Assessment in Practice

Assessing Learning Communities Based on Program Outcomes and the Eight Characteristics of High-Impact Practices

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All universities are required to assess the effectiveness of their academic programs for accreditation purposes and for improvement. Less is known about student services program assessment, especially those which focus on academic and social integration. One such program is the Learning Community (LC) Program. At Wayne State University (WSU) in Detroit, a systematic assessment approach was established in 2014 which targets overall LC learning outcomes including the eight key elements of High-Impact Practices.

THE LEARNING COMMUNITY PROGRAM AT WSU

The Learning Community (LC) Program at Wayne State University has been in place since 2005. The initiative started with Residential Learning Communities, but has evolved into a program serving over 9,000 students in different capacities. Learning communities at Wayne State take a variety of forms supporting academic and social integration with a focus on student characteristics and needs. Each LC has follows a proposal process and the strength of the proposal is based on a rubric score. Among the requirements are specific learning outcomes within the overall LC framework and implementation of at least three of the eight key elements of High-Impact Practices in alignment with the university's student success goals, and an assessment plan.

KEY ELEMENTS OF HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES

One of the ten High Impact Practices, identified via research as highly beneficial to students, is learning communities. Eight key elements of High-Impact Practices make High-Impact Practices effective (Kuh,

2008). Whereas the application of these eight key characteristics is related to instructional settings, these can be easily applied in learning communities. Wayne State LC coordinators are encouraged to choose from the checklist regarding which ones they would like to implement in their LC (Figure 1). Because learning communities are closely connected with classes, but also foster academic success within a community of learners, these are very applicable.

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List of High-Impact Practice characterictics that coordiantors can implement in their Learning Community

Choose three or more of these HIP characteristics you intend to implement that will support learning in your LC:

1. **Performance expectations are set at appropriately high levels.**
   Challenge is good for students – it interests and engages them – as long as the challenge is within reach.
2. **Significant investment of time and effort by students over an extended period of time.**
   Perhaps the LC might have a supplemental project that students work together on during the semester.
3. **Interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters.**
   How will a peer mentor help your students interact with faculty? Are you open to deeper discussion about the subject matter? About being in college?
4. **Experiences with diversity, wherein students are exposed to and must contend with people and circumstances that differ from those with which students are familiar.**
   A Learning Community might use icebreakers to help students get to know each other and the rich array of experiences and backgrounds among Learning Community members
5. **Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback.**
   Elaborate on how you will embed timely and constructive feedback into LC activities.
6. **Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning.**
   Reflecting on your own learning may make it easier to help students do so.
7. **Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world applications.**
   Field trips, speakers, and many other LC activities can help make learning “real.”
8. **Public demonstrations of competence.**
   LC sessions can be a great place for students to practice their class presentations, or to present and share learning even if they aren’t asked to do so in class.

Figure 1. High-Impact Practices for LCs

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

From the establishment of the LC program until 2014, individual LC coordinators were instructed to do their own assessment and submit it to the program

coordinator. They were advised to use their data for improvement. Program assessment consisted of reporting the retention rates of LC students. In 2014, the assessment process became more intentional and systematic. First, measurable learning outcomes were created, which are listed below:

In 2014, the assessment process became more intentional and systematic.

