. Shift in behavior
2. Campus involvement	a. Finding common goals b. Enhancing undergraduate experience
3. Marijuana use	a. Perceived as negative b. No major effect either positive or negative
4. Lived in a residence hall	a. Build network of friends
5. Talked to parents at least once a week	a. No common understanding of value
6. Lost on campus	a. Intimidating and stressful b. Helps one adapt to new situations
7. Made a friend in class	a. Build a professional network b. Academic assistance

**Experience: Failed a test.** While not all interview participants had failed a test during their first year at MU, those that did had consistent thoughts on the experience. Although Susie had not failed a test, she determined it would be harmful expressing:

My grade would suffer and I think it just, I would feel embarrassed and, even if nobody else knew about it, I would feel embarrassed and know that's not like me and my study habits, and it's not acceptable.

Susie's discussion of how failing a test was not something that was like her, demonstrated that although she had not failed a test, she would have taken notice and worked to remedy the situation.

***Perceived Value: A new challenge.*** Jane discussed failing a test by saying, "It was helpful in the fact that I realized that maybe, maybe step it up in that class or that this was a different level than I was at high school and stuff." Although several of her classmates also failed that test, her response was the perception that she needed to work harder to succeed, rather than to blame the test, class or instructor. Jake shared a similar sentiment when he stated, "It [failing a test] was definitely a wake-up call."

***Perceived Value: Shift in behavior.*** Other participants talked about how the experience impacted their behavior in addition to their self-perceptions. Mary said, "I mean it was annoying at the time, but it just kind of kicked me into gear and I was like 'OK, I need to step it up.'" Notably, before offering this comment, Mary asked for clarification to determine what level of performance constituted failure on a test. Although she and others may perceive a grade lower than they expected (eg: a "D"), what is significant is the participants' response to and perception of this experience's value.

**Experience: Campus involvement.** All of the participants agreed that campus involvement was positive in several different aspects of their educational experience. Susie discussed her experience with other students through campus involvement by saying:

We still chat, I'm still friends, they're still contacts on campus, um several of them are in my classes now, and it's just been a way to get to know more people on campus.

The connections that interview participants made through involvement demonstrate just how positive of an impact it made on their first-year experience.

***Perceived Value: Finding common goals.*** While several different participants mentioned specific groups they were involved in, Troy went into detail about the commonalities he has found throughout his coursework and involvements:

I mean, it's all, everything I've done, um in the [major], in either in class, specific classes, the [major-specific classes] and, um at the [major-related campus organization] has, you know, it's all been building on each other, I've, I mean I've made contacts professionally.

Through his different involvements and coursework, Troy was able to build on, and further understand, how to incorporate different aspects of his education into his professional future.

***Perceived Value: Enhancing undergraduate experience.*** Jake brought up the issue of being over-involved on campus and the harmful effects that could happen when not enough time was available. In addition, Jake emphasized the benefits of being involved by saying:

The personal enrichment from being involved in things that are totally outside my realm of experience is such a valuable experience and enriching, um, especially within the [major] school now. Those experiences are really enriching my college career.

Likewise, Mary further elaborated on the experience, “I’ve built up my own leadership and have been able to like help pass those down and just like establish like a name for the clubs and stuff.” While some of the participants’ involvements had not been directly related to their chose major, they discovered they were developing and enhancing their skill set.

**Experience: Marijuana use.** Marijuana had been used by three of the participants, whose views contrasted those who had not used it but felt it. Those who had used marijuana generally perceived it as having a neutral or positive effect, while those who had not used it perceived it as having a generally negative effect.

***Perceived Value: Perceived as negative.*** Jane mentioned, “I’ve never met anyone whose tried it and had a serious harmful effect, but, I mean on paper it’s harmful.” She immediately expressed ambivalence about this negative perception, adding, “I mean harmful seems like the generic answer.” Mary explained her reasoning against marijuana by saying,

I just feel like you shouldn’t have to take something to help you have fun or relax, like, it’s one of those things the world is so wants like just the quick answer right now and like the quick answer to stress is like ‘let’s smoke weed so we can relax’ but like maybe you should look at eliminating the stressors and your life would be like overall better instead of just like better for five minutes.

***Perceived Value No major affect either positive or negative.*** Troy specifically talked about his experience with marijuana, and although he admitted to making poor decisions while using it, he admitted to poor decisions but did not attribute them to marijuana.

Susie supported her argument for a lack of a strong positive or negative effect when she said, “it didn’t get in the way of any responsibilities or [pause] effect really the dynamic of the people I was hanging out with.” Jake added, “It wasn’t a bad experience but it just wasn’t anything special to me.”

**Experience: Lived in a residence hall.** Although not all participants who responded to the online survey lived in residence halls, those who chose to complete a follow-up interview all had lived in residence halls during their first-year. The question was only asked to those interviewees who had participated in a learning community because non-learning community participants rated “Talked to a parent at least once a week,” higher.

***Perceived Value: Build networks of friends.*** The theme which emerged from living in residence halls revolved completely around developing relationships with those around them. Jane expressed:

It was helpful. I met a huge portion of the people that I know now in the residence halls just by, you see them every day, you walk past them, you just get to know people and you get a lot more comfortable here, too.

