

The freshman learning community (flc) in sport management: Does it have an impact?

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**Teaching
Session 15**

**Friday, May 30, 2008
2:30 PM - 2:55 PM**

**Presentation (25-minute)
Abstract 404**

It is estimated that 40% of college students will leave higher education without getting a degree (Porter, 1990) and 75% percent of such students will leave within their first two years of college (Tinto, 1987). Thus, it is not surprising that almost every university in the country has developed and implemented some type of "first year learning experience" for college freshman to facilitate retention (Jaffee, 2007). Few would argue that the freshman year represents a stressful transition for college students (Lu, 1994). Despite a multitude of social, academic, and emotional stressors, most college students successfully cope with a complex new life role and achieve academic success. Other students are less able to successfully manage this transition and decide to leave higher education during or at the end of their freshman year. Freshman class attrition rates are typically greater than in any other academic year and are commonly as high as 20-30% (Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek, 1987). These patterns have assisted in the plight for university officials to put together programs to increase student retention on college campuses.

A report from the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, for the first time focused attention on a national level, on the first year or freshman year experience. The study called for college administrators to reallocate faculty and other institutional resources toward the development of first and second year students (Hunter, 2006). "The idea of the learning community came to the fore in the late eighties and early nineties. The learning community movement arose as a way to assuage criticism of higher education's structural problems, such as its oppressively large units and emphasis on research (Gahlenick, MacGregor, Matthews, Smith, & Leigh, 1990 p.2)". Many psychological theories state that getting a student involved early in a small community while in college can allow for him or her to socially integrate and develop confidence which improves performance and retention (Hotchkiss, Moore & Pitts, 2006). Students who are involved with their campus and community show positively correlated factors of retention, so institutions are allocating funds to assist colleges with the implementation of such programs (Hunter, 2006).

Texas A&M University currently admits over 7,000 freshmen each year and labels itself as a research institution. The Freshman Learning Community (FLC) was first implemented on the Texas A&M University campus in the fall of 2004. More specifically the Sport Management Program at Texas A&M University started their FLC the same year. The program has specific goals including connections with faculty and peers, community service, university involvement, time management and study skills, leadership, career development, and team building. However, the overall goal of the program is to increase retention while allowing students to make the transition to college life. The purpose of this study was to assess the success of the Freshman Learning Community with regards to the level of student engagement in comparison with the sport management freshman students that were not a part of the Freshman Learning Community program.

Data were collected by adapting the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) (2007) to measure the level of student engagement with numerous academic and extracurricular activities. The data were collected the conclusion of the 2006 academic year. A total of 21 FLC students completed the questionnaire, as did 87 students studying in the sport management curriculum. However, only freshman students studying in the sport management curriculum were retained for the analyses ($n = 48$). All of the participants in the study were enrolled in separate sections of a Foundations of Sport Management course; however, the 21 FLC students were also enrolled in the separate Learning Community course over the entire freshmen year (1 hour per week). The BCSSE instrument measures broad student engagement with the goal of gaining a better understanding of the influence of the university on student performance and patterns of engagement with university assigned work loads. The instrument also assesses the value that students place on academic tasks and community opportunities (BCSSE, 2007).

Data were analyzed using a series of independent sample t-tests, the participation or lack of participation in the formal program Learning Community served as the independent variable for the analyses. A total of 19 items measuring engagement of the student with academic tasks served as the dependent variables in the study (a priori significance level was set at .001). The 19 questions from the BCSSE included items such as "come to class without completing readings," "talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor", and "worked with other students on projects during class." The items were measured on four point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 = Never to 4 = Very Often.

Significant differences were noted on 4 of the 18 outcomes. The Learning Community Students indicated that they were more likely to work on projects with other students in class ($M = 2.52, SD = .75$) than the freshmen students not in the FLC ($M = 1.92, SD = .81$) $t(47) = 2.62, p < .01$. The FLC students were also more likely to have participated in a community based project

2008 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2008)

than non FLC student ($M = 2.52, SD = .67$; $M = 1.78, SD = .83$ respectively) $t(47) = 3.32, p < .001$. The FLC students were more likely to have used email to communicate with their instructors ($M = 3.33, SD = .73$) than non-FLC students ($M = 2.85, SD = .80$) $t(47) = 2.13, p < .05$. Finally, the FLC students were also more likely to work with their faculty members on activities other than course work ($M = 2.33, SD = 1.11$) than non-FLC students ($M = 1.64, SD = .67$) $t(47) = 2.69, p < .01$.

First year programs must assess goals and objectives based on their programs needs. Based on the current study and a thorough review of the literature, a model has been developed to help students better understand and achieve program outcomes. The FLC students indicated a higher level of engagement by communicating with instructors, completing community service projects, interacting with faculty, and working with other students in class. Research into student retention in higher education suggests that creating emotional attachments and social bonds are two key ways to retain students who might otherwise drop out (McGinty, 1987). It is also interesting to note that significant differences on levels of engagement were not significant. We expected that students in the FLC would be more engaged in asking questions in class, contributing to class discussions, and working with classmates outside of class to prepare for class assignments. Pragmatically, these findings are useful when assessing the value of FLC and determining future curriculum goals and learning objectives for the program. The findings should also be of interest to curriculum scholars that can use this exploratory study to establish future research questions of interest related to first year college experiences and retention.