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# Learning communities: Understanding the transfer student experience

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**Learning communities: Understanding the transfer student experience**

by

**Jennifer R. Leptien**

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

Major: Human Development and Family Studies

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2012

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Learning communities provide small groupings of students of similar academic interests with the opportunity to take two or more college courses together, form study groups, and engage in shared social and service activities. Some communities of learners live together within the same residential hall, while others meet only within the classroom or a common meeting space. Along with the benefits of taking two or more courses in common and engaging in shared social activities, these cohort groups often have access to small group interactions with faculty and staff and many receive additional academic and social support from upper classmen in the same major or college who serve as peer mentors for the learning community (Laufgraben and Shapiro, 2004).

Learning community programs were developed to acclimate and retain incoming students, primarily focusing on first-year students direct from high school; however, growing numbers of students are transferring to universities with substantial college credits earned at other institutions. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, one-third of all students transfer colleges at least once, most often during their second year of college (2012). Among the general transfer pool, 41.2% of students transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution (NSCRC, 2012). Research on the needs of transfer students suggests that this population requires assistance in acclimating to the university culture. Students transfer to the university with varied levels of academic preparedness for the courses they encounter (Laanan, 2004). Additionally, the students often feel socially isolated and have difficulty getting to know other students (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Lack of academic preparedness and social connection contributes to a negative transition experience known as transfer shock (Hills, 1965).

Transfer shock is evidenced by a dip in a student's GPA following transfer from a community college to a four-year institution. This negative academic experience may then lead to personal dissatisfaction with the transfer institution.

The transition experiences of the transfer population have been difficult for a variety of reasons—students often enter the university underprepared, without clear academic goals, discover incompatibility between themselves and the transfer institution, and struggle to manage the demands of multiple roles such as student, parent, and employee (Laanan, 1996; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Zamani, 2001). Additionally, transfer students are typically less socially engaged with the university than students who entered in their freshmen years (Ishitami & McKitrick, 2010). These barriers have resulted in decreased academic performance of the transfer student population, which in turn has increased pressure on Academic Affairs and Student Affairs professionals. They have been challenged to address transfer students' needs and enhance the partnership between offices to improve the transition process so more students can first frame and then achieve their academic goals.

Many schools now collaborate to improve the rate of transfer from two- to four-year institutions through articulation agreements. These agreements aim to improve the transfer process by clearly defining which community college course credits will transfer to the prospective student's chosen four-year institution. Handel reported that "...only about half of the community-college students who indicate a desire to transfer to a four-year institution eventually succeed" (2007, p.38). With increasing numbers of students transferring via these articulation agreements, it is important to consider how learning

community programs may assist them so that the transition can be more seamless and successful. While the transition experience of transfers has received research attention (Davies & Casey, 1999; Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010; Laanan, 1996; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Zamani, 2001), the particular experiences of those getting academic and social support through learning communities has not garnered much attention.

Self-efficacy may be an important key to understanding transfer students' ability to transition successfully to the university. Self-efficacy is defined as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy contributes to personal motivation and one's ability to achieve set goals. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy can help discern how transfer students address the academic and social challenges encountered during their transition. Specifically, it can serve as a framework to identify how learning community engagement can support and influence the transfer student transition experience.

This qualitative case study explores learning community programming and the transition experiences of transfer students. The specific goals of the study are two-fold: (1) to better understand the role of self-efficacy in the experiences and insights of recently transferred college students participating in a transfer learning community at the receiving four-year institution; and (2) to recognize how self-efficacy is addressed in transfer learning community program design. The study highlights the challenges and opportunities faced in working with transfer students and developing learning community programming for them. Data analyses provide insights about the congruence and

incongruence between learning community programming and the expressed needs of the students they serve.

A case study design offers “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, 2002, p. 205). This study uses a qualitative case study approach because the objective is to better understand learning. A combination of two individual interviews with students enrolled in university learning communities over the course of a semester enabled the researcher to develop trust with the participants and encourage deeper understanding through prolonged engagement with them. Student interviews were complemented by focus groups engaging the students near the end of the semester. Coordinators (full-time staff or faculty who manage each learning community) participated in a focus group exploring transfer programming design from their perspectives. Additionally, the research process included examination of learning community documentation artifacts, such as the learner outcomes provided in the annual Request for Proposals (a document used to propose a given year’s learning community, see Appendix F) and course syllabi to evaluate the intended outcomes from the transfer learning community experience with those reported in the coordinator focus group.

Data collected from individual students and coordinators can be analyzed then used to inform the delivery of various academic and social learning community programming components including strategies to best engage transfer students in learning community initiatives. The personal accounts of study participants help identify the specific academic and social needs of transfer students that have not been well met by

learning communities. The findings can shape the approach used to engage the transfer population academically and socially through learning community participation.

### *Alternative Dissertation Structure*

The organization of this qualitative dissertation follows the alternative dissertation format. Chapter One serves as an introduction to the study including a brief overview of the research topic, research questions, and theoretical framework used for this study. Chapter Two provides a review of the related literature on transfer challenges, self-efficacy and learning communities. Chapter Three contains the first manuscript, *Does Self-Efficacy Matter in the Transition Experiences of Transfer Learning Community Students?* and Chapter Four portrays learning communities as understood and designed by coordinators in an article entitled, *Transfer Learning Community Programming: Aligning Needs, Expectations, and Learning Outcomes to Sustain Student Self-Efficacy*.

The first manuscript, Chapter Three: *Does Self-Efficacy Matter in the Transition Experiences of Transfer Learning Community Students?* focuses on individual transfer student experiences in learning communities. In this investigation how learning community participation influences the transition of transfer students and the role self-efficacy plays in the transition and acclimation from one school to another are examined. This study asks the following questions from the student perspective: What did the transfer student hope to gain through participation in the learning community? What role does self-efficacy play in student motivation during the transition to a new institution? How does the learning community address and support student self-efficacy? These study questions were shaped by previous research identifying anticipated benefits and unmet



needs of transfer students enrolled in learning communities in which transfer students indicated they encountered academic and social difficulties related to feeling like unprepared outsiders (Leptien, 2010).

The current study extends previous knowledge about transfer students, their levels of self-efficacy and the role of learning communities in promoting and supporting self-efficacy. Furthermore, the addition of demographic questions such as age at transfer, GPA pre-transfer, and whether the individual is a first-generation college student provides new insights into the challenges facing those who transfer from one institution to another. The research also probes into aspects of student motivation and self-efficacy by using questions adapted from the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen et al, 2001). The information derived from these questions helped to provide a deeper understanding of the motivating factors behind student persistence after transfer.

The study included two interviews and a focus group with each student participant. The first interview built rapport and asked questions about the individual's learning community experiences. At the close of the first interview, participants were asked to complete the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen et al., 2001) and indicate specific details about their personal background, such as their age, pre-transfer GPA, and status as a first-generation college student. The second interview, during the twelfth week of the semester, probed more deeply into the students' self-efficacy and its potential connection to the learning community experience. The third encounter, held near the end of the fall semester, engaged the participants in a focus group to explore the similarities and differences among individual transition experiences. Additionally, the focus group

provided an opportunity for a dynamic exchange of insights and allowed the participants to learn from one another's perspectives (Morgan, 1998).

Chapter Four, *Transfer Learning Community Programming: Aligning Needs, Expectations, and Learning Outcomes to Sustain Student Self-Efficacy*, is a qualitative case study analysis of learning community design based on a focus group of learning community coordinators. The research questions for this study examine the strengths and challenges encountered while designing transfer learning community programs and the support of transfer students. An important dimension of this study was to consider how learning community program strengths and challenges can be used to meet self-efficacy needs of transfer students. A 'self-efficacy' lens was employed to better understand how learning community programming might support or diminish transfer student self-efficacy as revealed in the analysis of learning community coordinator focus group data and in the examination of artifacts such as the learning community outcomes as defined in each Request for Proposal (RFP) form and learning community course syllabus.

The focus group participants in this study were asked to explain why transfer students need support while transitioning to the university and to share what they hope transfer students gain by participating in a learning community. Additionally, coordinators were asked to reflect about long-term improvements that could be integrated into current programs. The focus group findings, in addition to the analysis of learning community outcome documentation and syllabi, provided insights into the intended outcomes of the transfer learning community program. The participatory nature of the focus group process allowed the coordinators to collectively process the difficulties and

benefits of working with transfer populations. Additionally, the investigator anticipates this group process will serve as a catalyst for program improvements because coordinators shared learning community best practices and built ideas for the future together.

Chapter Five, *Conclusion*, summarizes the overarching findings within the manuscripts and connects the findings to the overarching research questions regarding the role self-efficacy plays in the experiences of recently transferred college students participating in a transfer learning community and the challenges and improvements in further developing learning community programming for transfer students. It addresses the limitations of the study and provides recommendations for transfer programming design. This final chapter concludes with direction for future research within the study of transfer student learning community design and implementation.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Reflexivity is defined as "...the process of reflecting critically on the self as a researcher, the 'human as instrument'" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). When employing a qualitative research methodology, the researcher is an instrument through which all collected data is interpreted. Data analysis is filtered through the lens of the researcher and the lived experiences of the participants provide an opportunity for comparison with the experience of the researcher. The researcher's experiential contributions provide legitimate knowledge that informs the analysis of the data (Davies & Dodd, 2002). The epistemology behind this transfer student research has developed through personal experience. As the researcher, I have a personal connection to this study. I earned an

Associates of Arts and Sciences degree from a two-year community college, worked for five years as a professional interior designer, and then transferred to a four-year institution. I was a newly married, non-traditional aged student working toward a bachelor's degree in the field of human development and family studies. I found the transition very difficult. Upon entering the four-year institution, I quickly came to realize that being three-to-five years older than the majority of my classmates created an age—related barrier. I feel my biggest hurdle in acclimating to university culture was connecting socially with my peers. Other students had already developed social networks and seemed disinterested in making new connections beyond shared coursework. I believe that engaging in academic and social experiences with other transfer students, particularly with non-traditional aged students, would have provided me with greater opportunities for social support and acclimation to the university culture.

In addition, this study is important to me professionally because I am a program coordinator for the learning communities program at a large Midwestern university. I have a vested interest in knowing the needs of both transfer and non-transfer students, as well as the support needs of the coordinators working with our program. Knowing the needs of various student populations entering their first-year at my institution can better inform my understanding of the learning community components needed to ease the transition for these students. Identifying the challenges and needs of our transfer coordinators can inform the professional development programming and support we provide at the university-level as well. It is through this qualitative endeavor that I have

sought to understand transfer student motivation during their transition to the university and how the learning community experience may impact the acclimation experience.

My personal transfer experience, as well as my professional role with learning communities, has been beneficial in shaping this qualitative research investigation and contributes a deeper understanding of what transfer students encounter during their transition to the university. These personal and professional perspectives have led me to ask questions based on my assumptions that most transfer students encounter challenges in acclimating to campus and that there are particular needs that may not be met during the transfer process. Also, my understanding of the transition experience and learning community programming has provided a foundation from which I have developed questions about the needs addressed by, and the potential challenges of, transfer learning communities design.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Bandura's self-efficacy theory serves as the theoretical underpinning for this study. Self-efficacy, the feeling of personal usefulness, effectiveness, or worth is an important developmental task. Bandura defines the importance self-efficacy plays in influencing individual development and academic achievement: "Successes build a robust belief in one's personal self-efficacy. Failures undermine it, especially if failures occur before a sense of efficacy is firmly established" (1995, p. 3). As individuals process personal experiences, and witness the success of others through their social environment, they gain new insights and develop plans for future endeavors. These plans contribute to personal goals, motivation and flexibility when needed to complete those goals.

Bandura suggests that there are four primary sources for self-efficacy, including: mastery experiences, in which student persistence is enhanced by scaffolding challenges just slightly above where they can reach; vicarious experiences, where the student experiences success and failure through the successes and failures of their peers; social persuasion in the form of verbal affirmation and encouragement; and somatic/emotional influences to the academic environment (1994). Each of these domains provides a framework through which self-efficacy is examined.

Self-efficacy builds as the student achieves various personal goals and successfully navigates transition periods, such as those encountered when transferring from one academic environment to another. This speaks directly to the academic transition from community college to university. If self-efficacy is negatively impacted during the transition experience, it could have detrimental consequences such as impinging on a student's motivation to stay in school. Additionally, Bandura's theory suggests that social persuasion can build a student's self-efficacy. If students feel supported by peers, family, faculty, and staff, they are more likely to maintain motivation to complete their personal goals (Morisano et al. (2010). Zimmerman (1995, p. 204) noted, "Students with a high sense of efficacy for accomplishing an educational task will participate more readily, work harder, and persist longer when they encounter difficulties than those who doubt their capabilities". Previous research by Lent et al. (1984) also indicated that college students with levels of higher self-efficacy had higher levels of academic achievement than those with low self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 1995). Additionally, research on student performance conducted by Chemers et al. (2001)

revealed the importance of self-efficacy in students' ability to control stressors encountered in adjustment to their first-year of college and motivation to achieve educational goals. And finally, Margolis and McCabe (2006) outlined how teaching pedagogy can align to support self-efficacy and create an environment in which students can successfully engage in academic challenges and maintain motivation.

Bandura's theory is applicable and important to learning communities because it suggests that individual motivation and academic achievement are shaped by the social environment. Bandura's theory on self-efficacy postulates that a student's success depends on the ability to remain motivated, to achieve goals, and to adapt when necessary. Learning communities strive to provide opportunities to succeed both academically and socially. As described by Smith et al. (2004), "Learning communities offer a more intensified learning environment by providing more time for students to develop these connections through the classroom learning afforded by taking multiple courses together and out-of-class activities such as study groups, project work, and co-curricular experiences" (2004). Therefore, by creating a supportive social environment in all four domains influencing self-efficacy learning communities can serve as a means to increase student motivation to meet personal goals and enhance academic success. The existing research suggests the importance of maintaining self-efficacy and providing a supportive environment for those who are at greatest risk for attrition, such as the university transfer population.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The motives behind student transfer, the transition period between community college and the university, and the diverse needs of transfer students have all been examined to varying degrees. While the literature on transfer student experiences has not been exhaustive, a few key components have clearly emerged in the research. The academic and social motivations underlying transfer student experiences have been articulated in a variety of studies beginning with the reasons behind transferring between institutions.

Increasing numbers of students in higher education attend multiple institutions, with some moving one direction, such as transferring from a two-year to a four-year institution, some “double-dipping” by attending two institutions at one time, while others “swirl” by moving back and forth between institutions (McCormick, 2003). With regard to those who attempt to transfer in one direction, such as transferring from a community college to a four-year institution, common barriers have been identified among transfer students. Duggan and Pickering (2008) found that the transient patterns of transfer students stem from factors such as financial concerns, poor academic preparation, low grade point averages, lack of family support, and issues resulting from juggling multiple roles such as employee, parent, and student. Additionally, Zamani (2001) found that the community college commuter atmosphere meant that students spent fewer hours on campus and hindered the opportunity for students to develop a connection to faculty members.



The phenomenon known as transfer shock as evidenced by a decline in a student's grade point average (GPA) has been well-documented in the transfer literature as well (Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Laanan, 1996). This drop in GPA has been attributed to changes in the academic setting, such as increased class sizes, decreased interaction with instructors, and decreased social connectivity within the larger university context (Davies & Casey, 1999). Research conducted by Laanan (1996), for example, identified that one of the primary challenges for students is the move from a hands-on community college classroom culture to a more independent academic experience at the university. Chickering and Reisser (1993) also found that institutional size is important as larger student populations can lead to lower levels of engagement and lower overall satisfaction with the institution.