Mary spoke about how living in a residence hall, “just kind of helped me to like expand my horizon and I met a lot of cool people from there.” Jake echoed similar thoughts as he stated, “it was honestly really just the steady line throughout my freshman year. It was an absolutely incredible experience and I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

**Experience: Talked to parents at least once a week.** The non-learning community participants were asked this question in lieu of the question about living in a residence hall since it rated higher for that population in the online survey. Of the two

participants who the researcher spoke to about this particular experience, there was not a common theme which emerged.

Susie had not spoken to her parents at least once a week and found it helpful citing:

I think it would have made me probably gossip more to my parents about things that were going on or just probably talk about things that, you know, just, I put out of my mind and didn't talk, like think about anymore, but would have if I went through my whole week and talked about it with my parents.

Troy had spoken with his parents at least once a week and shared, "It's just, uh, it's uh, good to, um, you know, give somebody an update, uh, on your life, other than the people around you." The lack of a common theme for this experience demonstrates that further information needs to be gathered to understand what impact frequent parent communication could have on first-year students.

**Experience: Lost on campus.** Coming to a new environment forced each of the participants to confront the unknown and find their way through a new campus and a new environment. Participants all had experienced being lost on campus, but reacted in two distinct ways.

***Perceived Value: Intimidating and stressful.*** Susie explained, "I had to take a final exam and it was in [academic building] that I'd never been there before and I couldn't find the room," to share why she felt getting lost was a harmful experience. Mary took a similar note to Susie sharing:

It's stressful because I'm late for class and I need to know where I'm going and I just, I was that girl freshman year that like had my map like scanning over it like



not knowing I would like trace out my path I needed to take, but, I think it's just stressful because in like high school you're so confident with everything and then you come to a new place and it's just like overwhelming cause it seems so big.

Troy said, "I mean it was scary when I was a freshman, but looking back on it, it's silly now that I was scared, I mean campus isn't that big."

***Perceived Value: Helps you adapt to new situations.*** Jake took a positive view of being lost on campus when he stated, "I have a horrible sense of direction and I learned how to use a map very well." Jane similarly found being lost on campus helpful and framed the experience as a means to connect with others when she said, "I suppose you can get the courage to go up and ask somebody, swallow your pride a little bit."

**Experience: Made a friend in class.** Participants readily agreed that making friends in class was something they had all done and was beneficial to their success at MU.

***Perceived Value: Build a professional network.*** Jake summarized his ideas well in saying:

You know, especially for a [major] student, expanding your professional network, um, and really, I'm one of those people where I don't go anywhere where I don't know someone, and that's, you know, that's, it's really nice, especially with such a large university.

Troy explained his views of the benefits, "As you probably already know, I mean it's, you've got, if somebody's taking the, especially an upper level class, they have the same interests as you." Mary shared her ideas simply by saying, "Instead of just like going out, it's a friendship that revolves around something that's like gonna contribute to your life,"

and further elaborated with, “so it’s just like a good friendship based on like something that matters.

***Perceived Value: Academic assistance.*** Troy discussed some additional benefits of being friends with classmates when he said, “When you’re taking the class together it’s good to have somebody to study with and do homework with and just bounce ideas off of.” Similarly, Jane said, “You can study with them or you can just have someone to kinda bond over the course with because you’re both in it together.” Susie shared her perception of how it has been helpful:

It’s just easier, sometimes teachers aren’t very approachable or, um, they aren’t, it’s not as easy just to get the information you need to get stuff done by class, as it is if you have a friend in the classroom with you.

Throughout the results, information has been presented which demonstrates not only statistical differences between learning community participants and non-learning community participants but also the similarities that occur within their perceptions of their first-year experiences. Both the differences and similarities between the two groups show present interesting information in relation to how the first year is experienced by each group and how that impacts them in the end.

Chapter 5 will discuss the results of this mix-methods study, provide some of the implications from the research and identify possible further research for how that could expand upon and utilize the information gathered through this study.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to better understand the differences in student perceptions of first-year experiences in college between learning community participants and non-learning community participants.

#### **Research Questions**

The overarching questions this study sought to answer were: What do learning community participants and students not participating in learning communities perceive to be the most helpful and harmful first year experiences and how do these perceptions differ between the two groups? The following specific questions were developed to help answer the main research question.

1. What are the characteristics of learning community participants and do they differ from non-learning community participants in terms of composite ACT score and High School Class Rank Percentile (HSCR)?
2. Does learning community participation have a positive effect on college grade point averages earned?
3. Does learning community participation have a positive effect on student retention?
4. What first-year experiences do learning community participants and non-learning community participants have?
5. Are learning community participants' perceptions different from those of non-learning community participants?

6. How do learning community participants and non-learning community participants describe experiences they identified as helpful or harmful?
7. What do learning community participants and non-learning community participants perceive as the reasons why first-year experiences were either helpful or harmful?

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings of this study demonstrated the many common characteristics of student first-year experience, while highlighting some of the different characteristics of those who chose to participate in a learning community in comparison to their non-learning community peers. Several characteristics were analyzed to better understand which factors had the highest impact upon first-semester GPA and retention to the institution.

