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

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### 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 oneyear retention rate compared to the university wide oneyear retention rate.

### **EXPERIMENTAL SETUP**

Undeclared students have two course options during orientation:

- i. Seminar course in a large lecture hall with 300 students once a week.
- ii. 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**

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

### DISCUSSION

- i. 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.
- i. 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)  $\approx $20,000$ 16 peer mentors-4 per section  $\approx $10,000$ 1/4 time lead coordinator (year round)  $\approx $12,000$  $\approx $42,000$  total

Estimated gain using learning community model
18 low performing students over 3 years \$144,000 ( ≈ \$48,000/year)

### IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

## Learning community participation increases students' confidence in major and career selection Choose a major or career that will fit your interests

Academically low performing students are more likely to attend

and pass the learning community

Academically low performing students have increased odds of

being retained after participating the learning community

2.13 \*\*

2.00 \*

Learning community participation improves retention of URMs

non-URM

Not Specified

URM

The Sky is the Limit

92.31%

84.62%

85.71%

87.55%

F15

Average

P value = 0.06

Independent variables

URM

RAI

Non-URM

(Not Specified)

The Sky is the Limit

High School Biology Units

High School English Units

High School Physics Units

High School Social Science

# of DFW Courses ( $\geq 20\%$ )

High School Math Units

# of College Credits

 $P < 0.05^*$   $p < 0.01^{**}$ 

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# of Midterms

High School Chemistry Units

Iowa Resident

Pass/fail rate for high and low performing students

Low performing

1.95 \*\*

1.95

Model 3

Odds ratio

2.24 \*\*

0.68 \*\*

Seminar Course

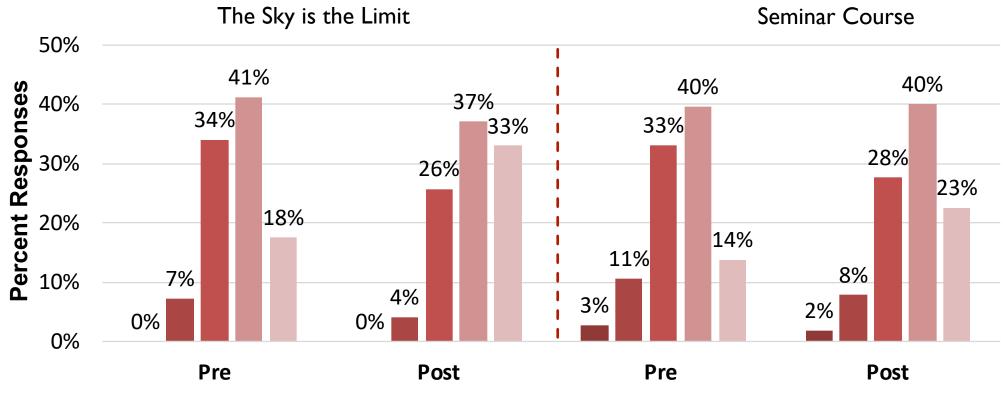
Seminar Course

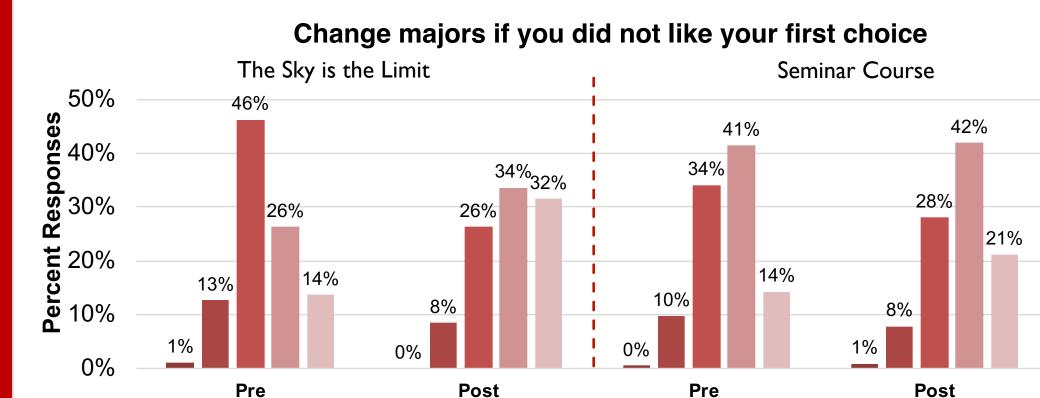
77.42%

83.33%

78.00%

79.58%





■ No confidence at all ■ Very little confidence ■ Moderate confidence ■ Much confidence ■ Complete confidence