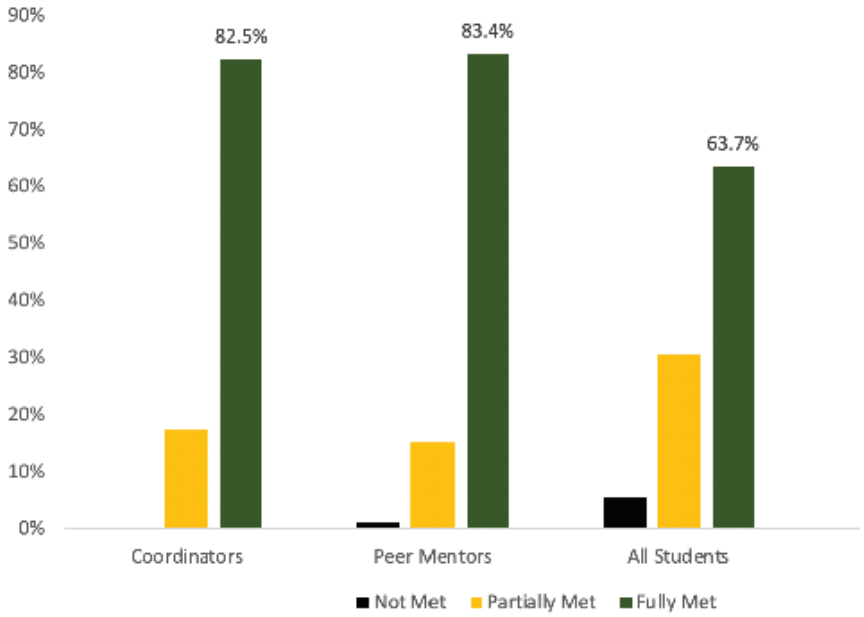
1. Learning Communities will create a community of learners, where, students have a strong sense of membership in a diverse community, whose purpose they understand and value, and with whom they engage.
2. Learning Communities will develop **three specific learning outcomes**, experiences designed to meet the learning outcomes, and an assessment plan to measure student success.
3. Learning Communities will incorporate characteristics of High-Impact Practices (HIPs), as outlined by AAC&U, for improved student success. They will offer students opportunities for increased connection to the subject matter and provide students with both independence and support.
4. Learning Communities will train responsible Peer Mentors to lead academic study sessions, demonstrate effective study methods to LC students, appropriately respond to challenges, and build a sense of community among participants.

Secondly, to determine if the learning community program is effectively meeting the outcomes, each stakeholder group – individual LC coordinators, peer mentors for each LC, and students – were asked to answer the same survey questions. (See questions in Appendix A for the LC Student Outcome Survey.) The answers to survey questions were on a likert scale ranging from “not met” to “partially met” and “fully met.” The only variability in survey questions was the way in which they address each group. Additionally, students also responded to questions about their peer mentors’ performance. The survey is administered through an online platform, which also provided basic reports.

Third, after the data collection was completed (usually in the beginning of May), the data were downloaded, cleaned, and in-depth analyses were performed. A learning outcome was met when all three stakeholder-agreed at 80%. This was based on Robert Mager’s (1984) definition for performance mastery, e.g. if a learning outcome has been met at 80% by all students, mastery was achieved.

Learning Outcome 1 was met at or above the threshold by all stakeholders, however, significant differences were found when additional analyses were performed. Students more often indicated, at significantly lower levels, that they were meaningfully engaged. (See Graph 1 on the next page.)

Learning Outcome 2 was measured through the submission of individual LC assessment reports. Overall, Learning Outcome 2 was fully met by 62.8 % of the Provost-funded Learning Communities (22 of 35). Of all Learning Communities 19 of 35 complied with their proposed assessment. 100% of all LCs submitted three or more LOs, 100% of all LCs also had an assessment plan.



Graph 1: Meaningfully engage with other students to create a community of learners.