When exploring specific first-year experiences, both learning community participants and non-learning community participants had comparable ratings and participation among the majority of experiences surveyed. In addition, when follow-up interviews were conducted, the consistency of how students succeeded, as well as how they viewed different experiences was consistent among the two populations and demonstrated the experience the average student may be having while enrolled at MU.

### **Discussion**

This study adds to current and existing research being conducted to understand the impact and effect of learning communities and how learning community participation during the first year of college influences different perceptions of first-year experiences.

**Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of learning community participants and do they differ from non-learning community Participants in terms of composite ACT score and HSCR?** Prior research (Alcarcon & Edwards, 2013) has demonstrated that either ACT or HSCR can be used as a predictor of success at a college or university. This portion of the study was done to compare the population with current data and understand whether the populations studied, learning community participants, and non-learning community participants, followed prior research and demonstrated success based upon their incoming ACT scores or HSCR.

Using ACT score and HSCR as predictors proved to be significant for both GPA, and continued enrollment at the institution for both target populations. This reinforced prior research on the subject, and demonstrates that the population studied; although not identical in all characteristics to other populations which have been studied before, followed a similar trend regarding the relationships between ACT score, HSCR and academic success at an institution.

**Research Questions 2 and 3: Does learning community participation have a positive effect on college grade point averages earned? and Does learning community participation have a positive effect on student retention?** Through a multiple regression model, both the composite ACT score and HSCR were controlled for when determining the impact of learning community participation on first-semester GPA and retention to the institution. In looking at the correlation of learning community participation and GPA, there is a negative correlation between participation in a learning community and GPA. This is significant, specifically because learning communities are designed as an academic and social support structure for incoming students. The lower

GPA is an indicator that students are not making satisfactory progress, and the program needs to be evaluated for effectiveness.

The correlation between retention and learning community membership was not significant, although there was a slight trend between learning community participation and a lower level of student retention.

The lower GPA and retention could be due to a number of factors, including those collected such as incoming characteristics, or outside contributors such as motivation, financial or outside support structure. One factor to also consider would be the academic rigor of the programs students were undertaking during the first semester of their collegiate career. The difficulty in different programs could be a significant reason why participants had varying GPAs and levels of retention.

**Research Question 4: What first year experiences did learning community participants and non-learning community participants have?** The majority of participants in the survey from both samples participated in each of the experiences in the instrument. Four specific experiences were shared by less than half of both. Additionally, for two of the experiences less than half of participants who had experienced it were from the non-learning community pool, but greater than half of participants who had experienced it were from the learning community group.

Using marijuana, holding a part-time job, changing one's major, or asking for a letter of recommendation from a professor all were identified by less than half of the participants for both samples. Each of these had similar levels of participation from both learning community participants and non-learning community participants, demonstrating

a potentially consistent level of participation for students throughout MU in their first year.

**Research Question 5: Are learning community participants' perceptions different from those of non-learning community participants?** Throughout the data collected in the online survey, there were frequent consistencies among the ratings of the different first-year experiences between learning community participants and non-learning community participants. The differences between the two groups demonstrate some of the unique experiences for each subgroup experienced, but they also correlated with participation differences between the two groups.

Major differences in the mean ratings of different experiences occurred specifically in three areas: participation in a study group, holding a part-time job, and meeting alumni from college. Non-learning community participants consistently rated both participation in a study group and holding a part-time job higher than learning community participants. Participation in a part-time job was consistent among the two different groups, but learning community participation in study groups was almost ten percent higher than non-learning community participation. This could be due to the fact that learning community students live together on a residence hall floor, and are enrolled in courses together. This would assist the formation of study groups purely out of proximity to one another and allow for students to have greater access to this resource.

The consistent participation rate in a part-time job suggests the possibility that the need for work may be equivalent among the two groups. While there is nothing conclusive about this information, it shows that financial considerations are not a definite

factor in whether a student participates in a learning community or in other measures of student success like GPA and retention to the institution.

The other major difference in the mean rating of experiences was the act of meeting alumni. Learning community participants participated at a higher rate, as well as rated the experience significantly higher than their non-learning community peers. This could be due to the fact that frequently learning communities work to incorporate alumni into different events and grant students special access to different speakers who may come to campus.

Additional differences in ratings, although not as significant as those previously mentioned, occurred in three other areas: attending a professor's office hours, failing a test and meeting with an academic adviser. Attendance at a professor's office hours was ranked higher by non-learning community participants, which is interesting as a learning community works to connect students with different faculty and staff at the institution studied.

Learning community participants did rank failing a test and meeting with their academic adviser higher than their non-learning community peers. Knowing that non-learning community participants felt office hours were a more positive experience, it is surprising that learning community students felt this sense of helpfulness in their adviser's office. Each discipline does have different advising structures, varying between faculty and professional advisers, but the higher rating does show students value these experiences.

Beyond ranking differences, some experiences had significantly different levels of participation between the two groups. The largest difference came when comparing what



percentage of students had been lost on campus between the two groups. There was over twenty percent different when comparing participation among the two groups, yet their ranking was consistent for the experience. Learning community students tended to have a higher rate of being lost on campus at 67.21% compared to their non-learning community peers at 43.75%. This statistic is interesting because the upper class student mentors who work with learning communities specifically take incoming freshmen on tours around campus to assist in their adjustment process.

