

KU Learning Communities—assessment summary

In 2012, the University of Kansas reestablished its commitment to learning communities as a way to promote student academic and personal success. The University of Kansas previously had a learning communities program housed within its division of Student Success. This program was discontinued in 2008. As part of *Bold Aspirations*, KU's strategic plan, the university had made new investments in first-year intellectual experiences. Learning communities was one program recommended by the Energizing the Educational Environment (EEE) workgroup.

In 2012, the University of Kansas established an Office of First-Year Experience to implement the recommendations of the EEE workgroup. In August 2012, an associate director for academic programs was hired to work with the director on the development of learning communities. In October 2012, the Office of First-Year Experience added a faculty fellow to help develop an institutional plan for the expansion of learning communities.

In 2012, the Office of First-Year Experience supported one pilot LC program, the Mount Oread Scholars learning community, housed in the Undergraduate Advising Center. The planning for this learning community occurred prior to the launch of the Office of First-Year Experience, but the project had input from members of the EEE workgroup.

The Mount Oread Scholars learning community consisted of three orientation seminars each linked to a general education lecture course. Each seminar enrolled 19 students, so the learning community accommodated 57 students across the three sections. The learning community included a residential component with all students living in GSP residence hall.

The pilot of the Mount Oread Scholars learning community was designed to focus on the benefits of cohort enrollment. For phase I of this learning community, we did not expect that faculty would collaborate across courses or develop assignments to integrate material. Because we had yet to develop a structure to support this level of faculty involvement, the learning community was designed to promote and measure the following benefits of cohort enrollment:

- Through discussion-based seminar students practice active participation that they utilize in other course environments.
- Through the seminar students gain confidence interacting with instructors and peers and see the value of these connections in other course contexts.
- Cooperative learning activities in the seminar facilitates collaboration in larger courses.
- Students acquainted through the seminar have an established network for study groups in the lecture course.
- Students develop skills in integrative thinking by identifying and discussing meaningful connections across course content.

In early fall 2012, it was announced that the Mount Oread Scholars Program would be discontinued at the end of the academic year. This announcement limited the scope of the assessment project, as the MOS director and course instructors learned that the program would not be repeated. The Office of First-Year Experience took over the assessment project to use this information to guide the development of future LC projects.

The Office of First-Year Experience with some input from UAC staff developed a student survey that consisted of questions to assess the benefits of cohort enrollment. The assessment was distributed to students through the Baseline platform at the end of the semester. 21 students responded to the survey.

Findings:

- 76% of student respondents said that they would likely be an active participant in future course discussions because of their experience in the learning community.
- 100% of respondents said that they were somewhat confident, very confident, or extremely confident in their interactions with instructors and peers.
- Nearly half the respondents said that they were very likely to interact with faculty outside of the classroom.
- 60% of the respondents said that the seminar course did not help them to establish study groups.
- 57% of the respondents made few to no connections between courses.
- Fewer than 40% of the respondents felt that the residential experience related to their seminar course.
- Over 50% of respondents felt that their success at KU benefited very little or at all from having peer mentors associated with the learning community.

The Office of First-Year Experience has used this information to improve the 2013 LC pilot programs. We currently have three learning communities for freshman students coordinated out of the Office of First-Year Experience, two on the topic of **exploring visual culture** and one on **sustainability**. Each LC consists of a seminar—either a First-Year Seminar or a section of PRE 101 (KU's orientation course)—linked to a lecture course. The assessment of the MOS learning community has informed the development of these new LCs in the following ways:

- Instructors teaching the seminar courses have disciplinary background or interest in the content of the linked lecture. There has been increased collaboration across faculty, particularly in the area of experiential learning. Faculty from the sustainability learning community met with staff from the Lied Center to incorporate performance opportunities into both courses.
- All three learning communities are using the KU Common Book, which provides a bridge across courses and an important connection among all LC participants.
- The Office of First-Year Experience and the Department of Student Housing have engaged in a survey and focus group project developed by Stacey White's Urban Planning 763 course. This project is exploring ways that first-year students make academic and housing decisions.

- The Office of First-Year Experience now manages the peer mentor program. Peer mentors were selected by an application and interview process. Peer mentors completed training with our FYE associate director of academic programs, and this group continues to meet on a monthly basis for ongoing training and to evaluate how the peer mentor portion of the program is meeting student needs. Our associate director has also met together with the peer mentors and their assigned faculty and also separately with the faculty to monitor progress and to gather feedback on this aspect of the LC program.
- Integrative assignments from all three seminar courses will be assessed using the AAC&U Value rubrics for critical thinking and written communication.
- We have convened a university workgroup to explore the expansion of learning communities. This group has been reviewing assessment information, researching best practices, and refining goals and learning outcomes for the program.

The present version of KU's learning community program is still new and assessment will become more robust over time. The workgroup is developing new goals and learning outcomes for the program based on priority areas for development. The workgroup is also preparing a proposal for the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities at the Washington Center at The Evergreen State College. If selected for participation, this program will provide an additional opportunity for us to refine our vision and administrative structures for the program, including our assessment plan.

This report summarizes recent activity in the Office of First-Year Experience. Additional learning communities exist in the Honors Program, the School of Business, and the School of Engineering. For information about the assessment of these learning communities, please contact these schools and programs directly.