Research has continued to affirm the role of smaller class sizes in promoting student engagement (Barker and Gump, 1964; Thomas, 2005). Community colleges offer smaller classroom environments; therefore, students transitioning to a large lecture classroom might feel less engaged in the learning process than in their previous academic experience. In comparing community college to university experiences, Davies and Casey (1999) also noted that students who have transferred benefitted from the smaller community college class sizes. In addition, students reported community college faculty and staff had a better understanding of, and provided a more supportive environment for, those juggling multiple roles at the community college than they did at the university.

Faculty-student engagement has been found to be significant toward encouraging intellectual development and academic independence among students (Chickering &

Reisser, 1993). Astin (1984) supports that “Frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic” (p. 525). Richard Light (2001) describes faculty engagement as a critical factor of student success: “...students who get the most out of college, who grow the most academically, and who are happiest organize their time to include activities with faculty members or with several other students, focused around accomplishing substantive academic work” (p. 10). In addition, he asserts that faculty who use concrete and practical examples, linking student experience with course content, create the most successful learning experiences for students (2001). This research supports that intentional faculty-student engagement plays a central role in the overall academic experience.

Along with faculty engagement, a well-developed transfer articulation agreement can ease the transition from community-college to the four-year institution (Handel, 2007). Development of clear articulation agreements between institutions can decrease the frustration among students and can create a smooth path for transfer. Transfer articulation planning reiterates the importance of supporting transfer students in order for the program to reach its intended goal of providing smooth transfer experiences culminating in graduation for those encountering the many barriers of transferring between institutions.

Social support has been identified as a means for maintaining equilibrium throughout the transfer process. Davies and Casey (1999) found that social connectedness to other students was beneficial to university acclimation. Those who were socially

engaged at the university were more likely to report satisfaction with the campus environment. Those who were not socially connected at the university reported feelings of distress and a lack of social support. In a study on college friendsickness, Paul and Brier (2001) found that students who were unable to transition away from their precollege friendships to develop new college relationships had a more difficult time adjusting to college, while those interested in moving forward and seeking out new friendships had an easier adjustment to college. While research has not indicated a strong connection between social support and persistence (Townsend & Wilson, 2009) less engaged students reporting feelings of isolation and overall lack of social support may be connected to transfer student attrition. Friendships and peer communities foster self-esteem and expose students to diverse ways of thinking (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Tinto (1987) found that students lacking compatible social networks were at a greater risk of leaving college. He underscores the importance of social connection by saying that “it is the daily interaction of the person with other members of the college in both the formal and informal academic and social domains of the college, and the person’s perception or evaluation of the character of those interactions, that in large measure determine decisions to staying or leaving (p. 126)” college.

Frisby and Martin (2010) also noted the importance of social support through interpersonal relationships in transfer adjustment. Their research determined that interpersonal relationships among students, and between faculty and students, encouraged greater engagement within the classroom. Even more importantly, they determined that student learning benefitted most through the development of interpersonal relationships

between faculty and students. Townsend and Wilson's (2009) research reiterated this social need for faculty interaction. In addition to developing interpersonal relationships like other research supports (Davies & Casey, 1999; Frisby & Martin, 2010; and Light, 2001), Townsend and Wilson's study revealed that transfer students want more study support. Students indicated that they wished for study partners as a way to connect both academically and socially with others. Similarly, Chickering and Reisser (1993) reported that collaborative student learning environments provide greater engagement in the material covered in the classroom, as well as, the development of caring relationships between students.

#### *Self-Efficacy in Higher Education*

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy has served as a framework to define student behavior and persistence within the classroom (Choi, 2005; Wood & Locke, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000) and can serve as a framework for evaluating student motivation. In particular, Bandura's (1994) four domains of self-efficacy; mastery experiences; vicarious experiences; social persuasion; and somatic/emotional influences have provided a construct through which self-efficacy has been measured in the academic context. Specific examples of this application of the four domains include a study by Hutchison et al. (2006) and the integration of the four domains in classroom instruction by Margolis and McCabe (2006). The work of Hutchison et al. (2006) revealed how self-efficacy is influential to the academic experience and persistence of first-year engineering students, with mastery experiences being found as the most influential toward student motivation. Margolis and McCabe (2006) employed the four domains as guidelines for supporting

and enhancing student learning within the classroom. Their recommendations to support student self-efficacy included scaffolding course content, offering affirmation for students' accomplishments, providing collaborative learning experiences and peer modeling, and assisting students with the development of learning strategies.

Furthermore, research conducted by Dennis et al. (2008) revealed how external support, such as through peers and family, contributed to student motivation and how self-efficacy determined persistence among college students. While their findings indicated that low-level academic preparedness was the greatest predictor of college drop-out, low self-confidence and lack of peer support were also shown to contribute to four-year attrition. In a related study, Morisano et al. (2010) determined that the reciprocity of positive feedback gained from completing defined personal goals increases self-efficacy among college students and enhances their motivation to complete the next academic objective. This suggests that intentional programming to connect transfer students to one another academically and socially may increase both motivation and self-efficacy.

Overall, the literature indicates that transfer students need academic support, want small group engagement in and out of the classroom setting, and that they benefit from developing interpersonal relationships with other students and faculty. Each of these components has been found to contribute to the self-efficacy of transfer students. By enhancing self-efficacy, there is an increased likelihood that the student will persist in the transfer institution through graduation.

*Addressing Student Transition through Learning Communities*

University initiatives to acclimate students to the academic culture intend to provide faculty-student engagement and academic support in an effort to retain students. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is annually administered to freshmen and senior university students in order to assess engagement in key components designed to encourage higher learning. The five nationally recognized benchmarks that have been identified by NSSE include the following: promoting a high level of academic challenge, encouraging student interactions with faculty members, engaging in active and collaborative learning, enriching educational experiences, and maintaining a supportive campus environment (NSSE, 2012). Learning communities strive to incorporate these educational benchmarks as intentional learning outcomes for all new students at the university. The learning community model provides opportunities for small group interactions and fosters academic and social support to meet the needs of students during the first semester/year at the university. This approach has proven to help retain students acclimating to the university (Beaulieu & Williams, 2006). In a study about the effect of learning communities on student engagement, Zhao and Kuh (2004) found that participation in a learning community resulted in higher grades over a students' matriculation, provided greater opportunities for faculty and staff engagement, and enhanced social and personal development when compared with non-learning community participants. Furthermore, in a study by Coston et al. (2010), it was found that transfer stressors such as navigating campus, work-school balance, concerns about major

requirements, etc., were decreased over time through targeted intervention provided by the learning community experience.

**CHAPTER 3: DOES SELF-EFFICACY MATTER FOR THE TRANSITION  
EXPERIENCES OF TRANSFER STUDENTS IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES?**

A paper to be submitted to the *Journal of the First-Year Experience &*

*Students in Transition*

Jennifer R. Leptien

**Abstract**

There are an increasing number of students transferring from two-year to four-year higher education institutions. Receiving schools are often challenged to provide outreach to students who find themselves in transition. While a substantial amount of research on the transfer population exists, there is little available to describe the experience of transfers engaged in learning community programs. In this qualitative case study analysis the role that learning community programming has on the transition experience of transfer students is investigated. Additionally, the importance of self-efficacy in the overall adjustment to the university is examined. Twelve participant accounts of recently transferred community college students detailing self-efficacy and learning community involvement were gathered through multiple data collection methods. Two interviews were conducted with each student at which time the New Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen, 2001) survey was administered. Later in the semester a focus group was conducted with the transfer students. Collected data were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed for themes. Students' reports of self-efficacy in the transition experience of transfer learning community participants were a particular focus of the analysis. Findings support that learning community classroom experiences such as



study groups and team projects, peer networks and mentoring, and out-of-class experiences such as faculty and staff engagement effectively address self-efficacy and the transition needs of the students. These findings can be instructive in the design and delivery of programming for learning communities directed to community college transfer students' strengths and concerns.

### **Introduction**

Learning communities at Midwestern U provide students with an opportunity to enroll in two or more classes with students of similar academic interest. In addition to taking classes together, and in some cases living in the same residence hall with one another, the learning community cohort also engages in academic, social and service-learning activities outside of the classroom. Activities such as study groups, informal faculty-student interactions, field trips to industry, campus clean-up projects, community outreach, and team-building activities are just a few of the many opportunities available to students who join a learning community.

Each learning community is led by a professional employee of the university, most commonly an academic adviser or faculty member. In addition to other university position duties, the coordinator is responsible for the learning community programming design, implementation, and assessment. Additionally, the majority of learning communities at Midwestern U also employ peer mentors, upper-division students, who assist in acclimating the incoming students to campus resources, facilitate community-building among the students, and provide referrals based on individual student needs.

Learning community programs were developed to acclimate and retain incoming students, primarily focusing on first-year students direct from high school; however, growing numbers of students are transferring to the university with multiple college credits earned at other institutions. In 2011-2012, Midwestern U had 1,781 transfer students enter the institution, with 1,050 of those individuals transferring from a community college within state (Midwestern U Fact Book, 2012). Current research on the needs of transfer students suggests that this population requires assistance in acclimating to the university culture. Many transfer students enter the university with varied levels of academic preparedness for the rigorous courses they encounter as transfers in their specific major. Research by Laanan indicated that some transfers felt underprepared for the increased rigor at the receiving institution (2004). In addition, research shows that transfer students often feel socially isolated and have difficulty getting to know other students (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). This lack of academic preparedness and social connection contributes to a negative transition experience recognized as transfer shock (Hills, 1965). Transfer shock is evidenced by a dip in a student's GPA following transfer from a community college to a four-year institution. This negative academic experience may then lead to personal dissatisfaction with the transfer institution. Retention is an important consideration for this population as the one-year retention of 2010 transfer cohort at Midwestern U (2012) was 80.4% in comparison with 87.7% of first-year students direct from high school retained. The two-year retention of the 2009 cohort was 72.7% v. 78.2% for transfers and first-year students direct from high school respectively (Midwestern U, 2012).

The transition experience of transfers has been difficult for a variety of reasons, as students often enter the university underprepared, lacking clear academic goals, finding incompatibility between themselves and the transfer institution, and struggling to manage the demands of multiple roles such as student, parent, and employee (Laanan, 1996; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Zamani, 2001). These students are typically less socially engaged than students who entered the university in their freshmen year (Ishitami & McKitrick, 2010). Previous research reiterated that transfer students also feel a sense of “otherness”, i.e. being different than the traditional student when trying to assimilate to the existing student campus culture, and feel less engaged in the larger university classroom environment (Leptien, 2010). Knowing that these barriers exist, there is an increased demand to address transfer students’ needs to improve the acclimation to receiving institutions.

Acclimation may be enhanced by students’ self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (Bandura, 1994). Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy is important to higher education because it can describe how students address challenges and how self-efficacy shapes their motivation to attain personal goals. Self-efficacy can help us understand the underlying motivations behind behavior and responses to challenges within the transfer student transition experience. Questions that remain unanswered in the literature include how transfer learning communities can mediate the transition to the receiving institution and support self-efficacy experiences which can positively influence the adjustment to the university-setting.

This study seeks to understand and address the following questions: What did the transfer student hope to gain through participation in the learning community? What role does self-efficacy play in student motivation during the transition to a new institution? What students' needs are not being met during the transfer experience? How could the learning community experience be improved for future transfer students? To examine students' experiences and probe into aspects of student motivation and self-efficacy questions were adapted from the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen et al, 2001). Research conducted on college-age students showed the validity of the New General Self-Efficacy Scale in identifying motivation and self-efficacy across multiple domains including academic contexts (Chen et al, 2001). The scale was administered in this study to obtain insight into the students' sense of self-efficacy during their transition and to more clearly discern motivating factors behind student persistence after transfer.

This study uses a qualitative case study approach to acquire rich, thick description of the twelve transfer students' learning community experience through prolonged engagement with them. Two interviews were conducted with each participant to develop a trusting relationship between the researcher and participant and to acquire a deeper comprehension of the students' transition issues. A focus group was conducted with participants to further examine issues uncovered by the interviews and to provide a forum for students to engage in discussion about their learning community experiences. The group dynamic heightened the engagement of the participants.

## Literature Review

### *Self-Efficacy in Higher Education*

Self-efficacy, the feeling of personal usefulness, effectiveness, or worth is an important developmental task. Social cognition theory proposes that human agency is shaped by thoughts, behaviors, attitudes and interactions with the social environment. In describing the interactional nature of self-efficacy, Bandura states, “In this model of reciprocal causation, action, cognitive, affective, and other personal factors, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants” of individual behavior (Bandura, 1989). This theory can be applied to the achievement of higher education goals, as students’ motivation is impacted by personal factors, such as self-efficacy, and the environment in which students learn. Bandura defined the importance self-efficacy plays in influencing individual development and academic achievement. “Successes build a robust belief in one’s personal self-efficacy. Failures undermine it, especially if failures occur before a sense of efficacy is firmly established” (Bandura, 1995, p. 3).

Bandura (1994) suggests that there are four primary sources for self-efficacy, including: mastery experiences, in which student persistence is enhanced by scaffolding challenges just slightly above their current performance level; vicarious experiences, where the student views the successes and failures of peer models as an indicator of her/his potential for success or failure; social persuasion in the form of verbal affirmation and encouragement; and somatic/emotional influences experienced within the academic environment. Learning communities strive to provide opportunities to succeed both academically and socially. As described by Smith et al. (2004), “learning communities

offer a more intensified learning environment by providing more time for students to develop these connections, both through the classroom learning afforded by taking multiple courses together and out-of-class activities such as study groups, project work, and co-curricular experiences” (2004). This aligns with the four domains of self-efficacy as Bandura suggests that individual motivation and academic achievement are shaped by the social and academic environment. Scaffolding course content and peer modeling are just two of many pedagogical strategies derived from Bandura’s proposition of self-efficacy which can be successfully applied to the classroom context in order to engage and motivate learners (Margolis & McCabe, 2006). Bandura’s definition of self-efficacy suggests that a student’s success depends on the ability to remain motivated, to achieve pre-determined goals, and to adapt when necessary. Therefore, creating an affirming and encouraging social environment serves as a means to increase student motivation to meet personal goals and enhance academic success.

Transition periods, such as those encountered when transferring from one academic environment to another, poses a challenge to personal self-efficacy. If self-efficacy is negatively impacted during the transition experience, it could detrimentally impact the student’s motivation to stay in school. If students feel supported by peers, family, faculty, and staff, they are more likely to remain motivated to complete their personal goals (Morisano et al., 2010). Zimmerman (1995, p. 204) noted, “Students with a high sense of self-efficacy for accomplishing an educational task will participate more readily, work harder, and persist longer when they encounter difficulties than those who doubt their capabilities”. Previous research by Lent et al. (1984) also indicated that

college students with higher levels of self-efficacy had greater academic success compared to those with low self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 1995). Additionally, research on student performance conducted by Chemers et al. (2001) revealed the importance of self-efficacy in students' ability to control stressors encountered in adjustment to their first-year of college and motivation to achieve educational goals. This research suggests the importance of increasing self-efficacy and creating a supportive environment for those who are at greatest risk for attrition, such as the university transfer population. Learning communities are one proven way to achieve these goals. Existing research supports that learning communities have a significant influence on the acclimation and retention of students (Shapiro & Levine, 1996). In a study about the effect of learning communities on student engagement, Zhao and Kuh (2004) found that participation in a learning community resulted in higher grades over a student's matriculation, provided greater opportunities for faculty and staff engagement, and enhanced social and personal development when compared with non-learning community participants.