Two other areas where learning community participants had substantially higher participation than non-learning community participants were: talking to their parents at least once a week and budgeting money. The idea that learning community participants talk to their parents at a higher rate is interesting, especially as they are part of a program that is designed to help them succeed through structured experiences. Although a learning community is not designed to serve in lieu of parental contact, the additional support parents potentially provide could have increased success for several of these students. In addition, budgeting money is a common topic of conversation among first-year students and their parents, so the connection that both activities were higher participation demonstrates a possible connection between the two.

Although not as great of a difference in participation levels, non-learning community participants did outdo their learning community peers when it came to participating in a volunteer activity. This could be attributed to a number of factors, whether it meant that the non-learning community participants sought out different activities to meet other individuals, or if they had joined another organization which valued these experiences. Learning communities at MU do not have a strong focus

around service, and so although learning community participants do have additional activities, they would likely not have been focused around service.

**Research Question 6: How did learning community participants and non-learning community participants describe experiences they identified as helpful or harmful?** Looking at the three most helpful and harmful experiences for each sample reveals several similarities, and a single difference. This overlap allowed the researcher to further explore and understand these three areas throughout the follow-up interviews and understand the similarities and differences in how students view each of these areas and how they impacted the student experience.

The three most harmful experiences for both samples were: failing a test, using marijuana and being lost on campus. Both samples believed that making a friend in class and getting involved with a group on campus were positive experiences, but non-learning community participants viewed perceived calling their parents at least once a week as more positive than learning community participants who viewed living in a residence hall as a more positive experience. This difference could potentially be explained by the requirement that learning community participants are required to live in a residence hall and may have a more engaged experience through the program than their non-learning community peers.

**Research Question 7: What did learning community participants and non-learning community participants perceive as the reasons why first-year experiences were either helpful or harmful?** Although two distinct subgroups, learning community participants and non-learning community participants had a similar ideas as to why

different experiences were either helpful or harmful, as well as what particular experiences helped to shape their collegiate career.

Each of the first-year experiences identified as either the most helpful or harmful by the participants seemed to be viewed in a positive light by the participants. An example was when participants discussed being lost on campus. While this experience was perceived as one of the most negative experiences for both learning community participants and non-learning community participants, when the experience was discussed each of them spoke not only about how the situation may have been “scary” or “stressful,” but also about how they learned from the situation and adapted to make a change.

The positive perception continued when participants spoke about what it was like for them to fail a test. Jake said, “It was definitely a wakeup call.” Through this experience, students were able to adapt and change their habits to become more successful in the classroom and thrive at the institution.

Through the experiences that participants viewed as helpful, participants discussed different connections, both socially and professionally that they made and how their experience was better for it. For example, Jane shared:

I’ve met a lot of people I think networking is one of the biggest things when you get here. More, you know, connections are always a good thing to have, um, plus it just, it kind of builds you as a person a bit, getting to, be able to relate to people and talk to people comfortably and kinda be a leader in a sense

Mary spoke about having friends in class when she said:

Definitely positive because you have someone that you can count on to like help you with the course and help you do better and then, if it's a course you're interested in then that person probably has like the same interests as you and so it's just like a good friendship based on like something that matters.

These connections are potential reasons the students decided to stay at the institution and how their academic and social experiences have impacted their views.

An interesting correlation behind how participants viewed experiences deals with whether or not a particular experience was helpful or harmful. When speaking about harmful experiences, participants spoke about how they changed to fit a particular situation. Conversely, when they spoke about helpful experiences, they spoke about others that they met and shared a common bond with to further enhance the experience they were already having at the institution.

## **Implications**

One of the major implications which can be drawn from this particular study would be that students in different programs tend to have comparable views on a range of experiences and how these experiences impact them. This was demonstrated to be true not only across disciplines, but also between the different cohorts studied. The commonalities are fascinating in that they demonstrate a common experience occurring across the campus and a common feeling between students and what they see as valuable to their collegiate experience.

The consistency of findings also demonstrates how strong institutional culture is and how it permeates through all levels of the institution and not just a particular

program. These common perceptions demonstrate a consistency in thought across campus, which is interesting in how each student may approach a particular experience. This information could be used to help structure or change institutional culture in specific ways to establish future traditions and expectations for entering or current students.

A finding which is surprising for this study is that learning community participants had a lower first-semester GPA than their non-learning community peers. This has significant implications for the learning community program at MU, and warrants a deeper look into the programmatic structure and how changes need to be implemented to better serve this population. Further study also needs to be done of these disciplines and the others served by the learning program to determine the long-term impact of this program.

### **Future Research**

While there was an increased understanding developed through this research project, there are several different directions which could be taken to further develop the topic and understand student perceptions.

One change the researcher would make if the study were done again would be to conduct follow-up interviews focused not on the most harmful or helpful experiences as deemed by participants, but to look at specific experiences for which the perceptions differed most between populations. This would provide a starting point in the discussion of where participants varied most, instead of looking at areas with common views on different experiences. The differences could then be explored, and a potential correlation between experiences and whether or not a student had participated in a learning community could be determined.

