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LEARNING — COMMUNITIES

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“I’m taking the step by learning about my history that many of the people that look like me have been so often deprived of. I am doing this with people who have similar mindsets and undying curiosities of exploring the life, history, and culture of African American individuals and their role in the south.”

—Student participant, 2019 Summer Learning Community

For over 2 decades, the Learning Community Program has impacted students at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), with its emphasis on critical thinking, community, belonging, and student success. Faculty teaching this high-impact practice (HIP) not only implement an integrated curriculum in 2 paired courses representing different disciplines, but also strive to build community among the students and teachers, setting up activities and an atmosphere so that students of diverse backgrounds can build relationships and understanding.

At CCBC, we typically have general education learning communities for first year students in the general college population, as well as ESOL learning communities that link ESOL classes with a general education requirement and allow preacademic ESOL students to earn credit. In 2019, our Learning Community Program reached new heights, as a Mellon Foundation Humanities for All grant paved the way for summer travel themed learning communities to Atlanta, Montgomery, Birmingham, and later New Orleans, as well as taking a deeper look at our own Baltimore during the pandemic.

In these settings and with the support of their learning community faculty, students explored culturally relevant themes, formed a community bond as they journeyed together throughout the country, and gained both academic success and a life-changing experience

Overview of the Literature on Learning Communities

Learning communities, as a nationwide HIP, have contributed to a myriad of positive outcomes that are documented in the literature. Back in 2004, for example, a study by Zhao and Kuh found that “participation in some form of learning community is positively related to student success.” Since then, West and Williams (2017) refer to previous research documenting that learning communities are associated with higher persistence rates and grade point averages as well as “higher student engagement, greater respect for diversity of all students, higher intrinsic motivation, and increased learning,” which they attribute to the community atmosphere. According to Kern and Kingsbury’s (2019) study on retention, students who took learning communities were twice as likely to persist as students who took the same courses as standalone courses. An unpublished dissertation found that learning communities were positively linked with retention at community colleges (Wurtz, 2014, cited in Katsumoto & Bowman, 2021). Katsumoto and Bowman (2021) in their study on international student success, found that participation in learning communities was one of the few HIP experiences that positively impacted international students’ GPA, sense of belonging, and college satisfaction, which they attributed to the “collectivistic environment” in learning communities.



CCBC DATA

ON LEARNING COMMUNITIES

CCBC's internal data concurs regarding the success of learning communities. In January 2023, CCBC's Planning, Review, and Evaluation (PRE) Department provided a data analysis comparing all the learning community sections of courses to standalone sections, for all semesters between summer 2019 to summer 2022 (Breux, 2023). The results, presented in Tables 1-3, indicate that students who enrolled in CCBC learning communities had significantly higher retention rates, success rates, and GPAs (Breux, 2023). In particular, African American and Hispanic/Latino students who enrolled in learning communities had significantly higher retention, success rates, pass rates, and GPAs than their counterparts who enrolled in non-learning community sections, as Tables 4-6 attest (Breux, 2023).

One reason for this success, according to some scholars, is that learning communities have a particular potential for creating a strong sense of community and belonging, which specifically can be built through "active and collaborative learning" as well as through student-faculty interaction, engagement in activities focusing on diversity, and emphasis on higher-order thinking skills (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Maestas et al. (2007) refers to studies in which learning community students perceived "higher levels of faculty support, peer support, and classroom comfort" and "view[ed] their faculty as being more empathetic and understanding," all factors that contribute to belonging. CCBC learning community faculty strive to intentionally build community and belonging in the classroom; students in the Humanities for All summer travel learning communities had an opportunity to experience these to a greater degree.



Table 1. Next Semester Retention.

Learning Community			Non Learning Community		
Enrollment	N retained	% retained	Enrollment	N retained	% retained
850	642	76%*	37,557	25,792	69%

Table 2. Success Rate by Term.