#### *Transfer Student Issues in Higher Education*

Qualitative research is useful for examination of the transfer students as it provides an in-depth understanding of their transition experience. While the literature on transfer student experiences has not been exhaustive, a few key components have clearly emerged in the research. The phenomenon known as transfer shock as evidenced by a decline in a student's grade point average (GPA) has been well-documented in the transfer literature (Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Laanan, 1996). This academic shift is attributed to changes in the academic setting, such as increased class sizes, decreased

interaction with instructors, and decreased social connectivity within the larger university context (Davies & Casey, 1999). Research conducted by Laanan (1996), for example, indicated that one of the primary challenges for student transitions is the move from a hands-on community college classroom culture to a more independent academic experience at the university. Chickering and Reisser (1993) also found that institutional size is important as larger student populations can lead to lower levels of engagement and overall satisfaction with the institution.

Research conducted by Dennis et al. (2008) revealed how external support, such as through peers and family, contributed to student motivation and how self-efficacy determined persistence among college students. While their findings indicated that low-level academic preparedness was the greatest predictor of college drop-out, low self-confidence and lack of peer support were also shown to contribute to four-year attrition. In a related study, Morisano et al. (2010) determined that the reciprocity of positive feedback gained from completing defined personal goals increases self-efficacy among college students and enhances their motivation to complete next academic objective. This suggests that intentional programming to connect transfer students to one another academically and socially may increase both motivation and self-efficacy.

In summary, the literature indicates that transfer students need academic support, want small group engagement in and out of the classroom setting, and that they benefit from developing interpersonal relationships with other students and faculty. The existing literature supports that each of these components contributes to self-efficacy; however, the influence of self-efficacy through engagement in transfer learning communities has



not been addressed. Previous literature suggests that by enhancing self-efficacy, there is an increased likelihood that the student will persist in the transfer institution through graduation.

### **Method**

This study explores the influence of transfer learning community participation on the transition to the receiving institution and what influence self-efficacy plays in the transfer experience. Two research questions were identified: how learning community participation influences the transition of transfer students and what role does self-efficacy play in the transition and acclimation from one school to another? The research of learning community transfer students was conducted at Midwestern U, a large, Research I university that serves over 24,000 undergraduate students. The use of backyard research, sampling from the researcher's employing institution, offers the opportunity to better understand the specific needs of learning community students at this particular institution (Glesne, 2006).

#### *Transfer Learning Communities at Midwestern U*

A broad definition of learning communities is the intentional engagement of small groups of students in two or more common courses connected to a common theme (Smith et al, 2004). Transfer learning community models at Midwestern U provide students of similar academic interests with the opportunity to engage in a cohort experience. A majority of the transfer learning communities offer an introductory seminar covering topics such as academic expectations and exploration of the connected academic majors. In one instance, the transfer learning community offers an interdisciplinary residential

experience where students live as a cohort in the same university complex. Each of the transfer learning communities provides the opportunity for students to engage in study groups, career exploration, and out-of-class social and community or service-learning activities. Additionally, these students are provided with the opportunity to engage with faculty, peer mentors, university staff and industry mentors both in and out of the classroom.

### *Participants*

Twelve undergraduate students, who transferred in at the start of the fall 2011 semester from a two-year college to Midwestern U, were interviewed on two separate occasions and participated in a student focus group. The sampling technique that was used is a criterion sampling. Each student had attended a community college prior to transfer to Midwestern U and was actively enrolled in a transfer learning community during their first semester at the university.

Invitations were sent to two hundred and ninety-four registered transfer students enrolled within seven learning communities prior to the start of classes. Sixty-three students responded to this initial call for participants. In order to narrow the scope of the study, the researcher reduced this initial sample pool to twenty-nine with the criterion that each participant should have recently attended a community college within state prior to transfer. These students were then sorted by learning community affiliation and by gender, with seven males and twenty-two females represented. At least one male and female representative student was selected, when possible, from each of the seven learning communities to the final thirteen individuals in the sample participant pool. An

equal number of males and females were sought; therefore, males were oversampled to compensate for the low response from this population to the original call for participants. After the first set of interviews was completed, one student withdrew from the study due to a combination of scheduling conflicts and lack of desire to complete the process. The final participant pool of twelve completed the study in its entirety.

### *Demographics of participants*

This purposeful selection of participants was made to reveal the influence of engaging in transfer learning community programming. Some learning communities were connected to a specific major (discipline) while others focused on a common demographic such as women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) majors or adult non-traditional students. The discipline-specific learning communities are designed to explore students' selected academic focus through common courses, provide connections to faculty in the discipline and offer social networking for cohorts in the major field of study. Students not enrolled in a major-specific learning community were involved in college- or university-wide transfer learning community programs designed to help acclimate the students to the college academic structure and provide opportunities for social support of students from various majors. A few of the students lived on a campus residential floor comprised of transfer students, some lived in university apartments exclusively with other transfer students, and the remaining lived in housing off-campus. The learning community sizes ranged from 10– 200 transfer students, with smaller teams of 15-20 developed among the larger learning communities.

*Demographics of the participants*

The participants' ages ranged from 19 – 36 years, with a mean age of 24. The self-reported mean transfer grade point averages was 3.3., while the average GPA of incoming transfer students at Midwestern U in fall 2011 was 2.99 (Midwestern U Records & Registration, personal communication, 2012). Two students reported being first-generation students, and three students indicated a family college history where parents/grandparents had attended college but did not complete degrees. The students' hometown population ranged from 1000 - 200,000 residents. These demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

<b>Student</b>	<b>Hometown</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>GPA Prior to Transfer</b>	<b>1st Generation Status</b>
A	3000	21	2.5	No
B	10,000	21	2.65	No
C	3,000	36	3.8	No
D	6,000	26	3.7	No
E	25,000	20	4	No
F	8,000	35	u/k	attended but no degree
G	10,000	20	3.2	Yes
H	10,000	21	3	No
I	60,000	20	3.8	No
J	10,000	30	3.74	attended but no degree
K	16,000	19	3	No
L	200,000	21	2.7	Yes

Data collection: Students were interviewed at two intervals, once early in the fall semester to build rapport and to identify current transition issues and concerns. At this

time, students also completed a brief survey asking them to identify their age, pre-transfer GPA, first-generation college student status, followed by questions from the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen et al., 2001) at the end of the first interview. This background data has helped to understand the predispositional characteristics of the participants. The second interview took place three-quarters of the way through the fall semester and focused on the student's motivation and self-efficacy. Questions about student motivation and goal setting derived from Chen et al. (2001) were asked so that students could reflect on how their self-efficacy affects their dedication and motivation to achieve goals. And finally, focus groups conducted nearing the end of the fall semester engaged all of the interviewed students during one-of-two optional meeting times. The students were asked about their transfer experience, their expectations for the learning community, what academic and social needs remain unaddressed and how the learning community could assist in meeting those needs. The focus group provided a dynamic exchange between the students and was employed to reveal deeper insights into the commonalities and differences between the participants. It provided the opportunity to compare the data collected in the larger group context with the data collected through the individual interviews, thereby enabling a more rigorous analysis. The interview and focus group questions and survey instrument can be found in Appendices A - D.

With the fall semester timing of the research data collection, the students participated in the study during their first semester in the learning community at the university. This timing allowed the students to voice emergent concerns and issues

related to their current transition experience. It also allowed for an examination of how self-efficacy influences the transition over a prolonged period of time.

### *Procedures*

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to proceed with the intended study, an invitation was sent requesting potential student participants to take part in the study. Students were informed of the nature of the study in the initial request to participate. Each potential student confirmed their willingness to participate in two interviews, a brief self-efficacy survey during the first interview, and a focus group nearing the end of the fall semester. The students were asked to schedule the first forty-five minute interview during the follow-up email contact from the researcher. Both sets of interviews, the survey and the focus group took place within private meeting rooms on campus and students were assured of anonymity while completing the informed consent documentation. There was a financial incentive of \$100, provided by a research grant, for participating and completing all three interactions scheduled in the study.

Each encounter was audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis coding purposes. Additionally, pseudonyms were assigned to ensure student confidentiality. The researcher took extensive field notes throughout the entire research process. The field notes detailed the researcher's thoughts regarding pre-and post-interview contexts and perceptions to ensure that individual nuances were recorded for review prior to the follow-up interviews and focus group activities, as well as during the overall research analysis process.

The first session involved a forty minute interview, followed by a ten minute self-efficacy survey. This first interview was conducted during the third week of the fall semester in order to obtain insight about the students' reflections on the transition period. The second thirty minute interview was scheduled during the twelfth week of the fall semester. The twelve participants were asked questions reflecting on their self-efficacy and personal motivation such as "how am I able to achieve the goals I set for myself", and "how is the learning community assisting me to reach my academic goals". The third and final interaction was a focus group in which all of the student research participants were asked to attend one, of two, sixty minute discussions during the fourteenth week of the fall semester. The data collection process is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Student Data Collection Process

<b>Data collection method</b>	<b>Duration of involvement</b>	<b>Semester timing</b>
Interview one	40 minutes	Week 3
Self-Efficacy Survey	10 minutes	Week 3
Interview two	30 minutes	Week 12
Focus Group	60 minutes	Week 14

The researcher sought an equal mix of gender in each of the two focus groups and assigned participants in the same learning communities to different focus groups. This method was chosen to decrease the likelihood of participants dominating sessions with

comments about one particular learning community, to achieve a level playing field of participants not knowing one another, and to cross-check opinions and feedback between focus groups from students within the same learning community.

The focus groups allowed the students to reflect on their transition experiences as a whole and provided dynamic engagement in the topic among the participants. The conversation was constructed so that the students could share their individual experiences while creating a connection to others in a similar academic situation. Focus group participation was structured with a round robin opening question to get input from everyone at the start. The participants informally followed this go-around pattern throughout the sessions. Additionally, the researcher targeted content from interviews which was repeated at the focus groups.

The questions developed for this study originated as a combination of the researcher's previous knowledge about the topic of transfer experiences, the role of learning communities in higher education, previous research on self-efficacy and from personal experience with the transition process (Chemers et al., 2001; Laanan, 1996; Lent et al., 1984; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). The sequence of questions was intended to first understand each student's pre-transfer expectations, leading toward more in-depth perceptions of the transition experience. The first interview culminated in the individual students' account of his/her current learning community experiences, while the second interview focused on the influence of the learning community in their acclimation and transition process and their motivation toward future goals.



### *Data Analysis*

Transparency of the data collection and analysis was ensured through memo writing and observations recorded while conducting each interview and focus group. Interviewer field notes were taken for later reference before and after each interview and focus group. The field notes served as a means for recording poignant statements and personal reflections on each individual interview and focus group. Additionally, the field notes provided the researcher with the perception of the students' intent and any recurring and/or novel perspectives shared during the interview and focus group.

### *Researcher Reflexivity and Coding Scheme*

In using a qualitative case study approach, it is important that the researcher practice epoche, by bracketing presuppositions from previous personal experiences and knowledge gained through the literature review process (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing ensures a transcendental approach to the content shared during the interviews and focus group (Merriam, 2002). After bracketing presuppositions about college transfer and learning community participation, such as the presumption that most transfer students encounter challenges with the transition process and that emergent findings will reflect current self-efficacy and learning community research, the researcher utilized NVivo qualitative research analysis software to code interviews and focus group content.

Coding began from a horizontal approach where all of the coding was treated with equal weight so as to assure that data received the same level of consideration (Merriam, 2002). This process was initiated by coding the fully transcribed interviews and focus

group events into the NVivo software program. These nodes were reviewed for broadly defined descriptions and grouped into similar categories. A sample of the coding within three categories; classroom experiences, peer networks, and out-of-class experiences, with corresponding codes are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Categories and Coding

<b>Classroom Experiences</b>	<b>Peer Networks</b>	<b>Out of Class Experiences</b>
Faculty connections	Age differences	Campus culture
Preparedness and rigor	Maturity and life experiences	Community Service
Study habits	Mentor connections	Living arrangements
Physical environment	Classmates	Clubs and honor societies
Technology	Roommates	Stressors

The final step of the coding process was to analyze the resulting categories and filter them into overarching themes connected to Bandura's (1994) four domains of self-efficacy: mastery experiences; vicarious experiences; social persuasion; and somatic influences as done in a similar study by Hutchinson et al. (2006).

#### *Rigor and Trustworthiness of Analysis*

Rigor in qualitative research is achieved through transparency, consistency, care in application of research practices, and reliability in analysis and conclusions (Davies &

Dodd, 2002). Transparency is achieved by providing full transcriptions, audit trails, field notes, coding, and memos collected during the research process. In order to ensure credibility and internal validity, the researcher's reflexivity has been ever-present. There is a potential for bias as the researcher is actively engaged in the learning community program at the research institution. The researcher achieved internal validity by thorough coding and member checking. When performing the member checks, study participants were provided three portions of their interview transcription and analysis to review for accuracy. The member checks allowed participants the opportunity to review the content to determine if it was an accurate account of his/her experience. Approval of the transcriptions and data analysis by various participants in this study served as an indication that the content was true to the personal experience of the participant.

Transparency of the data has been achieved through the use of quotations and member checking. Consistency of the qualitative research in this study has been assured through the process of triangulating the coded data collected through student interviews and focus group. Constant comparisons were made between the coded data, the researcher's own reflexivity and guided by previous research findings. Care in the application of research practices has been addressed through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application process. The intent of the study, the data collection methods and questions, as well as an informed consent form, were each reviewed by the IRB and approved prior to the initiation of the research process. It is important to create a reliable and accurate portrait of the personal accounts of study participants in order to guarantee trustworthiness of the data (Glesne, 2006). And finally, a peer debriefing with the faculty

committee overseeing the study has been utilized as a means to check the interpretation of the overall analysis as well.

### *Ethical Issues and Concerns*

As a learning community program coordinator at the university where this study took place, there was the potential for study participants to view the researcher as an informant and be guarded about their responses such as being worried about exposing negative aspects of their learning community. This potential issue was mediated by the voluntary nature of participation in this study. Participants were also reassured that the content shared during the interviews and focus group was collected and reported under pseudonyms. A second consideration was with regard to my professional role. It was necessary to guard against data analysis that is biased in favor of the learning community program or dismissive of negative statements made by transfer student participants. Throughout the process of recording and analyzing the data, the researcher was vigilant about maintaining neutrality toward both positive and negative comments regarding the learning community program itself. In doing so, the data analysis and interpretation reflects participants' opinions and experiences as reported.

### **Results**

The goal of this study was to examine the influence of learning community participation and self-efficacy in the experience of recently transfer college students. Twelve transfer students were asked about their overall transition to the university, their involvement in the learning community and how self-efficacy played a role in their day-to-day student experiences. Students reported their experiences in the learning

community around three themes, broad categories reflecting the nature of and influence on their participation in the learning community: classroom experiences, peer networks and out-of-class experiences.

