

The Sky is the Limit: A Learning Community for Undeclared Students – A Sustainable Investment in Student Success and Retention

Clark R. Coffman, Stacey N. Barnes, Jenifer N. Saldanha, MaKayla B. Schroeder, Andrew J. Sage, Jo Anne Powell-Coffman and Craig A. Ogilvie
Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011

INTRODUCTION

- Learning communities at Iowa State University are strongly linked with improved student persistence:
- The average 1-year retention rate is 7.2% higher for students enrolled in a learning community as compared to non-learning community students.
 - The average 6-year graduation rate is 11% higher for learning community students than for students who are not in a learning community.

- Undeclared students at Iowa State University:
- Prior to 2015 did not have a learning community specifically targeted to address their needs.
 - Historically undeclared students have 6% lower one-year retention rate compared to the university wide one-year retention rate.

EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

- Undeclared students have two course options during orientation:
- Seminar course – in a large lecture hall with 300 students once a week.
 - Learning community – A small multi-section course ≈ 40 students per section once a week in addition to the seminar course. Peer mentors at a 1:8 ratio with students.

DATA COLLECTION

- Retention data was collected after the tenth day of classes in the following fall semester.
- Student confidence data was collected using pre and post semester surveys in both courses.

RESULTS

- Undeclared students who are struggling academically during their first semester are more likely to attend and pass the learning community than the seminar course.
- Low academically performing learning community students have 2.5-fold higher odds of returning after one year as compared to seminar course participants.
- Underrepresented minority students in the learning community have an 8% higher one-year retention rate compared to seminar course participants.
- Learning community students make greater gains in confidence relating to major and career selection.

DISCUSSION

- Undeclared students are more likely to attend a small learning community course than a large lecture seminar course and are therefore more likely to receive programming that the university has deemed essential to retain students and enhance their experience.
- Learning communities require more personnel and are therefore more costly to the university than large seminar courses but the cost is offset by an increase in tuition dollars by retaining more students.

A Learning Community for Undeclared Students

1. Increases student retention

2. Enhances the students’ confidence in major and career selection

3. Is a financially sustainable investment

The Sky is the Limit Learning Community for Undeclared Students

Section 1	Section 2	Section 3	Section 4	Section 5
Save Planet Earth	Helping People: The Healthcare Career Spectrum	Changing theme year-to-year	Creative Solutions to Tomorrow’s Problems	Bringing Numbers to Life

Investment:

Five 1/8 time instructors per (fall semester)

16 peer mentors-4 per section

1/4 time lead coordinator (year round)

≈ \$20,000

≈ \$10,000

≈ \$12,000

≈ \$42,000 total

Estimated gain using learning community model

18 low performing students over 3 years \$144,000 (≈ \$48,000/year)