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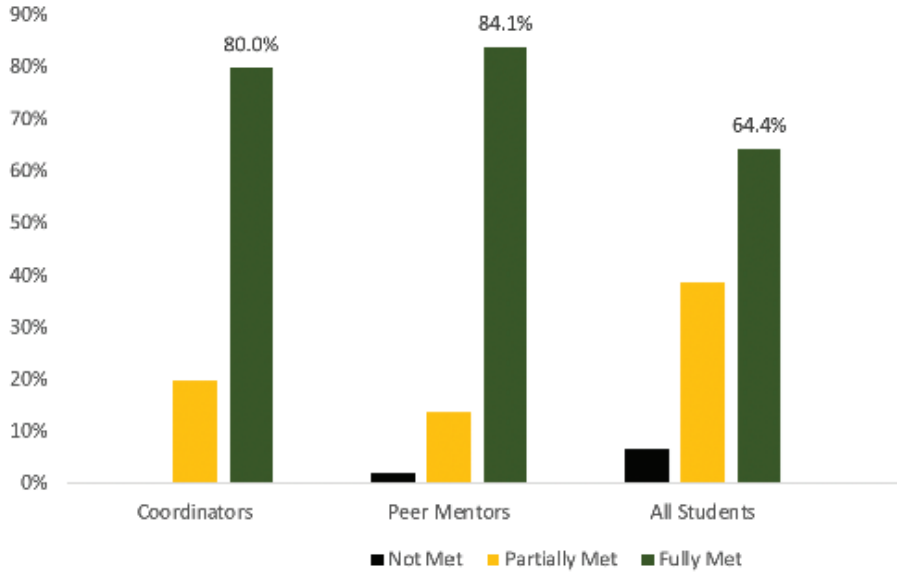
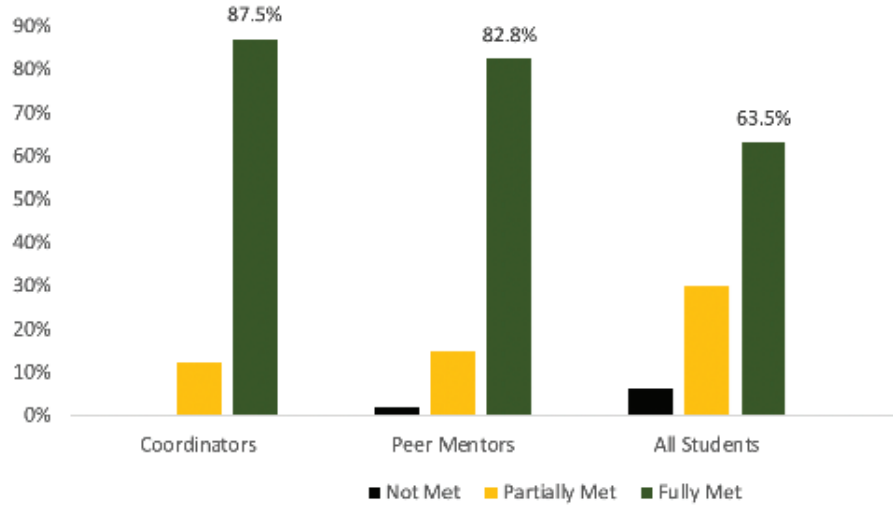
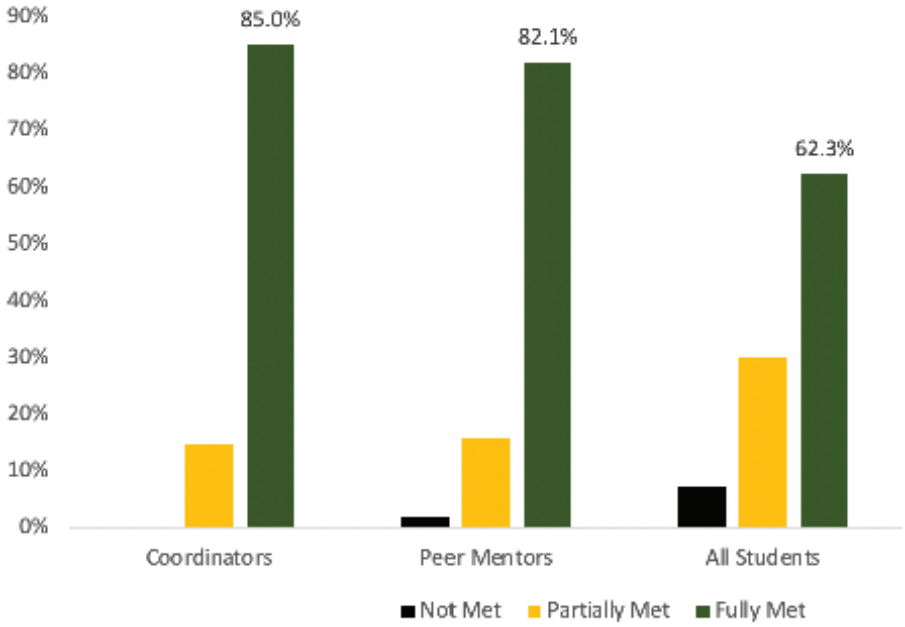
Learning Outcome 3 targeted the 8 characteristics of High-Impact Practices. Significant differences were found between the groups, where students indicated that High-Impact Practices were met at significantly lower levels than their coordinators and peer mentors indicated. Graphs 2-5 show four of the assessed elements and how the three groups are similar or differ from another.