Participants completed questions adopted from the New General Self-Efficacy Scale by Chen et al. (2001). Bandura asserts that there are four main sources of self-efficacy; mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic influences (1994). During the process of data analysis, each of these components was examined through the lens of the transfer student transition process. The analysis intentionally examined each domain of self-efficacy, as it applies to learning community participation, as well as the overall student transition. Additionally, participants responded to open-ended questions targeting their self-efficacy, such as “How are you able to overcome academic challenges?” as well as specific questions regarding how learning community participation has affected their self-efficacy, such as “How has the learning community contributed to your ability to accomplish your personal goals?” Although, as shown in Table 4, the students in this study had a mean self-efficacy survey score of 4.37, notably higher than the 3.87 mean score reported in the Chen study, no statistical inferences can be made based on the small N used in this study.

**Table 4. Self-Efficacy Survey Results**

Likert-scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Not Sure, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

<b>ID</b>	<b>Achieve goals set for self</b>	<b>Accomplish difficult tasks</b>	<b>Obtain outcomes important to self</b>	<b>Succeed at endeavors</b>	<b>Overcome challenges</b>	<b>Perform tasks effectively</b>	<b>Does tasks well</b>	<b>Perform well in tough times</b>
<b>A</b>	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA
<b>B</b>	A	A	SA	A	A	A	A	A
<b>C</b>	A	A	SA	SA	A	A	N	A
<b>D</b>	SA	A	A	SA	SA	A	N	A
<b>E</b>	SA	SA	SA	A	A	A	A	A
<b>F</b>	N	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
<b>G</b>	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	A	SA
<b>H</b>	A	A	SA	SA	SA	SA	A	A
<b>I</b>	A	A	SA	SA	A	A	A	A
<b>J</b>	SA	A	SA	SA	A	SA	A	A
<b>K</b>	A	A	SA	SA	A	A	A	A
<b>L</b>	A	A	SA	SA	A	A	A	A
<b>M</b>	SA	A	SA	A	SA	A	A	A

*Learning Community and Support of Self-Efficacy*

Nine of the students affirmed that the learning community had contributed to their ability to achieve their goals. They shared that the learning community provided an opportunity to meet others, network and receive additional social support. They felt the

learning community eased their transition to the university, gave them a platform for asking questions, helped them to meet faculty and provided ways to get involved in academic clubs. They reported that the learning community helped them to continue to develop their leadership potential and improved their time management and organization skills. Table 5 summarizes how each of the four domains of self-efficacy was revealed within this study and how the learning community addressed these areas.

Table 5. Bandura's (1994) Domains of Self-Efficacy in Learning Community Context

	<b>Mastery Experiences</b>	<b>Vicarious Experiences</b>	<b>Social Persuasion</b>	<b>Somatic Influences</b>
<b>Classroom</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study groups</li> <li>• Increased rigor</li> <li>• Study skills</li> <li>• 4-year plan</li> <li>• University policies and procedures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class cohort</li> <li>• Meet faculty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exams challenge</li> <li>• Team projects</li> <li>• Place to ask questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of otherness</li> <li>• Underprepared for exams</li> </ul>
<b>Peer Group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Living arrangements</li> <li>• Mentor experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer comments</li> <li>• Team motivation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress relief</li> <li>• Comfort in knowing others</li> </ul>
<b>Out of Class</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer teaching</li> <li>• University culture</li> <li>• Networking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic setting</li> <li>• Access to coordinator</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connection to community</li> </ul>

Mastery experiences are described as those in which individual persistence is enhanced by scaffolding challenges just slightly above where one can reach in order to motivate further development (Bandura, 1994). The students in this study had many opportunities to enhance mastery but the primary experience came from studying in group settings.

**Student H quote:** *I have people to study with and that helps me since it was tough for me to study at the beginning. They're not going to get me*

*off track and that's going to help me get good grades and do better on exams. Working or studying with other people puts it into a different perspective. Some of the information, they can quiz me and I think it's more effective if other people quiz me that if I just quiz myself so that helps.*

The students felt especially challenged early in the semester when they were adjusting to the self-reported increase in rigor at the university. Students reported that the university courses moved at a faster pace than at community college, as personified by Student D:

*Rigor in these classes - I've never had a class where two weeks into it we're already working into chapter 6, that's usually about mid-term time at the community college.*

Time spent studying was reported as a critical component in the adjustment to the university culture. Two particular students commented on their adjustment to the increase in time spent studying.

**Student K quote:** *I'm still getting used to how to study, so I haven't exactly adapted. I take all my time to condense it to where some students already know exactly how to study, so they have more free time to do other things. For my first exam, I studied the book in and out and the test wasn't as much as I studied so it's just getting used to how much time I need to put into it.*

**Student H quote:** *The studying and the coursework has been a lot more difficult for me, and since I didn't have to study that frequently in my community college, it's harder now for me to get those study skills and it's more difficult for me to actually sit down and read my textbook and take notes and stuff since I didn't have to do very much of that earlier.*

They reported that by week twelve, they were working a lot harder than anticipated, they were studying more, and in the words of student H, realized that **"I cannot slack off"**. Seven students declared that their classes were harder than expected, and three raised specific concerns about tests and grades.



**Student D quote:** *Midterm was a little scary. I've never had grades look quite that rough. I have worked on reaching out to more resources, such as the TAs and extra help study times. I am horrible with tests. I really am. I think it's probably poor study habits really. I go into it being nervous because I know I'm not prepared.*

**Student G quote:** *I have to work harder than I normally did. So I would say my level of concern is raised. Now I'm realizing that's actually kind of my fault. I should have looked at that from the get go.*

When probed for further explanation, the students expressed that their coursework had prompted them to seek out resources and academic support. Five students indicated that they were receiving individualized tutoring, and seven were routinely attending supplemental instruction outside of their courses.

Overall, the students shared that they were feeling more prepared and adjusted to their new academic environment by week twelve and revealed personal responsibility in mastering the course materials as exemplified by Student D's comment that: *I've taken the action to get the tutor on the weekends and I'm trying to get a study group of the students in the class because I'm not the only one that's lost.*

The students demonstrated their self-efficacy and mastery of experiences via their determination to stay focused and organized amidst increased academic challenge. Six students felt that their abilities were equal to those of the peers.

**Student B quote:** *I get ideas in my head of things I want to do and a little time goes by and then I think, well is that really that achievable? But for the most part if I need to get something done or I want to get something done I'm willing to sit down and do it.*

**Student C quote:** *I think I can complete any task that's put in front of me to get it done. Most of us will if we have something put in front of us, we will accomplish the task.*

Five transfer students shared that they felt they were better than traditional students at accomplishing tasks. These transfer students attributed their high organizational skills and strong sense of motivation as critical in setting themselves apart from the traditional students.

**Student D quote: *My lab mate made it very clear that he is not interested in anything but partying on the weekends, and complains constantly every morning in lab***

**Student E quote: *It's important to get things done when you say you're going to get them done and how you say you're going to do them....that experience sets me above a little bit.***

**Student K quote: *I'm a really organized person. I'll start studying way before the other students generally do.***

The students attributed some specific aspects of their mastery to the learning community experience. The learning community "... *forces you to have to schedule for the next semesters before you graduate. You have a long term plan* (Student F)." The importance of the development of a four year graduation plan via the learning community was reiterated by several participants. Other comments describing learning community influence in developing a sense of mastery included listening to guest speaker presentations about different offices on campus, learning where to get assistance when needed, learning university policies, getting internships lined-up early, and developing a clear study plan. The learning community "*gives you tons of tools, and it's just if you take advantage of it or not.*" (Student B). The students attributed having good study skills and time management, self-motivation to achieve greater outcomes, and outside

influences such as the learning community, tutoring, and supplemental instruction, as being important to reaching their goals.

Vicarious experiences occur when students learn by observing others' successes and failures. The success or failure of similar others is treated as a model for the success or failure of the individual (Bandura, 1994). Networking within the learning community provides a way for the students to learn from one another. Students help one another to learn new course material, as well as acclimating to learning in a new context as a cohort. Several students remarked about how they appreciated being among other transfer students and networking within the learning community.

**Student D quote:** *Getting to know people on a smaller scale. I think that will probably branch into other people cause you know if you get to know this group of 20 and they take you into their little group of five or more.....making a little network on campus with fellow students...it's helpful in that department and since we're all transfer students, we've got that in common.*

They appreciated how everyone in the learning community is going through the same situation and that they were able to share similar issues between classmates.

**Student L quote:** *I'd get a better understanding from someone that I'm taking a class with. Maybe they could explain it to me better than a professor could and I feel like it's more convenient where you can ask somebody for help rather than trying to make sure you can get scheduled around the office hours.*

(Peer) Modeling by peer mentors is an important part of vicarious learning. The students in this study reported that their upper-division peer mentors were sources of knowledge and encouragement during their first semester at the university. The students described how the mentors were friendly and a source of referral in times of need. One

student shared that the mentor relationship could be enhanced by having the mentor share more personal experiences so the student could better understand the successes and failures of their peer models.

**Student H quote:** *I'd like it if they would share things they wish they had done in their sophomore and junior years to prepare to be a senior and then graduate and be in the workplace. I would love to hear their advice or some tips on what we should be doing to prepare ourselves to get jobs within the next two years.*

Social persuasion manifests within learning communities in the form of encouragement provided by the learning community coordinator, peer mentors, and fellow students in the transfer cohort. Through learning community activities and programming, the students have a greater opportunity to give and receive feedback about their transfer experience. Students reported that they felt there was more of a social community at Midwestern U than at their previous school, and one shared that she felt more like a student at the university.

**Student G quote:** *There are students at the community college that don't care and they don't want to be there and they don't try and it gets old. Here you know that you are at a higher place of learning because everybody wants to be there, whether they act it or not. I feel like people that are here, want to be here.*

According to the participants, the university felt more like an academic environment than a two-year institution and that their fellow classmates are also driven and motivated to learn. They also described how the learning community was an agent for developing supportive social networks such as revealed in Student D's comment that *".....making a*

*little network on campus with fellow students...it's probably gonna be helpful in that department and since we're all transfer students, we've got that in common."*

Many of the students in this study said they expected to receive good grades and indicated that they were working hard to attain good scores. By week twelve of the semester, six students said their anticipated GPA would be better than expected, four anticipated that it would be worse than originally expected and two were not sure of their academic standing. The students described the influence of self-efficacy and social persuasion in how they had faced academic challenges and would rebound when they fell behind.

**Student G quote:** *I knew the class was gonna be a tough one since it's so big, and my roommate told me that going in too. She said it's a big lecture hall class, there's gonna be a lot of people and you're going to have to work a lot harder in it so I would say that I kind of expected it. I hoped it wouldn't happen, but I expected it. I'm going to rebound.*

Additionally, Student J described how he "*felt stupid*" after doing poorly on an examination, but that he had "bounced back" and understands that he will not get perfect scores on every examination at the university. One student shared that they were now more focused on learning, not just getting good grades because he saw the value in the learning process rather than just being motivated by his GPA as in the past.

One of the most prominent examples of social persuasion that was identified out of the interview and focus group process was how group work had the potential to contribute to self-efficacy and personal motivation. The students' shared that being held accountable within their study group pushed them to stay engaged and achieve the tasks

set before them. Social persuasion contributed to the student's desire to remain at the university. Student J shared:

*I severely considered dropping out of school for a while just because I didn't know anyone, felt uncomfortable here, felt like the old man on campus sort of stuff like that. Being involved in a class team exercise, where I had to be part of that every week, for a while I felt like I was carrying that because I could [lend my expertise]. That was really beneficial for me to be at those meetings and our team has been at the top, which we've got a lot of extra credit for, which is a nice little bragging point.*

When asked if the students feel that they are able to achieve most of the goals they have for themselves, all reported having high self-efficacy in achieving most goals. The approach they take toward achieving these goals varied slightly from one student to the next although the common thread identified was persistence. One student specifically shared that team responsibility contributed to their motivation and persistence:

**Student G quote:** *Sometimes it's just a matter of I really don't want to do my homework. It's like, quit being lazy. It's just getting over it, get it started, get it done, get it out of the way, and move on. Once I can just get over it, that kind of pushes me, motivates me a little bit more. Knowing that you told the group that you'd be there also pushes you which is another thing where the group setting comes in handy plus it's just easier when you have more people there, you have more brains thinking.*

And finally, Student A spoke of the importance of the learning community in encouraging them to reach out more to their coordinator and fellow students:

*"I feel like I can [succeed] if I remember to ask for help. I'm always a 'suffer in silence' kind of person and I don't really reach out and that's when I start falling behind. That's been kind of helpful with the learning community too because it got me more in with my coordinator and other people who have gone through it so I'm not the only one."*

Somatic, or emotional, influences were also revealed in this study, as the students shared their response to the new academic environment and how coping mechanisms were provided by the learning community. The students had a greater sense of independence at university. Three students shared that some of their classmates appeared to be immature or less experienced but they attributed that to a smaller subset of students. A sense of “otherness”, or feeling different, was attributed to age differences between themselves and their classmates. Student J said:

*I do feel like the old man on campus, and I know I'm not the oldest student by any means. I've met some others that have got a few years on me, but rare and few and far between. I don't mind being in a younger crowd but you notice the little differences right away. When it comes to socializing again, people want to associate with like other people. So being the old guy on campus, people are polite and they'll talk but...I don't expect to get a lot of invitations unless it is a club or by some group recruiting and that's a little frustrating.*

Students reported being worried, uncomfortable and nervous about transferring and being among a new student population on a campus they did not know well. Changes in the physical environment, instruction, and rigor were described by the students as barriers to a smooth transition. With regard to changes in the physical classroom, one student shared that *“I'm still a little intimidated by the class size to kind of reach out and talk to people in my classes” (Student A)*. Another student shared that the instruction at the university felt less personal: *“At the junior college, they were small classes. I didn't have any large classes at all... we're talking 20 to 25 at the most. So it gave you that sense that you were actually being taught by the professor...as opposed to here where the information is provided and what you do with it is what you do with it” (Student F)*.

Participants indicated the learning community had a calming effect and helped them adjust to the new environment. One student reported relying upon her study group as a source for venting and relieving academic and social stress with their fellow students. The students reported that meeting other transfers, including older students such as themselves, was reassuring. They appreciated the opportunity to meet others and all recommended more opportunities for social engagement in and out of the classroom to continue to address these emotional responses.

### **Discussion**

This study explored the influence of learning community involvement in the transition of recent community college transfer students to the university. It sought to identify what role self-efficacy played in shaping the transition experience and how learning community participation may support self-efficacy among these students. The findings in this study revealed that not only did the learning community address the common transition issues students have when transferring from a two-year institution to a university, but it also confirmed that self-efficacy is supported by the various classroom, peer networks, and out-of-class experiences and activities provided by the learning community.

Self-efficacy influences individual response to challenges, and ability to remain focused and motivated when encountering difficult tasks (Bandura, 1995). In this study, students all self-reported having high levels of self-efficacy. Their individual accounts of the transfer process and their learning community experiences reflect this as well. Students who found aspects of their academic and social experiences at the university



challenging, such as taking examinations and meeting others, took personal responsibility for the situations. Consistent with the literature, Zimmerman (1995) noted that students with a strong sense of self-efficacy will work harder and persist to accomplish tasks when challenged. The students in this study reported that they could mediate challenging academic situations by reaching out more, getting to know more people, looking for ways to network, and adjusting their study habits. Most importantly, the students who found themselves in unstable academic standing by midterms shared a common outlook in saying that they would rebound and recover from their present situation. Many of the students expressed personal responsibility for shortcomings, through their declarations to work harder to achieve the goals they had for themselves.