	Learning Community			Non Learning Community		
Term	Enrollment	N success (ABC)	% success (ABC)	Enrollment	N success (ABC)	% success (ABC)
Summer 2019	21	17	81%	33	25	76%
Spring 2020	144	108	75%*	4,913	3,210	65%
Fall 2020	149	93	62%	8,593	5,302	62%
Spring 2021	205	134	65%*	7,237	4,155	57%
Summer 2021	25	25	100%*	13	11	85%
Fall 2021	178	126	71%*	10,453	6,168	59%
Spring 2022	108	73	68%	6,265	3,813	61%
Summer 2022	20	20	100%*	19	13	68%
Total	850	596	70%*	37,526	22,697	60%

Table 3. GPA Comparisons.		
	Learning community	Non Learning community
N	850	37,557
Mean Term GPA	2.48*	2.19
Standard deviation	1.39	1.34
Significance (2-tailed)	0.000	
Mean difference	-0.29	
Standard error difference	0.05	
Lower CI	-0.38	
Upper CI	-0.19	

* = statistical significance. Abbreviations: CI = confidence interval, GPA = grade point average.

Table 4. All Course Results: Next Semester Retention by Race/Ethnicity and Gender.							
		Learning Community			Non Learning Community		
Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Enrollment	N retained	% retained	Enrollment	N retained	% retained
African American GPA	female	254	197	78%*	11,205	7,235	65%
	male	145	108	74%*	5,419	3,364	62%
	total	399	305	76%*	16,624	10,599	64%
Asian	female	87	75	86%	1,726	1,408	82%
	male	64	40	63%	1,334	1,025	77%
	total	151	115	76%	3,060	2,433	80%
Hispanic/Latino	female	50	40	80%	1,959	1,365	70%
	male	28	20	71%	1,340	919	69%
	total	78	60	77%	3,299	2,284	69%
White	female	102	88	86%	6,909	5,049	73%
	male	71	43	61%	4,959	3,536	71%
	total	173	131	76%	11,868	8,585	72%

* = statistical significance.

Table 5. Success Rate by Race/Ethnicity and Gender							
		Learning Community			Non Learning Community		
Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Enrollment	N success (ABC)	% success	Enrollment	N success (ABC)	% success
African American GPA	female	254	173	68%*	11,200	6,022	54%
	male	145	82	57%	5,406	2,654	49%
	total	399	255	64%*	16,606	8,676	52%
Asian	female	87	70	80%	1,726	1,335	77%
	male	64	40	63%	1,333	902	68%
	total	151	110	73%	3,059	2,237	73%
Hispanic/Latino	female	50	45	90%	1,959	1,155	59%
	male	28	21	75%	1,337	709	53%
	total	78	66	85%	3,296	1,864	57%
White	female	102	85	83%	6,906	4,976	72%
	male	71	44	62%	4,954	3,347	68%
	total	173	129	75%	11,860	8,323	70%

* = statistical significance.

Table 6. GPA by Race/Ethnicity					
Race/Ethnicity	Learning Community Status	Mean Term GPA	Standard Deviation	95.0% Lower CL for Mean	95.0% Upper CL for Mean
African American	learning	2.17*	1.42	2.03	2.31
	non-learning community	1.88	1.32	1.86	1.90
Asian	learning	2.90	1.34	2.69	3.11
	non-learning community	2.54	1.25	2.50	2.59
Hispanic/Latino	learning	2.89	1.00	2.66	3.11
	non-learning community	2.05	1.34	2.01	2.10
White	learning	2.67	1.34	2.47	2.87
	non-learning community	2.58	1.26	2.56	2.61

* = statistical significance. Abbreviations: CI = confidence interval, GPA = grade point average.

HUMANITIES

FOR ALL INITIATIVE AND CCBC TRAVEL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

"In a moment of time, in areas I was standing in, my ancestors were damaged. Even though all of this information broke me down, and made me extremely uncomfortable, it taught me that if we are looking for justice, we have to be comfortable with these feelings. It was amazing to also feel a sense of triumph, resistance, and resilience."
—Student participant, 2019 Summer Learning Community

CCBC's Humanities for All initiative propelled our learning communities to another level with its intentional design and purposeful faculty integration of high-impact and experiential activities into courses to foster a humanities mindset for their students' academic, personal and professional lives. Humanities for All engaged faculty as leaders in innovative teaching to enrich curricula and instructional design, with themed learning communities featured as a signature activity, resulting in enhanced student learning experiences, support, and outcomes.

