

Building Stronger Campus Communities Through Formalized Partnerships: Enhancing Living-Learning Communities in Higher Education

Linda Jena Ed. D*

Dallas, TX, USA, **ORCID ID:** 0009-0000-9890-2384

Email: jena.linda@gmail.com

Abstract

Learning Communities (LCs) and Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) are effective models for enhancing student engagement and fostering a sense of belonging in Higher Education (HE). However, the absence of structured collaboration frameworks often leads to less effective programs. This paper explores the challenges of interdepartmental collaboration in LCs and LLCs at a mid-sized public university in Northeast Texas and proposes a formal collaboration agreement as a solution. The agreement streamlined partnerships, enhanced accountability, and improved student experiences. By prioritizing structured partnerships, HE institutions can unlock the potential of these programs, ensuring they remain essential components of the student experience.

Keywords: Higher education; Collaboration; Collaboration agreement; Living-Learning Community (LLC).

1. Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of higher education, LCs and LLCs have reemerged as powerful models for enriching the student experience and fostering a sense of belonging within university settings [1,2,3]. These programs, which integrate academic and co-curricular experiences, rely on the active involvement of the entire campus community, academic and non-academic departments alike, to achieve their goals. However, the absence of a structured collaboration framework often poses significant challenges, hindering the effectiveness of these partnerships.

Received: 3/9/2024

Accepted: 5/9/2024

Published: 5/19/2024

* Corresponding author.

Without formalized agreements to clarify roles, responsibilities, and shared objectives, departments at a midsized public university in Northeast Texas struggled to coordinate efforts, resulting in fragmented initiatives and diminished student engagement. To address these challenges, a comprehensive intervention was developed, introducing a formal collaboration agreement designed to streamline partnerships, enhance accountability, and ultimately strengthen campus communities. This paper explores the potential of such formalized partnerships to transform the way institutions approach collaboration, ensuring that LCs and LLCs can thrive and deliver meaningful outcomes for students.

2. LCs and LLCs: An Overview

LCs have a rich history, dating back to Harvard University's founding and Alexander Meiklejohn's pioneering work at the University of Wisconsin, which emphasized fostering faculty-student interaction [2,4]. While definitions of LCs vary across institutions, this paper defines them as structured educational models designed to address key challenges in HE, such as faculty engagement, curriculum coherence, and fostering a sense of community [4,5]. Typically, LCs consist of two or more interconnected courses taught by faculty who collaborate to align curricula, integrate assignments, and regularly coordinate to enhance student learning and program success. Beyond academics, LCs also serve as platforms for professional development, forming cohorts centered on areas of interest or specific subjects, such as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. These communities often involve collaborative efforts among various campus partners to engage faculty and staff in innovative educational practices.

As HE institutions evolved, adding departments like student affairs and the increasing expectations for student success led to the emergence of Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) as a subset of LCs [4,6]. While definitions of LLCs vary, this paper defines them as specialized programs that integrate academic and residential experiences, where students live together and participate in tailored programs such as tutoring, advising, and social activities. Rooted in high-impact practices, LLCs emphasize the quality and quantity of students' interactions with peers, faculty, and staff to create a holistic learning experience [6,7]. Examples of such programs include first-year experiences and sophomore experiences. At the institution this paper is based on, LLCs were primarily affinity-based and academic interest groups, such as STEM and Women in Agriculture.

Affinity-based LLCs are centered on shared identities or interests, promoting academic and social integration [8,9]. At this Northeast mid-sized university, affinity-based groups were designed to support minority students, aiming to improve retention rates and foster a sense of belonging at a historically predominantly white institution (PWI). Academic interest groups, on the other hand, provided enhanced learning opportunities by connecting classroom content to real-world applications. Participants in these groups had the chance to interact with professionals in their fields of interest, offering insights into potential career paths. These LLCs resulted from partnerships between the housing office and other campus partners, though these collaborations were not without challenges.

LCs and LLCs offer numerous benefits by fostering meaningful interactions between students, faculty, and staff.

Over time, students in these communities have reported higher levels of satisfaction with their overall college experience and an increased sense of belonging. Studies have shown that students who participate in LCs and LLCs demonstrate higher persistence rates, GPAs, and retention rates than their peers who do not participate in these communities [3,5,7]. These benefits were evident among the students in the affinity-based and academic interest groups at the institution, with many attributing their success and persistence to the collaborative nature of these programs.