The students recognized the learning community for helping them connect to supportive resources, putting them on the right track for developing an achievable graduation plan, alerting them about marketing themselves for internships, and engaging in service opportunities. They found value in the learning community enabling them to meet other transfer students, with one of the students specifically commenting that it was reassuring to meet other older students. The students in this study appreciated having a comfortable place to ask questions within their learning community. One student described that their learning community helped them “*stay sane*” during their challenging transition to the university. These comments are consistent with the existing transfer research, as they reiterate the importance of social support and self-efficacy as a means to control stressors occurring within the new academic environment (Chemers et al., 2001; Morisano et al., 2010).

While a majority of the students shared an appreciation for the learning community, two expressed that they felt that it was not influential in their transition to the university and therefore, was not supportive or detrimental toward her/his self-efficacy. These students shared that they did not need social support or to learn about university procedures via the learning community. One student indicated that they were comfortable looking up resources on their own, and were displeased that their learning community was mandatory for their chosen major. The second student felt that her expectations for social connections were not met by her learning community, but added that learning community participation can provide networking benefits for transfers within the same major.

Additionally, not all learning community activities provided the students with the optimal opportunity to engage in vicarious experiences with their fellow students or peer mentors at the desired level. These students reported that they would have liked greater interaction among their fellow classmates, and more time to get to know the paths of their peer mentors. For those who did find strong connections through vicarious experiences with their cohort, this greatly reduced their anxiety (somatic response) to the increasingly challenging curriculum.

**Student K quote: *It would be kind of nice to do more social interactions with the other people. They say you're going to network with people in your class, but you spend most of the time covering material.***

While the students' primary recommendations for program improvement addressed a desire for increased social engagement, they also shared an interest in a few academic enhancements through the learning community. They recommended that

faculty be more engaged with the students both in and out of the classroom. One student explained that meeting faculty outside of the classroom put them at ease and made them feel more connected to the university. A second student expressed that while their peer mentors provided social and emotional support, it would have been more beneficial to have greater academic support from the mentor. Additionally, one student wished the learning community would provide more acclimation to classroom technology used on campus. This student shared that they did not feel prepared or confident in using classroom technology such as personal response systems, i.e. clickers, or navigating the university-wide course management system. Rather than being a source of frustration and concern, each of these recommendations, connected to mastery experiences, could be addressed by the learning community experience through small adjustments to existing practices.

Maintaining study groups, providing supplemental academic support and networking opportunities were proven successes of the transfer learning community experiences for a majority of the students in this study. These components, in addition to the recommendations for increasing faculty engagement, covering course management tools and peer mentor academic support, can support the self-efficacy of transfer learning community students. It is through these activities that students can feel more engaged with the university, potentially leading to greater retention of this student demographic.

Does self-efficacy matter in shaping the learning community experience? Yes - it is the intrinsic motivator that pushes students forward as they encounter greater academic rigor. It propels them toward their goals and motivates them to stick to their set objectives

even in times where their situation is challenging. It is the internal script that reiterates the possibilities of their future. As indicated in this study, supporting and reinforcing self-efficacy through learning community engagement can provide reassurance that one must continue on even when times are challenging. Mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic influences can each build upon existing strengths and provide encouragement to tackle the next academic and social challenge.

### *Limitations*

This study looked at the experiences of twelve students from multiple disciplines engaging in varied learning communities. Due to the individual experiences prior to transfer, as well as variations in the type of learning community the students were involved in, it is not possible to draw overarching conclusions that apply to all transfer learning community programs. While this qualitative inquiry demonstrates similarities among students centered on the four domains of self-efficacy, it is important to also acknowledge intra-individual differences. It is critical to continually assess the learning community program to determine how it can best address the needs of this varied and ever-changing demographic. Additionally, this analysis was made of stand-alone transfer learning communities, those that did not include the population of first-year students direct from high school. The experience of transfers integrated within first-year learning communities may shed light on variations in experiences that were not seen within this study. And lastly, the two-time interview with focus group design of this study was useful to measure semester-long impact of learning community involvement; however, a longitudinal design that looks at experiences throughout an entire academic year could

yield additional insight about the influence of student self-efficacy over a longer period of time.

### *Implications for Future Research and Practice*

This study contributes to the existing literature on the importance of self-efficacy in shaping the academic experience of young adults in transition. It provides a deeper understanding of the role self-efficacy plays in the motivation of transfer students via the learning community. It reveals particular experiences to enhance vicarious learning, provides encouragement, and engages students in incremental academic experiences to promote and sustain a sense of mastery within the university. It is intended that this deep analysis can be utilized to inform transfer learning community programming in order to better meet the academic and social needs of the transfer students served. Additionally, the study contributes to a better understanding of transfer students varied needs and how learning community participation influences the transition experiences of students entering the university after community college. It identifies components of the learning community that are well-received and reveals elements that will need further development in order to fully reach the intended program outcomes.

As the transfer population continues to grow, receiving institutions must look at programming to address transition needs. In doing so, four-year institutions have a better chance to engage and retain these students through graduation. Learning communities have a proven track record for retaining students and are an ideal means for the university to attract and support transfer students. In offering transfer learning community options, students entering the new academic environment can engage more closely with faculty,

staff and their peers. They can receive supplemental academic support through study groups, peer mentor support, and team projects. By engaging transfer students and supporting self-efficacy from day one, learning communities have the power to transform a challenging transition into a positive experience for the students they serve.

**APPENDIX A: FIRST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS****First interview questions**

(I) What were your first impressions about transferring to Midwestern U?

(I) How did you prepare yourself to transfer from your former school to Midwestern U?

(I) Please tell me more about your transfer situation and plans at Midwestern U. Major, what school did you transfer from, how many credits transferred, classification, type of credits transferred, live on or off-campus, how many years before graduation, know anyone at Midwestern U prior to coming, how many times did you visit campus prior to transfer, etc.

(I) How did you come to choose Midwestern U as your transfer institution?

(I) Describe your typical day as a student at Midwestern U. Academic, work, family, and social demands.

(I) In what ways is your experience as an Midwestern U student different than your previous school?

(I) Do you feel that your classes are the same or different from your previous college? (Rigor, class sizes, instructor methods)?

(I) What are your perceptions of your fellow Midwestern U classmates?

(I) What did you know about learning communities before you came to Midwestern U?

(I) What did you hope to gain by joining a learning community?

(I) How did you find out about the LC option?

(I) What have you done with your LC so far?

(I) What can you tell me about your peer mentor(s)?

(I) How do you feel being in the learning community is helping in your transition to the university from your previous school?

(I) In what ways could the learning community help you more?

(I) How might the peer mentor assist?

(I) Do you have any questions that you wish I would have addressed? Additional comments?



**APPENDIX B: NEW GENERAL SELF-EFFICACY SCALE****New General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen et. al., 2001)**

Likert-scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

1. I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself.
2. When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them.
3. In general, I think that I can obtain outcomes that are important to me.
4. I believe I can succeed at most any endeavor to which I set my mind.
5. I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges.
6. I am confident that I can perform effectively on many different tasks.
7. Compared to other people, I can do most tasks very well.
8. Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well.

Additional Survey Questions

Are you from in-state or out-of-state?

What is the approximate size of your hometown?

How old were you when you transferred to this institution?

What was your cumulative GPA prior to transferring to this institution?

Are you a first-generation college student or did your parent(s) complete college?

**APPENDIX C: SECOND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS****Second interview questions**

(I) After your past 10 weeks at Midwestern U, tell me about your coursework?

(I) Tell me about your adjustment to Midwestern U.

(I) What number of credits did you register for at the start of the semester?

(I) What number of credits are you currently taking?

<probe - why drop?>

<probe - why add?>

(I) Tell me about the goals you have for yourself at Midwestern U.

(I) How have you been able to achieve most of the goals that you have set for yourself?

(I) How has it been going with the learning community?

(I) Has the learning community contributed to your ability to reach the goals that are important to you? Why or why not?

(I) Please describe ways in which the learning community has/has not helped you overcome academic challenges.

(I) How do you think your ability to complete tasks compares with your fellow learning community students? Please elaborate.

(I) Do you believe that you can succeed at most anything you put your mind to? Why or why not?

(I) Are you, or have you, taken advantage of tutoring services? Supplemental Instruction?

(I) Have you met with others to study outside of the LC?

(I) What is your current grade point average at Midwestern U? Is this consistent with your expectations for your first semester? Why or why not?

(I) Are you currently employed? Why or why not?

<how many hours per week?>

(I) Are you involved in an extra-curricular clubs or teams?

<probe – on-campus?>

<probe – off-campus?>

(I) How do you feel being in the learning community has helped in your transition to Midwestern U?

(I) In what ways could the learning community help you more?

(I) After you left here last time, what were your reflections?

(i) Reflecting back on where you were at week 3, how do you think that compares with where you are now?

(I) Do you have any questions that you wish I would have addressed? Additional comments?

**APPENDIX D: STUDENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS****Student focus group questions**

(I) Please share one or two of your primary concerns about transferring from your former college to this university.

(I) How would you describe your transition to the university?

(I) What did you hope to gain by participating in your learning community?

(I) When did you enroll or when did you learn that you were in a learning community?

(I) Has the learning community contributed to your ability to reach the goals that are important to you? Why or why not?

(I) If there is a peer mentor working for your LC, what role do they play?

<probe> Position responsibilities

(I) Did they facilitate academic support for you? Study groups?

<probe> What was their influence on you as a student?

(I) Please describe ways in which the learning community has/has not helped you overcome academic challenges.

(I) Please tell me about your transfer LC. Briefly share what the LC did.

<probe> What are the academic components?

<probe> What are the social components?

<probe> What types of activities are offered?

(I) Was the LC for credit? If so, how many credits? How was it graded?

(I) How do you feel being in the learning community helped your transition?

(I) Tell me about the social aspects of the LC.

<probe> would you prefer more or less social activities to be built into the LC experience?

(I) Did the LC expose you to leadership opportunities?

(I) What advice would you give a student planning to join a transfer learning community?

(I) Can you describe your contact with faculty through the LC?

(I) Do you feel more or less comfortable approaching faculty based on these experiences?

(I) Do you feel like faculty are more, less, or the same in approachability to your previous school?

Are you taking primarily large or small courses this semester?

(I) Do you plan to continue on at the university in the spring semester?

<probe> how many credits?

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**CHAPTER 4: TRANSFER LEARNING COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING:  
ALIGNING NEEDS, EXPECTATIONS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES TO  
SUSTAIN STUDENT SELF-EFFICACY**

A paper to be submitted to the *Journal of the First-Year Experience and  
Students in Transition*

Jennifer R. Leptien

**Abstract**

Designing learning community programming for transfer students at the receiving institution can be a challenging endeavor as it is difficult to predict the variety of needs presented by the students to be served. This qualitative case study examines the strengths and difficulties encountered in implementing transfer learning community models. Additionally, it explores how self-efficacy is supported through transfer learning community programming. Transfer programming best practices and recommendations for future program improvements are presented. A focus group comprised of learning community coordinators was conducted to reveal the intended outcomes and challenges in designing programming for transfer students. Data collected from the focus group, in addition to learning community program outcomes and syllabi, were transcribed, coded and analyzed for overarching themes related to learning community programming. The identified themes of academic enhancement, social acclimation and career development were then examined through the lens of student self-efficacy as applied to the four domains of; mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic/emotional influences (Bandura, 1994). The resulting data analysis supports that transfer learning communities best serve their students' self-efficacy through intentional

activities that encourage academic enhancement, social acclimation, and career development.

### **Introduction**

Bandura postulates that high level self-efficacy pushes individuals to accomplish difficult tasks even in situations where there is a potential for failure (1994). Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to rebound and persist toward a goal when their abilities are challenged. Those who have a lower sense of self-efficacy are more likely to accept defeat when challenged with difficult tasks and are less likely to persist toward personal goals (Bandura, 1994). Bandura asserts that there are four domains through which one's sense of self-efficacy is created or undermined; mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic/emotional influences. Mastery experiences are defined as encounters through which successes or, negatively, failures build upon one another. Vicarious experiences are those in which an individual sees her/his own potential for achievement modeled in others. The influence of social persuasion comes in the form of verbal appraisal from others, and somatic influences are guided by the individual's emotional response to challenging situations.

Bandura's four domains of self-efficacy serve as an appropriate lens for better understanding learning communities as the domains have clear connections to the programming goals of building community, providing mentorship, and supporting academic success. Learning communities provide small cohorts of students of similar academic interests with the opportunity to take two or more college courses together, form study groups, and engage in shared social and service activities with the guidance of

learning community coordinators, peer mentors, and associated faculty and staff. Some communities of learners live together within the same residential hall or complex, while others meet only within the classroom or a common meeting space. Along with the benefits of taking two or more courses in common and engaging in social activities, these cohort groups often have access to small group interactions with faculty and staff and many receive additional academic and social support from upper classmen in the same major or college who serve as peer mentors for the learning community (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004).

While learning communities were initially developed to support and acclimate incoming first-year students direct from high school to a new academic environment, increasing numbers of students are entering four-year institutions with community college credits positioning them as upper-division students. With more transfer students entering the four-year university as sophomores and juniors, these students often find themselves void of well-integrated support for acclimation. They often find it difficult to transition from one institution to another due to increased institution and class sizes (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Davies & Casey, 1999), and greater academic independence (Laanan, 1996).

Many schools now collaborate to improve the rate of transfer from two-year to four-year institutions. At Midwestern U, a research I institution, transfer articulation agreements exist between the university and other in-state community colleges. These agreements are intended to improve the transfer process by clearly defining which community college course credits will transfer to the prospective student's chosen four-

year institution. With increasing numbers of students transferring via these articulation agreements, it is important to consider how learning community programs may best assist them post-transfer so that the academic and social transition can be made as seamless as possible.

One of the greatest challenges in developing a learning community for transfer students is the diversity of coursework each student brings with them to the receiving institution. In many cases, students may have already taken the introductory-level courses commonly linked to first-year learning community programs; thereby leaving few options to cluster students within the same courses. Additionally, the diversity of the students themselves may create difficulties in connecting them to one another. Some students may be commuting rather than living on campus, be of non-traditional age, be employed after class hours, and be married and/or have dependent children. Each of these circumstances influences the availability, or lack thereof, to engage in learning community activities.

This qualitative case study explores the experiences of learning community coordinators including their understanding of the transfer experience and transfer programming design. The study focuses on the strengths and challenges encountered within transfer learning community design and how existing programming addresses self-efficacy and support among students. Learning community coordinators at the institution under study are full-time professional academic advisers, or program coordinators, who have been designated to develop and oversee the learning community program within their department or college. A focus group was conducted with transfer learning community coordinators and program artifacts were analyzed to reveal the perceived

needs of transfer students and understand what programmatic challenges may exist in meeting their needs. Additionally, focus group and artifact data were examined to better understand the support and development of self-efficacy provided within learning community programming. Through the lens of Bandura's (1994) four domains of self-efficacy, the analysis identifies areas that could be enhanced through adjustments in transfer learning community design.