A comprehensive multi-year study utilizing interviews before, during and following the first-year of college for several cohorts would provide a more complete picture. This would allow students to not only further express their ideas and views in a timely manner, but it would also give further information as to how those views may shift throughout a student's time at an institution. Information could also be analyzed to determine if there is a consistent pattern among students who either succeeded or left the institution. This information could be used to develop outreach to try and assist the students who are more likely to leave the institution and determine ways to help them have a more positive experience.

In addition to gaining a more complete understanding of the students studied, it would be important to expand the study both to other disciplines beyond the three studied, and also other institutions. This would increase the applicability of the research across a broad range of demographics and institutional types. The theoretical framework developed through this could help to further understand how a student connects or disconnects with her or his institution and what factors may assist a student in staying to completion of his or her degree.

## **Conclusion**

First-year student experiences are common throughout different groups of students and throughout different incoming disciplines. This study worked to demonstrate the differences that participants had in their experiences, and ultimately learned that the differences were minimal. The common experiences speak to the strength of the institutional experiences students are having at MU and how they impact all students across campus.

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## **Appendix A**

### **IRB Approval Letter**



November 27, 2012

Jordan Black

Department of Educational Administration

ARH (Residence Life), UNL, 68588-0602

James Griesen

Department of Educational Administration

125 TEAC, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number: 20121112895EP

Project ID: 12895

Project Title: Student perceptions of first year experiences: A comparison of participants and non-participants in a learning community program and their first year experiences

Dear Jordan:

This letter is to officially notify you of the approval of your project by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. It is the Board's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the participants in this study based on the information provided. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46). Your project has been approved as an Expedited protocol, category 7.

Date of EP Review: 11/20/2012

<https://nugrant.unl.edu/nugrant/orr/irb/viewPrintedMessage.php?ID=1...>

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Approval: 11/27/2012. This approval is Valid Until: 11/26/2013.

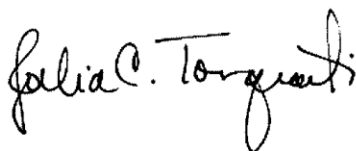
We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- \* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- \* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- \* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- \* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- \* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

For projects which continue beyond one year from the starting date, the IRB will request continuing review and update of the research project. Your study will be due for continuing review as indicated above. The investigator must also advise the Board when this study is finished or discontinued by completing the enclosed Protocol Final Report form and returning it to the Institutional Review Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 472-6965.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julia C. Torquati". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'J' and 'T'.

Julia Torquati, Ph.D.

<https://nugrant.unl.edu/nugrant/orr/irb/viewPrintedMessage.php?ID=1...>

Chair for the IRB



## **Appendix B**

### **Office of the Registrar Approval Letter**



STUDENT AFFAIRS  
Registration and Records

August 23, 2012

Internal Review Board  
ALEX West  
312 N 14th  
Lincoln, NE 68588 - 0415

Dear Committee Members,

The Office of Registration and Records has agreed to provide support to Jordan Black in her student research project regarding student perceptions of first year experiences under the general direction of Dr. James Griesen within the Department of Educational Administration.

Based on the request and plan forwarded to my office we will provide a randomly selected sample of student e-mail addresses that match the population target of the study. Students will be invited to voluntarily participate in the study by filling out an on-line survey. We will provide a file of unattributed e-mail addresses that will be used to invite students to participate in survey.

If you have any further questions, please contact Juan Carlos Gutierrez in my office at 402-472-2082.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Earl W. Hawkey".

Earl W. Hawkey, Ph.D.  
Director, Registration and Records

## **Appendix C**

### **University Housing Approval Letter**





Thursday, October 11, 2012

Internal Review Board  
ALEX West  
312 N 14<sup>th</sup>  
Lincoln, NE 68588-0415

Dear Committee Members,

The Office of University Housing has agreed to provide support to Jordan Black in his research project regarding student perceptions of first year experiences under his advisor Dr. James Griesen within the Department of Educational Administration.

Based upon the request and plan forwarded to my office, we will provide the names and a list of students who participated in the Business, Engineering and Mass Media Perspectives Learning Communities entering in the Fall of 2009 through the Fall of 2011. Students will be invited to participate voluntarily in a survey conducted online. The list will only be used for the online survey.

If you have further questions please contact me at 402-472-3885.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read "Keith Zaborowski".

Keith Zaborowski  
Associate Director University Housing – Residence Life

## **Appendix D**

### **Recruitment Email for Online Survey**

## Recruitment Email

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Jordan Black and I am a graduate student in the Educational Administration Department at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. I am also currently serving as an Interim Coordinator for learning communities.

I am currently conducting research for my master's thesis and I need your help. The topic being studied is student perceptions of their first year experiences at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. You have been selected for this study because you entered the University of Nebraska Lincoln between the falls of 2009 to the fall of 2011 and began your collegiate career in the College of Business Administration, the College of Engineering or the College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

The following link will take you to an online survey which should take you no more than ten minutes to complete. On the survey you will be asked about common first year experiences and whether you viewed them as helpful or harmful to your success at the University of Nebraska Lincoln.