Despite these benefits, LCs and LLCs face significant challenges. Coordination efforts across multiple departments and or disciplines can be complex, and resource limitations, both financial and human, often hinder implementation [10,11]. Additional factors, such as misaligned goals, inconsistent communication, unmet expectations, and lack of formalized structures, can further complicate partnerships, leading to fragmented or failed initiatives. Addressing these challenges requires intentional collaboration and clear frameworks. To address these issues, a formal collaboration agreement was implemented to streamline partnerships, enhance accountability, and ultimately strengthen campus communities.

3. Collaboration in Higher Education

Collaboration involves individuals or groups working together to achieve a common goal. In higher education (HE), collaboration is essential for institutions with diverse departments and disciplines, as they operate under the same overarching vision and mission. While much of the recent research on collaboration in HE focuses on partnerships with external entities, such as business organizations and research, there is a growing need to address the interdepartmental and interdisciplinary silos that persist within institutions [10,11]. These silos often hinder the day-to-day work of serving the largest stakeholder: students. However, insights from external collaboration research can still be leveraged to improve internal partnerships and provide students with the holistic learning experiences necessary for the success of models like (LCs) and (LLCs).

Studies have shown that interdepartmental and interdisciplinary collaboration in higher education fosters seamless learning experiences for students by connecting theory and practice [3,11,12,13]. Successful collaborations have benefited students, staff, and faculty, while institutions have leveraged these partnerships to enhance research, retention, and student learning opportunities [7,12,13]. For example, research by Abegglen & Burns [13] found that institutions with strong interdepartmental collaboration saw increased student retention rates. At the same time, Frazier & Eighmy [11] and Daffron & Holland [12] highlighted improved faculty engagement and student satisfaction in collaborative programs. Given these benefits, programs like LCs and LLCs are particularly well-suited to thrive in collaborative environments, as they rely on integrating academic and co-curricular experiences. This underscores the importance of adopting a collaborative model to enhance their effectiveness.

Despite the recognized importance of collaboration, implementing effective partnerships is still a struggle, as illustrated at this mid-sized Northeast Texas university. After several years of collaborating with various departments, the housing department bore full responsibility for the Living-Learning Communities (LLCs). This included programming, finances, and participant recruitment, highlighting the need for a more balanced and

sustainable approach. This experience aligns with research that shows that interdepartmental collaboration is difficult and results in the ineffectiveness of LCs and LLCs [3,11,12]. This scenario revealed that several key elements must be prioritized for collaboration to be effective. While not exhaustive, the following elements are critical for fostering successful partnerships and ensuring that no single department becomes overburdened:

- **Communication:** Clear, consistent, and transparent communication is the foundation of any successful collaboration. This included written and oral communication to eliminate confusion, set expectations, and ensure continuity despite changes in personnel over time.
- **Clear roles and responsibilities:** Clearly defined roles and responsibilities alleviate conflict, remove redundancy, and ensure accountability. In this case, housing personnel would manage residential logistics, while the partnering department would manage programming for curriculum integration.
- **Resource allocation and sharing:** Effective collaboration requires equitable distribution and sharing of resources, including funding, facilities, and staff. This clarity ensures the sustainability partnerships and long-term viability of programs.
- **Evaluation and continuous improvement:** Assessing the collaboration's effectiveness allows partners to identify and address weaknesses in time, celebrate areas of strength, and adapt any necessary changes for the program's success and/or shared goals.

4. The Implementation of a Collaboration Agreement to Enhance LLC Success

In the business world, formal agreements, such as contracts, are commonly used to ensure clarity, accountability, and efficiency in collaborations. Similarly, the collaboration agreement implemented in this case was designed to formalize partnerships and address the challenges faced by LLCs. The following sections highlight key components of the agreement and their impact on LLC operations and interdepartmental relationships:

1. **Housing commitment:** As the initiator of the collaboration agreement, the housing department outlined its resources and responsibilities in this section. This commitment provided stability across all LLC partnerships, ensuring students had consistent access to opportunities and benefits. By clearly defining the housing department's role, the agreement addressed previous issues of resource limitations and overburdened personnel, creating a more sustainable framework for LLC operations. In addition, this commitment aligns with the need to address chronic challenges in LLC partnership commitments, which [11,12] found critical.
2. **Advisor expectations:** This section designated advisors from each collaborating department as liaisons and coordinators for their respective LLCs. By assigning clear roles, the agreement ensured that each department was accountable for its contributions, particularly in programming and student mentoring. This also established a direct communication channel, reducing delays and confusion, thereby mirroring best practices for establishing partnerships [12,13]. Students reported improved access to support, noting that they no longer had to navigate multiple contacts to resolve issues.
3. **Community expectations:** The inclusion of community expectations added significant value to the LLCs by defining the roles of students, faculty, and housing staff. This clarity allowed students to hold each other accountable and fostered a sense of shared responsibility. Additionally, the documented standards

provided a foundation for students to explore and learn within their communities, as expectations were communicated clearly from the outset. The addition of this section addressed issues and recommendations raised in research [11,12,10,]