### **Literature Review**

Increasing numbers of students in higher education attend multiple institutions, with some moving one direction, such as transferring from a two-year to a four-year institution, some "double-dipping" by attending two institutions at one time, while others "swirl" by moving back and forth between institutions (McCormick, 2003). For those transferring from community college to a four-year institution, common transfer barriers have been identified among transient students. Duggan and Pickering (2008) noted barriers caused by financial concerns, poor academic preparation, low grade point averages, lack of family support, and issues resulting from juggling multiple roles such as employee, parent, and student. Additionally, Zamani (2001) found that the community college commuter atmosphere meant that students spent fewer hours on campus and hindered the opportunity for students to develop a connection to faculty members.

Research affirms the role of smaller class sizes in promoting greater student engagement (Barker and Gump, 1964; Thomas, 2005). In comparing community college to university experiences, Davies and Casey (1999) noted that students who have transferred benefitted from the smaller community college classroom environments;

therefore, students transitioning to a large lecture classroom at the larger receiving institution are at risk for being less engaged in the learning process than in their previous academic experience. Additionally, students reported community college faculty and staff had a better understanding, and provided a more supportive environment, for those juggling multiple roles at the community college than they did at the university (Davies & Casey, 1999). Greater student-faculty engagement has been shown to foster the intellectual development, as well as encourage academic autonomy among students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Astin (1984) adds that “Frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic” (p. 525). Richard Light (2001) describes the critical nature of faculty engagement where “...students who get the most out of college, who grow the most academically, and who are happiest organize their time to include activities with faculty members or with several other students, focused around accomplishing substantive academic work” (p. 10). Additionally, he asserts that faculty have the greatest influence when interweaving course content with the students’ personal experiences and ways of knowing (2001). Furthermore, Handel (2007) describes the importance of a well-developed transfer articulation agreement in easing the transition from community-college to the four-year institution. This reiterates the importance of supporting transfer students in order for the program to reach its intended goal of providing smooth transfer experiences culminating in graduation for those encountering the many academic and social barriers of transferring between institutions.

Social support has been identified as a means for maintaining equilibrium throughout the transfer process. Davies and Casey (1999) found that social connectedness to other students was beneficial to university acclimation. Those who were socially engaged at the university were more likely to report satisfaction with the campus environment. Those who were not socially connected at the university reported feelings of distress and a lack of social support. In a study on college friendsickness, Paul and Brier (2001) found that students who were unable to transition away from their precollege friendships to develop new college relationships had a more difficult time adjusting to college, while those interested in moving forward and seeking out new friendships had an easier adjustment to college. While research has not indicated a strong connection between social support and persistence (Townsend & Wilson, 2009) less engaged students reporting feelings of isolation and overall lack of social support may be connected to transfer student attrition. Friendships and peer communities have been shown to foster self-esteem and expose students to diverse ways of thinking (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Tinto (1987) reported that students lacking compatible social networks were at a greater risk of leaving college. He underscores the importance of social connection by saying that “it is the daily interaction of the person with other members of the college in both the formal and informal academic and social domains of the college, and the person’s perception or evaluation of the character of those interactions that in large measure determine decisions to staying or leaving (p. 126)” college.

Frisby and Martin (2010) also noted the importance of social support through interpersonal relationships in transfer adjustment. Their research determined that



interpersonal relationships among students, and between faculty and students, encouraged greater engagement within the classroom. Even more importantly, they determined that student learning outcomes benefitted most through the development of interpersonal relationships between faculty and students. Townsend and Wilson's (2009) research reiterated this social need for faculty interaction. In addition to developing interpersonal relationships, Townsend and Wilson's study revealed that transfer students want more study support. Students indicated that they wished for study partners as a way to connect both academically and socially with others. Similarly, Chickering and Reisser (1993) reported that collaborative student learning environments provide greater engagement in the material covered in the classroom as well as, the development of caring relationships between students.

### *Conceptual Framework*

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy has served as a framework to define student behavior and persistence within the classroom (Choi, 2005; Wood & Locke, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000) and can serve as framework for evaluating student motivation. In particular, Bandura's four domains of self-efficacy: mastery experiences; vicarious experiences; social persuasion; and somatic/emotional influences have provided a construct through which self-efficacy has been measured in the academic context. Specific examples of this application of the four domains include: a study by Hutchison et al. (2006) which showed how self-efficacy impacts the academic experience and persistence of first-year engineering students and the work of Margolis & McCabe (2006)

which employed the four domains as guidelines for supporting and enhancing student learning within the classroom.

Bandura's model closely aligns with the initiatives set forward by the learning community program at Midwest U. University initiatives to acclimate students to the academic culture intend to provide faculty-student engagement and academic support in an effort to retain students. The learning community model provides opportunities for small group interactions and fosters academic and social support to meet the needs of students during the first semester/year at the university. This approach has proven to help retain students acclimating to the university (Beaulieu & Williams, 2006). Bandura asserts "schools in which staff members collectively judge themselves capable of promoting academic success imbue their schools with a positive atmosphere for development that promotes academic attainments regardless of whether they serve predominantly advantaged or disadvantaged students" (p.10, 1994). One way in which universities support acclimation and a welcoming environment is through the integration of programs that help orient new students. Orientation programs were found to have a greater positive academic impact on transfer students than on native students; however, transfer students were less likely to attribute their social adjustment within the transfer institution to orientation programming (Mayhew et al., 2010). In a study by Coston et al. (2010), it was found that transfer stressors such as navigating campus, work-school balance, concerns about major requirements, etc., were decreased over time through targeted intervention provided by a learning community experience.

While these studies demonstrate the utility of a learning community experience, little qualitative research exists to describe in depth the benefits of learning community involvement for transfer students, the challenges of designing programs to meet the needs of this population, nor the extent to which self-efficacy is enhanced by learning community programming. In this qualitative study, I have investigated the accounts of transfer learning community coordinators to reveal the perceived needs of transfer students and the impact of learning community programming from the coordinator perspective.

### **Method**

The research in this study was conducted at Midwestern U., a large, Research I institution with 80 separate learning communities serving over 4700 undergraduate students. Of the 80 programs, seven learning communities have been developed specifically to serve transfer students from four distinct academic departments, two college-level programs and one interdisciplinary program. The coordinators who develop and implement the Midwestern U transfer learning community programs were asked to participate in a focus group to consider their individual and collective role in facilitating transfer student transitions to the university and engaging students through learning communities. Program artifacts, learning community program outcomes and syllabi, were also transcribed, coded and analyzed for overarching themes related to learning community programming.

### *Participants*

Seven transfer-specific learning community programs provided at Midwestern U were analyzed within this study. The intended outcomes and learning community seminar syllabi from all seven programs were analyzed; however, only four individuals were able to be actively engaged in the coordinator focus group at week thirteen of the study. As shown in Table 1, the focus group participants had nearly 50 years of combined experience working with transfer students and had been coordinating each transfer learning community for a minimum of two years at the time of the study. Three of the coordinators were full-time academic advisers, and one coordinator was a full-time program coordinator at Midwestern U. The motivation for providing a transfer learning community experience was primarily out of intrinsic desire; however one coordinator identified that he/she was asked to develop a program by higher administration at the university to fulfill a need in their college.

Table 1. Demographics of Focus Group Participants

<b>ID</b>	<b>Role at Midwestern U</b>	<b>Years of Experience w/ Transfer Students</b>	<b>Years LC in existence</b>	<b>Original Motivation for Transfer LC</b>	<b>Type of Program</b>
A	Academic Adviser	11	2	Intrinsic	Discipline-specific
B	Academic Adviser	9	2	Extrinsic	Discipline-specific
C	Program Coordinator	12	6	Intrinsic	Interdisciplinary
D	Academic Adviser	14	5	Intrinsic	Discipline-specific

### *Procedures*

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to proceed with the intended study, an email was sent to transfer learning community coordinators requesting them to take part in the study. Coordinators indicating an interest in participating were informed of the nature of the study in the initial email request to participate and again verbally at the beginning of the focus group session by the researcher. Each coordinator was emailed to confirm their willingness to participate and to schedule a sixty-minute focus group session. The sixty-minute focus group was conducted at week 13 of the 15-week fall semester so that the coordinators could share experiences that had occurred throughout the semester, and allowed discussion of any projected changes, issues, and challenges that might be applied before the semester's end.

Table 2. Study Protocol

<b>Data collection method</b>	<b>Type and Duration of involvement</b>	<b>Semester timing</b>
Pre-Focus Group Artifacts	Request for Proposal form and syllabus	Week 1
Focus Group	60 minute interview with group	Week 13

The questions developed for the focus group were intended to promote dialogue between the coordinators, leading toward more in-depth discussions about the transition and learning community experience for the transfer students. As described by Morgan (1998), focus groups provide an opportunity for participants to share varied approaches to similar situations. Through the process, participants actively seek to understand one

another's perspectives and in turn, have the opportunity to learn more about what motivates them to respond in a certain way. The participatory nature of the focus group process allowed a dynamic exchange of individual perspectives and provided the opportunity for the coordinators to collectively process the difficulties and benefits of working with the transfer population. Synergy among the coordinators propelled the discussion into areas for potential improvements to transfer learning community program design. As the principle investigator I led the group, asking IRB-approved questions and prompts as needed to explore and better understand coordinators' perceptions of transfer students' needs, challenges and opportunities for learning community development and motivation toward program improvements.

Individual learning community outcome documentation and syllabi supplemented the coordinator focus group transcripts and provided additional information about the intended outcomes of the learning community program. Content within these documents was coded along with the focus group data to obtain a holistic understanding, as well as to reveal the participant attributes and the magnitude to which there was consensus among participant accounts. A second coding cycle was employed to reveal data patterns which were collectively categorized and analyzed for overarching themes (Saldaña, 2009). The data provides insight into the learning community components that were provided to students, how each of the components addresses an area within Bandura's four domains of self-efficacy, the effectiveness of the components in meeting transfer student needs, identifies what works and does not work for this population, and demarcates potential areas of improvement.

*Rigor and Trustworthiness of the Data Analysis*

Transparency in qualitative research is obtained through meticulous record-keeping procedures, as well as thorough description of data collection and analysis procedures. This study involved the use of pre-existing artifacts, such as learning outcomes identified in each transfer learning community's Request for Proposal form and syllabi. Coding compiled from the process of reviewing these documents was recorded electronically. Three categories; academic outcomes, social outcomes and career demographic outcomes, and examples of codes within them are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Categories and Coding

<b>Academic outcomes</b>	<b>Social outcomes</b>	<b>Career Development outcomes</b>
-retention	-networking	-leadership
-knowledge of major/field	-mentoring	-exposure to industry
-resource sharing	-increased well-being	-meet professionals in field

Additionally, I actively engaged in memo-writing to record participant observations and to provide a descriptive analysis of the data collection process before, during and after the focus group was conducted. The focus group was audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Each of these recording activities helps to ensure that the study is transparent and could be replicated by another researcher.

Researcher reflexivity has been addressed through the process of bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher practiced bracketing by setting-aside any biases toward the data such as predispositions about learning community programming throughout the analysis. To ensure trustworthiness, three portions of the data analysis were provided to three focus group participants to review for accuracy of interpretation. After receiving members' approval of the analysis, a supervising faculty provided peer debriefing for correctness and impressions of the study analysis.

### *Ethical issues and concerns*

It is possible that some coordinators could have been concerned about the nature of the information shared during the artifacts review and focus group process. Some may have had reservations, thinking that it might impact their role in some way or that they may risk being seen in a negative light. This was of particular concern due to my role as a program coordinator for learning communities at Midwestern U. Participants in this study were assured that the information they provided would be coded with assigned pseudonyms to eliminate any potential anxiety about disclosing information during the focus group. Additionally, the artifacts used in this study were assigned pseudonyms to avoid associations that could be attributed to specific learning community programs.

## **Results**

The analysis of the data revealed three overarching themes in addressing the needs and challenges facing students in the transition from community college to the university. Bolstering academic performance, assisting in social integration, and developing career potential were clearly identified in the coding of documents (learning



outcomes and syllabi), and coordinator focus group analysis. The transfer learning community experience was viewed as a significant contributor to student success as suggested by each of these themes.

The coordinators reported that their typical transfer students have jobs that require more work hours than incoming first-year students direct from high school, are harder to engage outside of class, and have difficulties making connections with their peers. Challenges they encountered in developing programs to address their needs are attributed to the variations among student needs and the need for more one-on-one attention. Enrolling the students in a learning community created another obstacle for the coordinators. Course seat reservations were a notable challenge as there is a tendency for transfers to register for classes late as well as problems with finding common courses to cluster for the incoming cohort. In addition to these challenges, the coordinators identified that getting transfer student 'buy-in' to the learning community is the greatest challenge. Coordinators feel that transfer students often do not see the value of the learning community experience until the semester is over. The coordinators' responses were unanimous in their assertion that transfer students most need academic support and assistance in their social integration to the new academic environment despite the sentiment that transfer students feel mature and question the need of learning community support. They also stressed that transfer students have less time to plan and arrange internships since their matriculation at the university will be shortened in comparison to their traditional student peers. This puts the student at a potential disadvantage because if unaddressed, the students may need to lengthen their time to graduation.

After analyzing the needs and challenges facing students in the transition from community college to the university, focus group responses and other program documentation were examined to better understand the extent to which academic enhancement, social acclimation and career development can be achieved by attention to the promotion of students' self-efficacy. The self-efficacy framework was used as each of Bandura's (1994) four domains of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic/emotional influences align with intended outcomes within transfer learning community programs. A summary of this analysis can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. Bandura's (1994) Domains of Self-Efficacy and Overarching Themes

<b>Overarching Themes</b>	<b>Mastery Experiences</b>	<b>Vicarious Experiences</b>	<b>Social Persuasion</b>	<b>Somatic Influences</b>
<b>Academic Enhancement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain study skills</li> <li>• Develop repository of academic resources</li> <li>• Engage in research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist one another in coursework</li> <li>• Participate as a cohort with other transfers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish relationships w/faculty and staff</li> <li>• Motivate student engagement through team projects</li> <li>• Create academic atmosphere</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapt to changes in rigor</li> <li>• Engage with others in class</li> <li>• Prepare for course content</li> </ul>
<b>Social Acclimation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contribute personal experiences to team projects</li> <li>• Develop study groups</li> <li>• Enhance other's learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Network with other students</li> <li>• Reside among other transfers</li> <li>• Learn from mentor experiences</li> <li>• Engage in university culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask questions in a comfortable environment</li> <li>• Develop relationships with peers and mentors</li> <li>• Influence peers opinion of university and academic experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contribute to sense of belonging</li> <li>• Increase sense of well-being</li> </ul>
<b>Career Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acquire skills for workplace</li> <li>• Develop leadership potential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in service-learning</li> <li>• Work in teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet industry professionals</li> <li>• Discover career options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance preparedness for future career</li> </ul>

*Academic enhancement*

The theme of academic enhancement was defined by the academic experiences enhancing mastery such as the integration of study groups, sharing and understanding academic resources, and knowledge of, and participation in, academic research. The intended learning outcomes articulated by the transfer learning coordinators described the value of students helping one another to understand course content through study group participation. A second component of the learning community experience designed to enhance academic mastery is to make students aware and direct them to academic resources, such as tutoring services and supplemental instruction, to develop their personal study skills and time management, and to make them aware of university policies and procedures. And finally, another noted outcome was for the students to be aware of, and engage in, research opportunities within the institution. This was addressed through activities such as research presentations from faculty members and informing students of undergraduate research assistantships.