Following the survey you will be informed about an opportunity to give additional feedback about your first year experience.

(Link to survey here)

Thank you so much for considering taking the survey, and please contact me if you have any questions.

Thank you!

Jordan Black  
Graduate Student  
Educational Administration  
[Jblack2@unl.edu](mailto:Jblack2@unl.edu)  
(605) 673-7979

## **Appendix E**

### **Reminder Email for Online Survey**

## Reminder Email for Survey

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Jordan Black and I am a graduate student in the Educational Administration Department at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. I am also currently serving as an Interim Coordinator for learning communities.

Recently you received an email asking you to participate in a research study looking at your first year experience at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. This is a follow up email to ask for your assistance if you have not yet filled out the survey.

The survey is designed to take less than ten minutes and will help impact future students at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. The link below will take you to the survey.

(Link to survey)

Thank you so much for considering taking the survey, and please contact me if you have any questions.

Thank you!

Jordan Black  
Graduate Student  
Educational Administration  
[Jblack2@unl.edu](mailto:Jblack2@unl.edu)  
(605) 673-7979

## **Appendix F**

### **Informed Consent Form for Online Survey**

## Informed Consent for Survey

The purpose of this research project is to better understand first year experiences of students. This research project is being conducted by Jordan Black, a graduate student in the Educational Administration Department at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. You are invited to participate in this research project because you entered the University of Nebraska Lincoln between the falls of 2009 to the fall of 2011 and began your collegiate career in the College of Business Administration, the College of Engineering or the College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose whether or not you want to participate. If you choose to participate in this research study, you may withdraw at any time. If you choose to not participate or withdraw from the survey you will not be penalized. By choosing to not participate or withdrawing from the research study your relationship with the researcher and the University of Nebraska Lincoln will not be harmed in any way.

The procedure for the research project involves filling out an online survey which will take approximately ten minutes to complete. Your responses will be kept confidential and identifying information such as your name, email address or IP address will not be collected. The survey will ask questions about common first year experiences and whether or not you viewed them as helpful or harmful to your success at the University of Nebraska Lincoln.

If you have any questions about the research, feel free to contact the investigators at any time. Contact information is listed below. If have questions regarding your rights as a research participant or to report any concerns, you may contact the Research compliance Services Office at (402) 472-6965.

Jordan Black, Principal Investigator  
James Griesen, Secondary Investigator

Phone (605) 673-7979  
Phone (402) 472-3725

Clicking on the “agree” button below indicates that:

- You have read the above information
- You voluntarily agree to participate in the study
- You are at least 19 years of age

If you do not wish to participate in the research study, or are under the age of 19, please decline participation by clicking on the “disagree” button.

- Agree
- Disagree

## **Appendix G**

### **Online Survey**



### Survey Questions

The prompts below from the survey will be utilized using a scale system. Each prompt will allow users to select anywhere from a -5 to a 5, with a neutral/did not participate option located in the middle. No question will be required to have an answer.

At the end, there will be an open ended box which allows students to put in their name and email address to indicate whether or not they would be interested in participating in a follow up interview.

The following prompts are common first-year experiences for students at colleges and universities. Please indicate whether or not you believe the particular experience was positive or negative by selecting the option that best fits your perceptions. If you did not have this particular first-year experience, please indicate that by selecting the neutral/did not participate option, located in the middle of the options.

1. Lived in a residence hall
2. Participated in a learning community
3. Met with a professor during study hours
4. Participated in a study group
5. Talked about an academic subject outside of the classroom
6. Failed a test, paper or project
7. Used alcohol
8. Used marijuana
9. Utilized a resource center (e.g. Writing, Math, Chemistry, etc.)
10. Was involved in an on campus group
11. Held a part-time job
12. Asked a question during class
13. Stayed up later than your normal bedtime to study for a test, complete a project or write a paper
14. Avoided schoolwork in favor of a social activity
15. Talked with your parents/guardians at least once a week
16. Budgeted your money
17. Changed your major
18. Worked on a group project
19. Met with your Academic Adviser
20. Asked for a letter of recommendation from a professor
21. Participated in a voluntary community service activity
22. Ate a meal alone in a dining hall
23. Was lost on campus
24. Made a friend in a course
25. Met alumni from your college

Would you be interested in a follow up interview?

Name:

Email:

## **Appendix H**

### **Follow-up Interview Email**

### Follow Up Email for Interview

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Recently you indicated at the end of a survey about your first year experience that you would be willing to participate in a follow up interview to further discuss your first year experience.

This interview is a one on one interview that will last no longer than 45 minutes to one hour and will be conducted in order for you to describe first year experiences and their impact upon your success at the Midwestern University. The interview will take place in an agreed upon location such as the Union, Multicultural Center, or Abel Residence Hall.

If you are still willing to take part in this interview, please contact me at [jblack2@unl.edu](mailto:jblack2@unl.edu) or (605) 673-7979 with your availability.