2019 Summer Learning Community: The History of Racial Terrorism

"Another interesting part about the trip was to see how different aspects of society (from mass incarceration to agriculture) have played a major role in civil rights and how all those elements are still important today. I learned so many new facts about racial terrorism to the point where it made me want to cry (16th St. Church specifically)."
—Student participant, 2019 Summer Learning Community

In summer 2019, the History of Racial Terrorism Summer Honors Learning Community, led by Professor Adrienne Washington and Dr. Gretchen Rudham, paired sociology and English literature courses while delving into the history of racial terrorism. Experiences included several HIPs

(service learning, undergraduate research, common intellectual experiences, global learning and diversity, collaborative assignments and projects) and a travel component empowered students to learn about new cultures. Eleven students of color, between the ages of 19–29, participated in this Special Topics in Literature and Racial and Cultural Minorities hybrid learning community.

For context, the English literature course covered the imagery of the South, themes of memory, truth-telling and resistance, the legacy of dehumanizing images and caricatures during Jim Crow and Segregation, and the reclamation of images in music, film and art. Additional topics in sociology included culture, scientific racism, systemic racism, immigration, history and influence of hip hop, mass incarceration, the media's impact on minority groups, the death penalty, naming patterns among cultures, social inequality, and food insecurity (Rudham & Washington, 2019). Both Honors and non-Honors students were eligible to earn 6 Honors credits during the summer, and students who were not members of the CCBC Honors Program at the start of the learning community were encouraged to apply to the Honors Program upon completion of the experience.

Students and faculty traveled to Georgia and Alabama, visiting the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, the Lynching Memorial and

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Legacy Museum, the Equal Justice Initiative, the 16th Street Baptist Church, the George Washington Carver Museum, the Booker T. Washington Home, and Tuskegee University among other cultural institutions and historic sites. In Montgomery, Alabama, students engaged in community-based learning and contributed service through a hands-on urban farming day at EAT South, a non-profit organization part of Alabama's sustainable agriculture tradition rooted in the work of George Washington Carver and Booker T. Whatley (Eat South).

As a hallmark of experiential learning in Honors education and HIPs implemented through Humanities for All, this summer Honors learning community fostered CCBC's attainment of long-term goals including participation in activities, measurable change in perspectives toward the humanities, and measurable change in persistence and retention (Walker, p. 1). Moreover, racial affinity was created among the students who also learned to become advocates for social change using digital media production techniques (Rudham & Washington, 2019). Surveys and focus groups provided qualitative feedback and data, and each student submitted 4 video logs (vlogs) to reflect on their travel and learning experiences.

Success rate data reveals that students enrolled in the learning community had a course pass rate of 81%, as compared to students enrolled in non-learning community courses that summer at 76%; see Table 2 (Breaux, 2023).

Multiple HIPs, including community-based and service learning, diversity and global learning, collaborative assignments and projects and undergraduate research, were infused into the learning community to accomplish Humanities for All grant goals and objectives. Consequently, students' engagement in multiple HIPs and co-curricular opportunities through this learning community enabled them to build upon strengths that resulted in perseverance, social capital and enhanced their strong sense of cultural identity (Turner, 2022). All students reflected on the powerful, transformative nature of the 2019 Summer Learning Community and travel experience.

Evident in student reflections via blog entries and videos are 4 recurring themes of connection to ancestors and interacting with history, confidence, connection to peers and interpersonal skills, and the change agent role. To begin, students reflected on their newfound connection to ancestors and opportunity to interact with their history.

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One student shared that "my experience was overwhelming emotion wise, and it was an abundance knowledge wise. I learned a lot about my culture, my history, my black and white ancestors...I did not expect to become so emotionally connected and invested, but I enjoyed gaining the experience and knowledge." Another student spoke of self-discovery and history learned, sharing "I discovered myself. It was important to physically see the history and sites, and to learn outside of my comfort zone. Standing on the ground where the captives first were held in misery; that to me was haunting and carried a whole lot of baggage in the sense that, what if this were me? What if my family members were going through this turmoil?"