Coordinators described the importance of academic enhancement through mastery experiences. They explained that their transfer students tend to have high grade point averages at transfer and are often challenged by their high expectations about what they can handle during their first semester. Coordinator A explained:

*A lot of my students have really high GPAs and so their expectation is that 'I'm in Honors and I have a 3.9 at the community college' and their expectations of 'I can come here and take four core classes...' [It's about] trying to get them to be more realistic in their expectations, trying to give them resources. We have study nights with them. Trying to get*

*them to be more realistic about the reality...can you do this in exactly two years?*

Being underprepared was reiterated by the other coordinators as well. Coordinator D reported:

*I saw that incoming transfer students were experiencing what I thought was pretty extreme difficulty academically. We did a study over several years and saw that the GPAs they had coming from community colleges especially, would suffer significant drops the first year here and subsequently a lot of them would leave or be dismissed.*

Vicarious experiences to enhance student learning were evident in learning community documentation and coordinators' descriptions of students assisting one another with coursework and engaging in the academic experience as a transfer cohort. The learning community design presents an opportunity for the cohort to take one or more courses together and to be introduced to students who share the transfer experience. The ability to assist one another academically via study groups provides sharing in vicarious experiences as a cohort.

Social persuasion was addressed in the intended learning outcomes by introducing faculty and staff to the students, motivating student engagement through team projects, and developing an engaging academic atmosphere. The learning community coordinators reported the importance of creating connections between the faculty, staff and students as it would assist the students in their overall adjustment to the receiving institution. The development of these relationships and engagement in team activities were said to contribute to the students' sense of belonging. Coordinator C explained:

*It doesn't matter if it's a community college or a lateral transfer situation, just having come in later than that traditional first year experience really makes a difference for those that are going through it. They identify [with one another] because they've had different sorts of experiences.*

The learning community coordinators expressed their desire to help students experience a smooth transition and decrease anxiety which they noted commonly increases with changes in academic rigor from one institution to another. Assisting students' adaptation to changes in rigor, engaging them with other transfers in class, and helping them prepare for accelerated course content illustrates coordinators' concern and attention to the transfer students' emotional response to the transition to Midwestern U, i.e. somatic influence. The learning community outcomes and syllabi included presentations about the assistance provided by the university student counseling program so that students would be better aware of mental health services on campus. Additionally, the coordinators described the value in having mentors share their experiences in order to reassure the incoming class that they could persist through the transition. Coordinator D stated:

*I look for my peer mentors to be first and foremost role models so that they are involved and engaged. They are better than average academically. They've been successful so that they can model that behavior and they can explain things to them. They have to be good communicators and I always have at least one transfer student as a peer mentor. I don't know that the students treat them any differently in the classroom setting but I do know that individually when they meet with them, they tend to relate and talk about their previous experiences and it's almost like they're interpreters.*

*Social acclimation*

A mastery of student social acclimation was evident in the intended learning community outcomes designed to allow students to contribute personal experiences to team projects, develop study groups, and enhance one another's learning experience. While study groups provide a clear academic benefit, it can also be said that they provide a supportive network to students as they encounter difficulties in the adjustment to the new academic culture. Additionally, friendships build upon the interactions that occur within the study groups and the students benefit from learning from one another in this context. Providing students with the opportunity to know others through study groups can help build their social network on campus. This is a noteworthy goal that learning communities intend to address.

In addition to mastery experiences that assist in transfer students' acclimation to the university, social integration also was constructed through vicarious experiences via student networking, enabling students to reside among other transfer students, providing the opportunity for students to learn from their mentor(s) personal journey, and to engage in the university culture. One of the learning communities in the study offered a residential option wherein some of the learning community student participants lived among other transfer students. The value of knowing others encountering the same challenges was expected to provide a secondary layer of shared experiences among the students. While this was intended, it was not described as a critical component to the outcomes nor were specific student experiences explicated by coordinators connected to this study. The role of the peer mentor in providing transfer students' vicarious social

experiences' was important. The coordinators described how the students relied on their mentor's understanding of the transfer situation and his/her personal story of persistence was a meaningful motivator for the incoming class. Additionally, the coordinators reported the value for transfer students of getting involved in extra-curricular activities and being more engaged with clubs on campus.

Social persuasion was addressed through the intent to create a comfortable environment in which students can ask questions, develop relationships with peers and mentors, and influence one another's opinion of the university and the overall academic experience. The coordinators sought to create environments in which the students would approach them with questions concerning their academic and social concerns. They noted the increased amount of time they had to spend individually working with their transfer students so they could better understand academic expectations and help them develop realistic goals in developing their graduation plan. They sought to build community among the students so they could get to know their mentors and one another through the integration of ice breaker activities as well. The importance of social persuasion was articulated by Coordinator B:

*I think sometimes it takes a while for them to even acknowledge that they do have some similar needs [to incoming freshmen]. This year I [had students complete] their own self-assessment, and they talk about fitting in and getting to know their peers. Finding other students to study with and even some of them talk about homesickness. It's not as evident or significant with the transfer students as it is with freshmen, but I think it's harder for them to acknowledge because in their head, they're supposed to be further along and they're supposed to be able to make this transition. I think they have some of the same needs that freshmen do, it's just harder for them to acknowledge that.*

Students' somatic or emotional responses were addressed by providing programming designed to increase their personal sense of well-being. These concerns were addressed through social activities in which the students could interact in an informal atmosphere and develop their sense of belonging within the learning community; however, the coordinators noted the difficulties in engaging some students in out-of-class activities which encourage this type of interaction. Coordinator D stated:

*You have people who maybe because they were at a community college, where it tends to be, not in all cases, but tends to be more of a commuter-based program. They don't feel a connection to that community college. I attended a local community college for a couple of years, on a part-time basis, and I didn't feel a part of that school. And I think they come here with the same mindset that I'm just gonna come here from such and such time to such and such time. Put in my time and coursework and then I'm off to my job for six or eight hours a day. I'll be back tomorrow or whatever convenient schedule they can get. That makes it really tough for them to be engaged.*

#### *Career development*

Career exploration and preparation are important elements of the college experience that were addressed by the focus group participants. Intended mastery experiences within career development included acquiring skills necessary for the workplace and developing leadership potential. An example of this includes the integration of team projects and creating experiences in which the students can learn to work effectively as a team. The learning community proposals described intended student outcomes including the importance of becoming effective communicators and gaining a thorough understanding of social diversity, environmental and multicultural issues within their chosen field. Additionally, the students were provided opportunities to engage in



interviewing professionals in their chosen field, develop resumes and cover letters, identify career goals, and uncover job component details through career exploration assignments.

Vicarious career experiences were attended to in the transfer learning community outcomes via team projects, industry tours, field trips, service-learning and community service activities. The students were provided opportunities to engage in teams to plan and implement service activities connected to their curriculum. Additionally, some student cohorts took trips to businesses to learn more about operations within their chosen major. Coordinator B reported:

*We also focus on out of class activities and service learning because I think that a lot of learning goes on outside the classroom, and I think you know how hard it is to get transfer students to do that. Seeking out leadership opportunities...we have them do a service learning project, with our peer mentors leading different groups. Obviously one of the outcomes is that is hoping they come out of that with some kind of feeling of civic responsibility, but also one of the main objectives is that they work with a smaller group of students on a project and hopefully build community.*

Social persuasion in career development was intended to be influenced by student interaction with industry professionals and through student discovery of career options while in the learning community. Activities designed to engage and influence the students in this area included participating in mock interviews, meeting industry leaders while on field visits, and listening to presentations from faculty about career options within the major.

The goal of preparing transfer students for their future careers addressed somatic influences as well. It was intended that the students would be reassured and confident in their knowledge about their major, career options, and emergent issues within their chosen field. Additionally, experiences were planned to help prepare students for engaging in the career fair and encouraging them to think through their plans for attaining internships and co-ops. Coordinator C explained:

*I think something else especially with my population is there is a real sort of a quick get up to speed. You know they're they need to get internships. They need to get work experience in their field. They need to get those leadership experiences, the soft skills that employers are looking for. And I think that's a real challenge to do in a short amount of time....If we don't work to get them up to speed fast, they really miss out on some opportunities that employers are looking for, and so they maybe don't have all the advantages of a student that's been here from the first year, and I think it's difficult trying to get them to understand that sometimes.*

### **Discussion**

Self- efficacy has been applied in numerous studies, with Bandura's four domain approach most notably being applied toward teaching pedagogy (Margolis & McCabe, 2006) and the first-year college experience (Hutchison et al., 2006). The self-efficacy domain framework was used to illustrate how the three overarching learning community themes; academic enhancement, social acclimation, and career development, revealed in coordinator-developed learning community outcomes, syllabi, and focus group were each reflected within the four domains. The intended learning community outcomes and coordinator analysis describe mastery experiences such as those gained through study groups, awareness and use of academic support services such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, and knowledge of university policies and procedures. Academic mastery is critical for the transfer population who has a greater likelihood of being underprepared

for the rigor of a four-year institution as reported in the literature (Duggan & Pickering, 2008). This study reiterated the value of study groups and knowing major requirements as supported in the literature (Townsend & Wilson, 2009; Coston et al., 2010) as well. Vicarious academic experiences were identified through cohort engagement and students assisting one another with schoolwork. Social persuasion through academic connections with faculty, staff, and other students were integrated into the design of the learning community. The learning communities incorporated opportunities for faculty to visit the learning community class and discuss their research as well. Based on existing research (Astin, 1984; Chickering & Reisser, 1993, and Light, 2001), it is possible that this element could be better met with more intentional opportunities to engage with faculty outside of the classroom setting, such as the opportunity to dine with faculty, visit faculty research labs, and engage in fun activities like trivia nights. As supported by Light (2001), faculty who have the greatest impact are those who engage students through interweaving curriculum with the students' own experiences. Coping support for changes in academic rigor were important goals for the learning community as well. The coordinators reported the perception that transfer students have greater difficulty connecting with their peers and can become frustrated by the increase in academic rigor during their transition. Providing study group activities can support transfer student adjustment to increased rigor, offer networking opportunities and meet social support needs.

The importance of social connectedness to retention with the university has been well-documented in the literature (Davies & Casey, 1999; Tinto, 1987). Social acclimation was the second overarching goal of the learning communities in this study.

The learning community intended to address mastery experiences through study groups, one specifically sought to provide vicarious residential experiences, and all intended to develop the students' sense of connectedness and belonging in the campus community. The coordinators noted that it was more difficult to engage the students in social experiences due to competing demands from jobs and families. Additionally, one coordinator identified that many transfer students maintain a commuter approach to their university experience and thus are less engaged with the university in general. Multiple role demands (Duggan & Pickering, 2008) and challenges encountered through a commuter approach, specifically with regard to faculty engagement (Zamani, 2001) are supported by existing literature. It was acknowledged that the learning communities in this study sought to arrange out-of-class activities, but often found it difficult to obtain student participation. One way to mediate this is through additional active learning and networking opportunities within the learning community classroom experience. This could meet the students' need to know their classmates better without adding to the strain of returning to campus after class.

Career preparedness emerged as a theme within the learning community experience and is clearly connected to Bandura's domains of self-efficacy support. The importance of providing mastery experiences, such as those designed to enhance leadership and workplace skills, were integral to preparing transfer students for career fairs and internships. Furthermore, offering vicarious experiences, like service- and team-learning opportunities, and social persuasion through meeting industry professionals not only addressed somatic needs for reassurance of being in the correct major but also provided students with multiple opportunities to prepare for their future careers.

When prompted to suggest recommendations for starting a transfer learning community, coordinators identified several intended to improve transfer students' experiences. The first best practice was to ask students about their needs and uncover what they believe is missing throughout their first semester experience. Secondly, they recommended avoiding a single model approach noting that a first-year experience model may not work for this population due to variations in existing credits and outside obligations. They also described the importance of finding advocates in administration to support the learning community's development and to involve faculty in any way possible for the benefit of the students. Systematically seeking feedback from students also is critical to program evaluation and helps to ascertain what works and what does not for them, from their perspective. And most importantly, the coordinators suggested new programs should start simple and grow in time. This allows the program to easily adapt to the changing needs of the students and provides flexibility for future growth.

#### *Limitations of Study*

While this study provides an understanding about how the intended outcomes of learning communities address the self-efficacy of transfer students, more extensive exploration about how self-efficacy is influenced by learning community design and programming, the coordinators perceptions and opinions regarding student self-efficacy, and the role of coordinator in promoting student self-efficacy within each domain would be beneficial. This study provides a foundation for further examination of academic and social mastery, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic influences occurring within the learning community curriculum. Additionally, although outside the scope of this study, it would be helpful to engage coordinators and students in combined focus

groups so that the students can share their emergent concerns with the coordinators themselves. This may prompt deeper discussion and reveal greater connections between the student and coordinator perceptions and intended outcomes in the learning community.

### *Implications for Future Research and Practice*

This study was designed to inform transfer learning community programming and provides best practices for this growing population of students. The research reveals the influence of the learning community in meeting the needs of students academically, socially, and professionally. This study shows that academic support is provided by learning community programming. Furthermore, this academic enhancement is essential to student self-efficacy because it influences emotional responses to the transition through enhancement of mastery and vicarious experiences. By facilitating the development of cohort experiences, study groups, and encouraging students to take advantage of academic support services, the learning community program is supporting and enhancing academic mastery at a transitional time when student's self-efficacy may be most threatened.

The study also highlights the important roles that peers, faculty, and staff play in the social acclimation of students to the university. It is recommended that learning community coordinators, administrators and faculty seek out various ways to integrate students with faculty both inside and outside of the classroom so that students can experience a greater sense of connection to the university and to build confidence as students and young professionals. Not only is social persuasion enhanced through

increased faculty engagement, and networking and team-building opportunities between the students but this research supports that peer mentors have an opportunity to shape the student experience through role modeling. Mentors should be encouraged to share their personal academic journey for the benefit of the students they are mentoring. This encourages not only a deeper understanding of their academic path, but it is also a source of encouragement for the students who relate their own matriculation to the path of their mentor. And finally, career exploration and preparation was shown to be enhanced through learning community participation. By providing opportunities to explore careers in the major, developing internship and graduation plans, and engaging industry mentors in presentations, the learning community adds to the career mastery of its transfer students. This study demonstrates that each of these mastery and vicarious experiences is essential to the success of transfer learning community programs. It is recommended that these experiences, as well as providing an environment in which social persuasion and somatic influences are supported should be integrated into all future transfer learning community programs.

## **APPENDIX E: COORDINATOR FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

### **Coordinator focus group questions**

(I) I would like each coordinator to share one or two characteristics to describe the typical transfer student.

(I) Why do transfer students need support in their transition to the university?

<probe> Why did you/your department create a learning community?

<probe> What are the challenges in working with the transfer population?

(I) What role do you see the learning community providing in the transition?

<probe> How long have you been working with transfer students?

<probe> How long have you been coordinating your transfer LC?

(I) Please tell me about your transfer LC.

<probe> What are the intended learning outcomes?