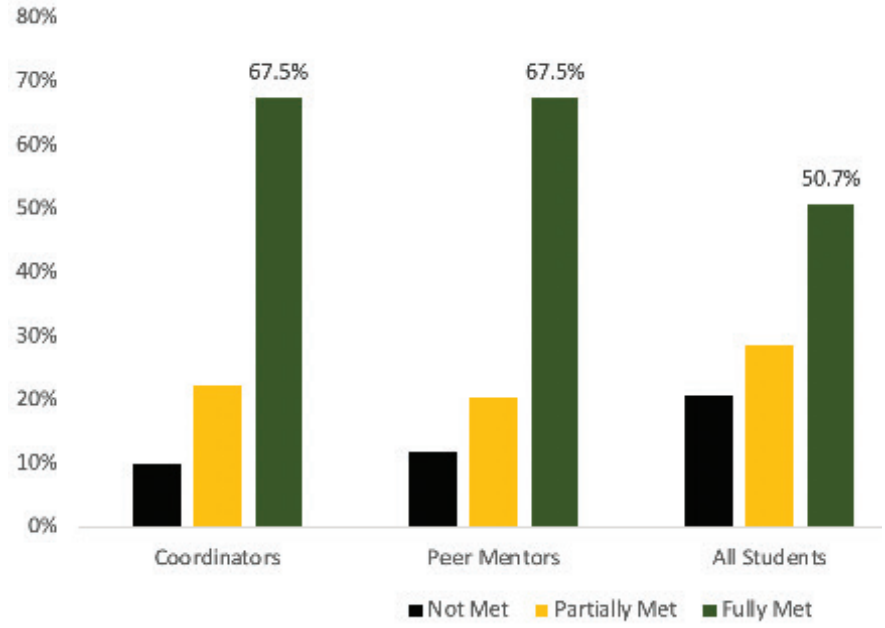
Graph 2: Performance Expectations



Graph 3: Constructive Interactions with Faculty, Peers, and Peer Mentors



Graph 4: Experiencing Diversity



Graph 5: Real World Connections

Significant differences were found between the groups, where students indicated that High-Impact Practices were met at significantly lower levels than their coordinators and peer mentors indicated.

Learning Outcome 4 was measured by a set of questions about peer mentor performance which were answered by LC coordinators and students. Like in the previous results, we found that there were significant differences in the perceptions students had of the peer mentors versus the coordinators. Students scored their competence on average 20% lower.

The open-ended responses showed more clearly what students truly benefitted from in their learning communities.

The results from the survey did not provide enough information for targeted efforts for improvements. We wanted to know what was most beneficial to our LC students, so we asked two open-ended questions: "What did you like best about your LC? And "What do you wish you had done more of in your LC?"

Figure 2 shows the results of the qualitative theme analysis.

Assesssment (Part 2) - Qualitative Themes

What did you like best about your CL?

1. **Academic support** and/or advice, help (63)
2. Working with **Peer Mentors** (58)
3. Amount of learning and variety of Learning methods (44)
4. Availability of and access to information/ **resources**/job and other opportunities (35)
5. **Engagement** with others and **collaboration** (31)

(286 students responded to questions; responses in brackets show frequency of the theme)

What do you wish you had done?

1. **Engaged more** with others including peer mentors (48)
2. N/A. **Nothing (different)**. It was a great experience (40)
3. More learning, study tips, met goals (31)
4. Had more opportunities, **more time, outside of class** experiences (29)
5. Attended more often, invested more time (20)

(259 students responded)

Figure 2: Qualitative Themes

The open-ended responses showed more clearly what students truly benefitted from in their learning communities and what they wanted to see done in learning communities more often, which was really valuable information that couldn't be captured in the quantitative analyses. We can now understand better why students may say to a lesser extent that certain outcomes were not met at high levels.

We were particularly interested in the eight key elements of High-Impact Practices to see how valuable those are to our students. We wanted to find a good framework for that analysis and used the "Best fit framework" synthesis as described by Caroll, Booth, Leavis, Rich (2013). This technique uses an existing model or framework onto which data are mapped. We used the 8 key characteristics and mapped the comments students made onto these. We did this twice, once with the "liked best" comments and once with the "wish had done" comment. Then we ranked the key element that emerged on top (most comments mapped onto it) down to the ones that had the least comments. See Table 1 for the complete ranking.

What students benefitted from	What students would like more of
Interactions with Faculty and Peers about substantive matters (161)	Significant Investment of Time and Effort by students over an extended period of time (83)
Significant Investment of Time and Effort by students over an extended period of time (61)	Interactions with Faculty and Peers about substantive matters (61)
Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world applications (49)	Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world applications (34)
Periodic, Structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning (27)	Performance expectations set at appropriately high levels (23)
Performance expectations set at appropriately high levels (22)	Periodic, Structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning (22)
Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback (19)	Experiences with diversity, wherein students are exposed to and must contend with people and circumstances that differ from those with which students are familiar (5)
Experiences with diversity, wherein students are exposed to and must contend with people and circumstances that differ from those with which students are familiar (14)	Public demonstration of competence (1)
Public demonstration of competence (6)	Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback (0)
Total student responses (n = 286)	Total student responses (n = 259)

Table 1. Ranking of 8 Key Characteristic according to LC students.