Second, students gained confidence and command not only of course content, but also of their voice, writing, and speaking skills. One student described personal progression and confidence gained in the form of creativity. "My writing has progressed. I found the assurance of a brighter future." Similarly, another student expressed that "I've learned from the course and the readings that we all have individual paths, lives and experiences and that destiny plays a strong role in determining our fates. But it is the hardships, pain, strength, dedication, and yearning for progress and change that builds potential and character."

Additionally, the learning community fostered among students a greater connection to peers and interpersonal skills. As one student participant noted, "it was refreshing to be in a new area with new people. I didn't just learn about myself and my ancestors, I also learned to make friends from all different backgrounds. I thought I would be secluded or only get close with 1 to 2 people, but it turns out I became friends with everyone! And that was something I did not expect!"

A final theme centered on students' self-perception as change agents and an increased desire to contribute to and influence society. One student recalled that "we realized how important we are. It showed me that there is a lot of work to do." Two other students shared a desire to make a positive societal contribution: "These were real events, real stories, real people, real lives, and it pushes me to work 10 times harder, not only for myself, but to create a legacy that won't be forgotten. I have a responsibility to spread the knowledge in a way that is reflective of myself." In addition, a student summarized her learning experience remarking that "this class is [about] spreading the awareness about issues to work altogether to bring a change. The reoccurring themes that were ringing in my mind as I was picturing and reading through the notes and the descriptions around the rooms that I walked through were: Advocacy; Serving Justice; and Empowerment."



CONCLUSION

AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Through Humanities for All, CCBC faculty and staff encouraged the academic pursuits of thousands of students engaged in HIPs across highly enrolled courses, exposed learners to humanities-enriched curricula and the Honors Program, and increased student engagement. With powerful, life-changing learning communities, students took a humanistic approach to their travel experience as they connected with community residents and learned about the history of each location, while applying concepts learned in class. Recognizing the powerful, transformative impact of the 2019 summer Honors learning community as part of Humanities for All, CCBC facilitated a 2021 summer learning community with the theme "Tapping into the Wire" pairing Sociology 102 (Social Problems) with Digital Media 111 (Visual Communications) for 12 Honors and non-Honors students. Professors Adrienne Washington and Kendrick Kenney led students on a 7-week journey, using the city of Baltimore as the text for the course. Students examined social issues affecting Baltimore, stereotypical media portrayals, and Black excellence as seen in Baltimore citizens. Also, in partnership with Baltimore Oral History, students interviewed Baltimore residents and participated in lectures on local history. Students researched the story of Henrietta Lacks, human trafficking, the impact of homelessness, and food justice.

In 2022, CCBC followed up with a summer learning community with travel to New Orleans, Louisiana using the theme, "Through the Eye of Hurricane Katrina: Social Justice & Media Literacy in the United States." Professors Adrienne Washington and Kendrick Kenney created an experience for students to learn about first-hand experiences of Hurricane Katrina survivors. Students created visual ethnographies and documentaries

highlighting the social problems that were further exacerbated by Hurricane Katrina and the impact of the levees breaking. In partnership with community residents, students participated in service-learning through a park beautification project in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans. Students contributed to a mural project in Odile Davis Park. The mural now serves as a reminder of community, resilience, and cultural connection for the residents, students, and faculty.

The role and importance of community partners was relevant throughout each of the learning communities. Partnerships included institutions of higher education, transfer partners, urban farms, advocacy groups, law clinics, and community shelters. Community partners provided another layer of expertise for students as they researched the impact of specific social issues. Another key lesson learned was the importance of building community among faculty and students. As a HIP, learning communities require a greater time commitment and the travel components result in more time spent outside of the classroom. Students are engaged with faculty and peers while focused on substantive, real world issues. The final key lesson learned throughout this process was the importance of the travel component and building cultural capital for students. Providing students with an opportunity to travel, at no cost, and learn from experts from across the United States has indeed been powerful and life changing.

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