Thank you!  
Jordan Black  
Graduate Student  
Educational Administration  
[Jblack2@unl.edu](mailto:jblack2@unl.edu)  
(605) 673-7979

## **Appendix I**

### **Informed Consent for Follow-up Interview**



College of Education and Human Sciences  
Department of Educational Administration

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

IRB# 2012111289SEP

### **Identification of Project**

Student perceptions of first year experiences: A Comparison of participants and non-participants in a Learning Community program and their first year experiences

### **Purpose of the Research:**

This research project will be used to describe the first year experiences of students who either participated or did not participate in a Learning Community from 2009-2011. You were selected because you participated in the Business, Engineering, or Mass Media Perspectives Learning Community from 2009-2011 at the University of Nebraska Lincoln, or began your collegiate career in the College of Business, College of Engineering, or the College of Journalism and Mass Communication. The information was provided by University Housing Associate Director Keith Zaborowski. The research will be conducted early November through December 2012. The research will lead to a thesis which should be completed by April 2013.

### **Procedures:**

To participate in this research study, you must be at least 19 years of age at the time of the interview. A one-on-one interview will be conducted with you in order for you to describe your first year at the University of Nebraska Lincoln and what experiences impacted your success in either a positive or negative manner. The interview will last no longer than 45 minutes to one hour and will be conducted at an agreed upon location (Nebraska Union, Gaughan Multicultural Center, or a study room in Abel Residence Hall).

### **Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no risks associated with this study.

### **Benefits:**

This interview will allow you to talk about your first year experience at the University of Nebraska Lincoln and experiences you may have had as a potential member of a Learning Community. They will be used to further the direction of the Learning Communities program and the first year experience of other University of Nebraska Lincoln students.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Initials



College of Education and Human Sciences  
Department of Educational Administration

***Confidentiality:***

The information you provide will be used by the primary investigator in this study to write a master's thesis. Results may be published in a professional publication or potentially presented at a professional conference. Your name and information will be kept confidential and an alias will be assigned in the thesis in order to maintain your confidentiality.

Observations made by the primary investigator during the interview may be used to describe findings in the research. The data will be stored on the primary investigator's secure external hard drive and will be deleted following the completion of the project in May 2013. Audio recordings will be erased following transcription.

***Compensation:***

There will not be any compensation for participation in this research project.

***Opportunity to Ask Questions:***

If you have any questions about the research, feel free to contact the investigators at any time.

Contact information is listed at the end of this form. If have questions regarding your rights as a research participant or to report any concerns, you may contact the Research compliance Services Office at (402) 472-6965.

***Freedom to Withdraw:***

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time throughout the interview. Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with the investigators or the institution.

***Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:***

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented to you. You will be given a copy of the consent form to keep for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_ Initial if you agree to be audio recorded during the interview

***Signature of the Participant***

## **Appendix J**

### **Follow-up Interview Script**



## Interview Script

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. My name is Jordan Black and I am a graduate student in the Education Administration Department. Before we begin talking about your first year experience, let's look at the informed consent form. I will need your signature before we can proceed with the interview.

[WALK THROUGH PURPOSE OF RESEARCH, PROCEDURES, RISKS AND/OR DISCOMFORTS, BENEFITS, CONFIDENTIALITY, AND COMPENSATION].

If you agree to this point, please initial here.

[WALK THROUGH OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS, AND FREEDOM TO WITHDRAW].

Do not hesitate to stop me at any point throughout the interview to ask questions or to ask me to clarify.

[WALK THROUGH CONSENT, RIGHT TO RECEIVE A COPY].

Please initial here if you agree to be audio recorded. Please sign and date here if you agree to be a part of this study. Thank you for signing. Here is a copy of the informed consent form for your records. If you don't have any other questions, let's get started.

[QUESTIONS]

This concludes the interview. Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your first year experience. I really appreciate your help with my study. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions you may have.

## **Appendix K**

### **Follow-up Interview Protocol (learning community)**

## Interview Protocol

Date\_\_\_\_\_

Location\_\_\_\_\_

- Describe your first year at UNL?
- What experiences contributed most to your success at UNL?
  - Probes: academically, socially, mentally, physically
  - Did any of these experiences lead to other experiences which also helped you succeed?
  -
- What would you do differently if you could be a first year student again?
  - Were these bad experiences?
    - Were there consequences?
  - Did you change your behavior based upon them?
    - Probes: schedule, habits, friends, organization
- Was there ever a time you considered leaving the university during your first year?
  - If yes, why?
  - If no, why?
    - Probes: academics, social life, family issues, health problems

Now I'm going to ask you about some specific first year experiences you may or may not have had. What I will ask of you is: first whether you have had this experience or not, second whether or not you viewed it as helpful or harmful towards your success at UNL, and finally why you think it is either helpful or harmful.

[THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCES HERE WILL HAVE BEEN GATHERED THROUGH THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT. THE THREE MOST HELPFUL AND THE THREE MOST HARMFUL EXPERIENCES, ACCORDING TO THE SURVEY, WILL BE ASKED ABOUT UTILIZING THE FOLLOWING FORMAT]

The following prompts are common first-year experiences for students at colleges and universities. Please indicate whether or not you believe the particular experience was **positive** or **negative** by selecting the option that best fits your perceptions.