From these comments we learned which characteristics of HIPs students perceived as beneficial, and this knowledge will both inform the program coordinator and the individual learning community coordinator what HIP experiences and activities they may want to focus on more in their work.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Our learning community assessment has evolved over the years. Each data collection cycle since 2014 has led to reflection and discussion with the LC stakeholder, particularly our coordinators and our students. Our key takeaways are:

- Based on the quantitative results we have realized that we need to change the scale from a 3-point (not met to fully met) to a 5-point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) to have more variability in the responses. We also believe that few coordinators and peer mentors may indicate that they haven't met outcomes. We are already seeing differences in our results, and will use these for continuous program improvement.

- With respect to the characteristics of HIPs, we have come to the understanding that we need to be transparent about these not only to our

coordinators and peer mentors, but also our students. We are planning to do workshops with coordinators and peer mentors to intentionally implement activities related to these, because we have not required these should be made explicit. For that reason, we are encouraging coordinators and peer mentors to build these into their syllabi, or directly address these when students gather with coordinators or peer mentors. This transparency will both show the intentionality of these practices, as well as the benefits to students.

- Our additional qualitative data analysis has provided us with very valuable information about our students, and helps us understand student needs and benefits as these relate to the key characteristics of HIPs. Interestingly what students benefit from and what they want to see more of in their educational experiences overlap greatly. The prioritization of the individual elements by students will inform classroom practices and activities within the LC context. We are planning on a workshop in which LC coordinators can share their best practices to be adapted to other LCs.

- We also found that the "Best Fit" Framework Synthesis may be an underused approach in education research to learn more about a particular population within an established framework. It may be given preference over a grounded theory approach to extract themes.

- Last but not least, the emphasis on intentionality and accountability when it comes to writing and meeting learning outcomes has to be given more emphasis. Students will understand their own learning much better when they are presented with transparent and intentional learning outcomes to which they and their instructors, peer mentors and peers can be held accountable.

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APPENDIX:
LC STUDENT SURVEY 2016-17

Select your Learning Community: _____ (Pull down answer options, see attached Excel spread sheet)

Please indicate your level of agreement by using the following answer options:

- Not met
- Partially Met
- Fully Met

HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES

In my Learning Community, I …

1. … work on assignments, projects, and activities which are challenging at appropriately high levels.
2. … invest significant time and effort on learning activities throughout the semester.
3. … constructively interact with faculty, peers and peer mentors about subject matter.
4. … am experiencing diversity through interacting with and learning about people whose background is different their own.
5. … receive timely and constructive feedback to improve learning
6. … have opportunities to reflect on my learning and have opportunities to integrate knowledge.
7. … have opportunities to make real-world connections and applications through field trips, speakers and other activities.
8. … present my knowledge and competence through various forms of presentation in or outside of the classroom.

Learning Community Outcomes

In my Learning Community, …

9. … students engage meaningfully with other students to create a diverse and inclusive community of learners.
10. … we meet LC specific learning outcomes that support students' successful course completion.
11. … we continuously utilize High Impact Practices to help students successfully work towards a college degree.
12. … peer mentors take on a lead role and work effectively with students toward college success.

My PEER MENTOR …

13. … maintains contact with students.
14. … is approachable for students.
15. … acknowledges students' challenges and assists with finding realistic solutions.
16. … shows respect and understanding for diverse student experiences.
17. … demonstrates a variety of effective study methods.
18. … encourages students to make effort to try new strategies, and provides feedback on their efforts.
19. … guides students with collecting information and careful selection of materials for problem solving.
20. … offers advice and suggests resources to identify academic and career aspirations.
21. … shows students that they are accountable for their learning process and outcome.
22. … encourages active participation in the community and service projects.

(Open ended Questions)

23. What did you like best about your Learning Community?
24. What do you wish you had done in your Learning Community?

Thank you for participating in the LC Student Outcome Survey!

If you would like an e-mail confirmation for your participation in this survey, please provide your e-mail address here:

Please Cite As:

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About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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