Implementing the collaboration agreement led to a noticeable shift in how LLCs operated. Benefits included streamlined processes, clear expectations, and defined responsibilities for all stakeholders. Students reported a stronger sense of belonging and support, attributing these improvements to the structured framework provided by the agreement. This case demonstrates the potential for formalized collaboration agreements to enhance interdepartmental partnerships and improve student experiences in higher education.

5. Conclusion

LCs and LLCs are dynamic program models for enriching the student experience and fostering a sense of belonging. However, lacking a structured collaboration framework often hinders their effectiveness, leading to unsuccessful programs [12]. The implementation of a collaboration agreement demonstrated the transformative potential of such frameworks. By addressing the key elements such as commitments, expectations, and community standards, the agreement streamlined partnerships, enhanced accountability, and improved student experiences. As institutions adopt similar models, they will continue to enhance the effectiveness of LCs and LLCs, ultimately contributing to student success, retention, and institutional excellence. While the collaboration agreement improved accountability, its success depends on sustained buy-in from all departments, even during periods of leadership change. Additionally, this suggested framework assumes centralized housing systems with LLCs and may not apply to institutions with different housing systems.

References

- [1]. N. E. Floyd. "Identity and achievement: A depth psychology approach to student development." *Small Group Research*. 41(1), 71-84, Feb. 2010.
- [2]. L. B. Smith. (2001, Fall). "The challenge of Learning communities as a growing national movement." *Peer Review*. [On-line]. 3(4), 4-8. Available: <https://home.ubalt.edu/ub78145/My%20Library/storage/F71R7MW4/pr-fa01feature1.html> [Feb. 28, 2025].
- [3]. L. Jena. "Experiences and Outcomes Associated with Students Who Self-Select into Living-Learning Communities at a R3 University." Ed.D. dissertation, East Texas A&M University, Texas, 2024.
- [4]. A. G. Love. "The Growth and Current State of Learning Communities in Higher Education." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*. 2012(132), 5-18, Dec. 2012.
- [5]. M. Elobaid, M. Zidani, N. Koffa, S. Qadi. (2024, November). "The impact of freshman learning communities on students' academic performance." *Frontiers in Education*. [On-line]. 9, 1-17. Available: <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1465809> [Feb. 24, 2025].

- [6]. S. G. Anderson, B. Blankenberger. "Validation and Living Learning Communities: An Evaluation Case Study." *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*. 25 (1), 76-100, May. 2023.
- [7]. M. L. A. Stassen. "Student Outcomes: The Impact of Varying Living-Learning Community Models." *Research in Higher Education*. 44 (5), 581-613, Oct. 2003.
- [8]. K. E. Boyd-Sinkler, T. K. Holloman, C. M. Pee, W. C Lee, and J. S London. "Black Students in Undergraduate Engineering Programs: A Qualitative Systematic Review." *Journal of Negro Education*. 91 (1), 112-124, Winter. 2022.
- [9]. B. N. Ramos. "Moving From Access to Success: How First-Generation Students of Color Can Build Resilience in Higher Education Through Mentorship." *The Vermont Connection*. 40 (9), 55-61, Jan. 2019.
- [10]. L. Roper. (2021, April). "Encouraging Interdisciplinary Collaboration: A Study of Enablers and Inhibitors Across Silos in Higher Education." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*. [On-line] 8 (1), 1-25. Available: <https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/35449/> [Mar. 7, 2025].
- [11]. E. Daffron, and C. J. Holland. (2009). "Honors Living-Learning Communities: A Model of Success and Collaboration." *Honors in Practice*. [On-line]. 5 (5), 197-209. Available: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchchip/98/> [Mar. 10, 2025].
- [12]. W. Frazier, and M. Eighmy. (2012). "Themed Residential Learning Communities: The Importance of Purposeful Faculty and Staff Involvement and Student Engagement." *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*. 38 (2), 10-31, 2012.
- [13]. S. Abegglen, T. Burns, and S. Sinfield. *Collaboration in Higher Education: A New Ecology of Practice*. Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 2023, pp. 33-154.
- [14]. S. Abegglen, T. Burns, and S. Sinfield. *Collaboration in Higher Education: A New Ecology of Practice*. Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 2023, pp. 33-154.