Failed a test:

Involved in a campus group

Used marijuana

Lived in a Residence Hall

Lost on Campus

Made a friend in a course

## **Appendix L**

### **Follow-up Interview Protocol (non-learning community)**

## Interview Protocol

Date\_\_\_\_\_

Location\_\_\_\_\_

- Describe your first year at UNL?
- What experiences contributed most to your success at UNL?
  - Probes: academically, socially, mentally, physically
  - Did any of these experiences lead to other experiences which also helped you succeed?
  -
- What would you do differently if you could be a first year student again?
  - Were these bad experiences?
    - Were there consequences?
  - Did you change your behavior based upon them?
    - Probes: schedule, habits, friends, organization
- Was there ever a time you considered leaving the university during your first year?
  - If yes, why?
  - If no, why?
    - Probes: academics, social life, family issues, health problems

Now I'm going to ask you about some specific first year experiences you may or may not have had. What I will ask of you is: first whether you have had this experience or not, second whether or not you viewed it as helpful or harmful towards your success at UNL, and finally why you think it is either helpful or harmful.

[THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCES HERE WILL HAVE BEEN GATHERED THROUGH THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT. THE THREE MOST HELPFUL AND THE THREE MOST HARMFUL EXPERIENCES, ACCORDING TO THE SURVEY, WILL BE ASKED ABOUT UTILIZING THE FOLLOWING FORMAT]

The following prompts are common first-year experiences for students at colleges and universities. Please indicate whether or not you believe the particular experience was **positive** or **negative** by selecting the option that best fits your perceptions.

Failed a test:

Involved in a campus group

Used marijuana

Talked to your parents at least once a week

Lost on Campus

Made a friend in a course

## **Appendix M**

### **Transcriptionist Confidentiality Statement**

### Transcriptionist Confidentiality Statement

I \_\_\_\_\_, (name of transcriptionist) agree to hold all information contained on the audio recorded tapes/and in interviews received from \_\_\_\_\_, (Name of PI), principle investigator for \_\_\_\_\_, (name of project) in confidence with regard to the individual and institutions involved in the research study. I understand that to violate this agreement would constitute a serious and unethical infringement on the informant's right to privacy.

I also certify that I have completed the CITI Limited Research Worker training in Human Research Protections.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Transcriptionist

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principle Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix N**

### **External Audit**



## External Audit Attestation

Carrie Petr

### Audit Attestation

Jordan Black requested that I complete a methodological audit of his qualitative thesis entitled “Student perceptions of first-year experiences: A comparison of participants and non-participants in a learning community program and their first-year experiences.” The audit was conducted in April of 2013. The purpose of the audit was to determine the extent to which the results of the study are trustworthy.

The audit was based on materials that Jordan provided for review. These materials provided evidence for the research process and were the basis for determining the extent to which the thesis findings were supported by the data. The following materials were provided primarily via email:

- IRB protocol submission
- Transcriptions of all five participants, each labeled with the corresponding participant number
- Completed version of thesis chapters one through five, references and appendices

### Audit Procedure

The audit consisted of the following steps:

1. Receipt of requested files as noted above
2. Review of IRB protocol submission
3. Review of random sample of transcriptions with independent coding to note possible emerging themes
4. Review of researcher identified themes and comparison to themes from auditor review and coding
5. Read draft version of complete thesis.
6. Write and submit the signed attestation to the researcher.

The below information details the auditor procedure and findings.

### *Review of proposal*

The IRB protocol submission was reviewed to gain an understanding of the original intention of the study and to later compare against the actual methods used in the study. The research was conducted as described in the protocol submission.

### *Raw data*

Transcriptions. The auditor reviewed files containing transcriptions from the recorded interviews of all five participants. The transcriptions noted the interactions between the researcher and the participants. The auditor randomly selected three of the five transcriptions and independently noted codes and emerging themes on a separate document while reading each transcription.

### *Identification of Themes*

The researcher's identified themes were compared to the coding by the auditor. The themes were consistent.

### *Thesis Manuscript*

The thesis manuscript was reviewed to ensure that each chapter consistently noted the purpose of the study, that the methodology was consistent with the informed consent, and that the findings were supported by literature and participant statements. The manuscript was well supported by documentation and followed consistent processes.

### Conclusion

Having reviewed the materials outlined in this audit, I submit the following conclusions regarding the process that was used and the product that was produced:

*Process.* It is the auditor's opinion that the process of the study was consistent with accepted qualitative research practices. The researcher fully described his process, noted study limitations, and established a basis of understanding allowing others to replicate this study. The focus of the student remained consistent with the proposed focus. The stated purpose and major questions remained consistent.

*Product.* It is the auditor's assessment that the trustworthiness of the study can be established. The findings are supported by the data. The researcher carefully designed the study and employed several verification strategies (peer review, clarification of researcher bias, and external review). The researcher provided a background of each of the participants and a context as to their selection and involvement in this study. After recoding the transcript, I concluded there is support from the data for the themes presented.

Attested to by Carrie Petr this 15<sup>th</sup> day of April 2013

Carrie Petr, Ph.D.

Director, Hansen Leadership Program, Doane College