<probe> How do you recruit students into your learning community?

<probe> Are your students aware that they are part of a learning community? Do you explicitly describe and refer to the group/course/experience as a learning community ?

<probe> What are the academic components?

<probe> What are the social components?



<probe> What types of activities do you offer?

<probe> In what ways is self-efficacy addressed in your learning community, if at all?

<probe> What types of leadership/mainstreaming opportunities do you offer?

(I) Describe your typical transfer LC student issues.

(I) What are your perceptions of your students' transition process?

(I) What would your students say about their transition process?

(I) What do you hope transfer students will gain by participating in your learning community?

(I) If there is a peer mentor working for your LC, what role do they play?

<probe> Position responsibilities

<probe> Influence on students

(I) How do you feel being in the learning community helped your students' transition?

(I) How do you measure your success in meeting the needs of the transfer students in your learning community?

(I) How would you assess your success in improving interpersonal relationships among transfer students?

(I) In what ways would you improve the LC for next year?

(I) What advice would you give a coordinator preparing to start a transfer learning community?

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## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Bandura's four domains of self-efficacy (1994); mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic influences served as a framework for analysis of the transfer student transition, learning community experiences and learning community programming design evaluated in this study. The results show that the learning community experience sustains and promotes transfer student self-efficacy. Students are motivated to address the challenges of increased academic rigor and learning communities help them to meet their academic goals and objectives. Understanding the domains and role of student self-efficacy can strengthen learning community programming. Mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic influences, the building blocks of student self-efficacy, further existing strengths and are the underpinning to tackle the next academic and social challenge. The findings supported that the learning community attended to the transfer students' transition challenges and established that self-efficacy is bolstered through learning community activities occurring both in class and out of class, as well as through peer networking.

The transfer student interviews and a focus group with them revealed how self-efficacy was addressed through specific learning community experiences. The students recognized the learning community for providing supportive resources, helping develop achievable graduation plans, engaging them in service learning activities and preparing them for internships. The students experienced social reassurance in meeting other transfer students as well.

Three overarching themes—academic enhancement, social acclimation and career development—were identified based on the analysis of transfer student and coordinator reports. Clear connections were made between these overarching themes and mastery experiences such as those provided through study groups and leadership activities; vicarious experiences like networking and mentoring activities; social persuasion through faculty engagement; and somatic/emotional influences such as adaptation to changes in rigor. The student analysis confirmed that for them the strongest connections made were between the academic and social outcomes of the learning community, while the career exploration and preparation only played a secondary role for the transfer student respondents.

### **Recommendations for Transfer Learning Community Programs**

Three recommendations for program improvement arose from findings within the body of this qualitative research. These recommendations are:

1) *Increase faculty engagement.* As supported by existing literature, faculty engagement is critical to student satisfaction (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; and Light, 2001). To meet this need, transfer learning community programming could benefit from offering more intentional opportunities to engage with faculty outside of the classroom. Suggested out-of-class activities include dining with faculty, visiting faculty members' homes, engaging in extra-curricular activities such as trivia game nights, etc.

2) *Increase study support.* Coping support for changes in academic rigor was an important goal articulated by coordinators and the students. The coordinators reiterated that transfer students experience more challenges in connecting with their peers and can



be discouraged by increased academic rigor during their transition. Transfer students reported that they greatly valued having study group support to address this concern and suggested increasing study group activities to support their adjustment to the increased rigor.

3) *Increase networking opportunities.* Transfer students expressed that the most beneficial aspect of their learning community experience was the opportunity to network. Increased active learning and networking opportunities within the learning community classroom experience are recommended to meet the students expressed needs to know their classmates better and to support the development of study groups.

With regard to the design and implementation of transfer learning community programs, the coordinators provided additional recommendations for best practice. These recommendations include:

1) *Seek feedback from student participants.* Transfer students in the learning community can share input so that the program can be evaluated with regard to what works and what does not for the transfer students.

2) *Avoid a single model approach.* A first-year experience model may not work for the transfer population due to variations in existing credits and outside obligations.

3) *Find advocates.* Administrative support is critical toward the learning community's development and find ways to engage faculty in any way possible for the benefit of the students.

4) *Start simple.* A straightforward design allows for growth over time to address changing needs of transfer students and enables flexibility for future growth.

**Limitations of this study**

While this study provides an understanding about how learning communities address the self-efficacy of transfer students, extensive exploration about how self-efficacy is influenced by learning community participation within each domain would be beneficial. This qualitative inquiry provides a foundation for further examination of academic and social mastery, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic influences occurring within the learning community curriculum. The study demonstrates similarities among students centered on the four domains of self-efficacy; however, it is important to also acknowledge intra-individual differences between students. It is critical to continually assess the learning community program to determine how it can best address the needs of this varied and ever-changing demographic. The two-time interview with focus group design of the student study was useful to measure semester-long impact of learning community involvement; however, a longitudinal design that looks at experiences throughout an entire academic year could yield additional insight about the influence of student self-efficacy over a longer period of time.

And finally, although outside the scope of this study, it would be helpful to engage coordinators, faculty and students in combined focus groups so that the students can share their emergent concerns with the coordinators and faculty themselves. This may prompt deeper discussion and reveal greater connections to be made between the student, faculty and coordinator perceptions and intended outcomes in the learning community.

### **Implications for Future Research and Practice**

This study contributes to a better understanding of transfer learning community programming and provides best practices for this growing population of students. The research reveals the influence of the learning community in meeting the needs of students academically, socially, and professionally. The research shows that academic support is needed and influences emotional responses to the transition through enhancement of mastery and vicarious experiences. By facilitating the development of cohort experiences, study groups, engaging faculty and encouraging students to take advantage of academic support services, the learning community program is supporting and enhancing academic mastery at a transitional time when student's self-efficacy may be most threatened.

The study also highlights the important roles that peers, faculty, and staff play in the social acclimation of students to the university. It is recommended that learning communities seek out various ways to integrate students with faculty both inside and outside of the classroom so that students can experience a greater sense of comfort and connection to the university. This study reveals that social persuasion is enhanced through increased faculty engagement, networking and team-building opportunities. Additionally, this research supports that peer mentors have an opportunity to shape the student experience through role modeling. Mentors should be encouraged to share their personal academic journey for the benefit of the students they are mentoring. This encourages not only a deeper understanding of their academic path, but it is also a source of encouragement for the students who relate their own matriculation to the path of their mentor. And finally, career exploration and preparation was shown to be enhanced

through learning community participation. By providing opportunities to explore careers in the major, developing internship and graduation plans, and engaging industry mentors in presentations, the learning community adds to the career mastery of its transfer students. This study demonstrates that each of these mastery and vicarious experiences is essential to the success of transfer learning community programs. Additionally important, transfer learning communities provide social persuasion such as encouragement from transfer student peers, mentors, and coordinators and somatic influences in the form of coping supports and connection to community. It is recommended that each of these experiences should be integrated into all future transfer learning community programs.

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## APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
1138 Pearson Hall  
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207  
515 294-4566  
FAX 515 294-4267

Date: 6/8/2011

To: Jennifer Leptien

CC: Dr. Christine Cook  
2538 Palmer Building

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Learning Communities: Understanding the Transfer Student Experience

IRB Num: 11-246

Submission Type: New

Exemption Date: 6/6/2011

The project referenced above has undergone review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b). The IRB determination of exemption means that:

- You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.
- You must carry out the research as proposed in the IRB application, including obtaining and documenting informed consent if you have stated in your application that you will do so or if required by the IRB.
- Any modification of this research should be submitted to the IRB on a Continuing Review and/or Modification form, prior to making any changes, to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an IRB proposal will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please be sure to use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review by the IRB. Only the IRB may make the determination of exemption, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.

## **APPENDIX B: STUDENT PARTICIPANT STUDY INVITATION**

Hi <<student>>,

Are you interested in sharing your transfer learning community experience for the potential benefit of future transfer students at Midwestern U?

My name is Jennifer Leptien and I am a PhD candidate in Human Development and Family Studies. I am seeking participants for a study focusing on transfer learning community student experiences. Specifically, I am interested in speaking with students who have transferred from a different college to Midwestern U this semester.

I received your contact information from the Midwestern U Office of the Registrar database. If you chose to participate, you would meet with me on three occasions.

- 1) A forty-five minute, one-on-one interview and brief survey during which you will be asked questions about your transition to Midwestern U approximately week 3 (September 5-9) of the fall semester
- 2) A thirty minute, one-on-one interview during which you will be asked questions about your academic and social motivations approximately week 12 (November 7-11)
- 3) A sixty minute focus group meeting in which you, as well as 10-to-15 of your transfer student peers, will be asked to reflect on your transfer learning community experience during your first semester at Midwestern U approximately week 13 (November 14-18)

Your participation will be compensated. You would receive \$100 after completing all three research events. All information received from the interviews and focus group activity would be coded so that your identity is kept confidential.

Does this sound like something you are interested in doing? If so, could you give me an idea of potential openings in your daily schedule for the week of September 5-9? Depending on our combined schedules, I will try to reserve a space in <<campus location>> to perform the interview.

Thank you for your consideration!

Jennifer Leptien

PhD candidate; Human Development and Family Studies

<<email address>>

## **APPENDIX C: COORDINATOR PARTICIPANT STUDY INVITATION**

Hi <<Coordinator Name>>,

Are you interested in sharing your transfer learning community coordination experiences for the potential benefit of future transfer students and coordinators at Midwestern U?

I, Jennifer Leptien, a PhD candidate in Human Development and Family Studies, am seeking participants for a study focusing on transfer learning community programming experiences. Specifically, I am interested in speaking with transfer learning community coordinators about the challenges and opportunities in developing programs for the transfer population.

I am requesting your participation as I am aware that you coordinate a transfer learning community program at Midwestern U. If you chose to participate, you would meet with me on one occasion for a sixty-minute focus group with five-to-eight other transfer learning community coordinators approximately week 13 (November 14-18) of the fall semester.

There will be no financial compensation for your participation; however, a pizza lunch would be provided at the start of the focus group session.

All information obtained through the focus group activity would be coded so that your identity is kept confidential.

Does this sound like something you are interested in doing? If so, could you please send a reply email to me at your earliest convenience?

Thank you for your consideration!  
Jennifer Leptien  
PhD candidate; Human Development and Family Studies  
<<email address>>

## APPENDIX D: STUDENT MEMBER CHECKS

**From:** Student D  
**Sent:** Saturday, April 07, 2012 2:12 PM  
**To:** Leptien, Jennifer R  
**Subject:** Re: Transfer Study Research Interview Follow-up  
 Jen,

Everything looks pretty good to me. As you know, for me, the learning community was a great environment for me to be involved with. I believe it definitely helped me with my transition. Even now, I still struggle from time to time, but because of those relationships that were built last semester I have learned how to handle things and who I can approach for help when necessary. I am not nearly as active in my learning community this semester, but I believe most of that is due to having a very busy schedule this semester as well as already knowing people to talk to when I have questions.

Good luck with your dissertation and your future work!

Student D

On Thu, Apr 5, 2012 at 8:55 AM, Leptien, Jennifer R wrote:

Hi Student D,  
 I am writing to see if you have had a chance to review the attachment I sent with this original email. Could you please let me know your thoughts at your earliest convenience?  
 Thanks!  
 Jen

---

**From:** Leptien, Jennifer R  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 27, 2012 12:46 PM  
**To:** Student D  
**Cc:** Leptien, Jennifer R  
**Subject:** Research Interview Follow-up

Hi Student D,  
 I hope the spring semester is going well!  
 I am sending portions of my dissertation analysis as they pertain to your interview and focus group comments.  
 Could you please look it over and let me know if you see anything that seems incorrect or misrepresented? Your feedback is very valuable to me so I sincerely appreciate your time in looking it over.  
 Thank you again for assisting in my research project!  
 Jen Leptien

<< File: Student D.docx >>

### Section 1:

When asked how the learning community was helping their transition to the university at week three, the students shared appreciation for knowing the university policies up-front, getting to know the specifics of their major, and learning about career preparations. One example of the benefits of the learning community that was shared most frequently is the opportunity for getting to know the other students in their program.

**D1 quote:** *Getting to know people on a smaller scale. I think that will probably branch into other people cause you know if you get to know this group of 20 and they take you into their little group of five or more.....making a little network on campus with fellow students...it's probably gonna be helpful in that department and since we're all transfer students, we've got that in common.*

While a majority of the students shared an appreciation for the learning community, two expressed that they felt that it was not influencing their transition to the university. These students shared that they did not need the social support or to learn about university procedures via the learning community. One student indicated that they were comfortable looking up resources on their own, and was not pleased that their learning community was mandatory for their major. The second student felt that the social component was not important to their transition but also included that they felt learning community participation is a good idea for all transfers within the same major.

#### Section 2:

When asked to reflect upon their adjustment to Midwestern U. the students shared that they were feeling more socially adjusted while seven declared that their classes were harder than expected, and three raised specific concerns about tests and grades.

**D1 Quote:** *Midterm was a little scary. I've never had grades look quite that rough. I have worked on reaching out to more resources, such as the TAs and extra help study times. I am horrible with tests. I really am. I think it's probably poor study habits really. I go into it being nervous because I know I'm not prepared.*

**G1 Quote:** *I realized this is a weighted grading system, so this is totally different [than at the community college]...which means I have to work harder than I normally did. So I would say my level of concern is raised. Now I'm realizing that's actually kind of my fault. I should have looked at that from the get go.*

When probed for further explanation, the students expressed that their coursework had prompted them to seek out resources and academic support, such as supplemental instruction and tutoring for more difficult courses. Five students indicated that they were receiving individualized tutoring, and seven were routinely attending supplemental instruction outside of their courses.

#### Section 3:

Mastery experiences are described as individual persistence enhanced by scaffolding challenges just slightly above where one can reach in order to motivate further development (Bandura, 1994). The students in this study had many opportunities in which mastery experiences were engaged. The primary opportunity for mastery experiences was realized through studying in group settings. The students felt especially challenged early in the semester when they were adjusting to the self-reported increase in rigor at the university. They reported that by week eleven, they were working a lot harder than anticipated, they were studying more, and in the words of student H, realized "*that I cannot slack off*". Student I commented: *I'm probably pretty well because I get in and get the work done that I have to get done... you know, work now, play later type of mentality. I work ahead in classes.*" The students shared that they were feeling more prepared and acclimated by week eleven and revealed personal responsibility in mastering the course materials as exemplified by student D's comment that: *I've taken the action to get the tutor on the weekends and I'm trying to get a study group of the students in the class because I'm not the only one that's lost. I am actually trying to get that put together.*

## Section 4:

Social persuasion manifests within learning communities in the form of encouragement such as provided by the learning community coordinator, peer mentors, and fellow students in the transfer cohort. The students in this study shared how the university environment creates a sense of higher learning and that fellow classmates are also driven and motivated to learn. They described how the learning community was an agent for developing supportive social networks such as revealed in student D's comment that *".....making a little network on campus with fellow students...it's probably gonna be helpful in that department and since we're all transfer students, we've got that in common."* The students described the influence of efficacy and social persuasion in how they had faced academic challenges and would rebound when they fell behind such as in student G's comment about how a roommate warned them that they would have to work harder than ever before to succeed in a particular large lecture course, and while they expected it, they would *"rebound"*. Additionally, student J described how they *"felt stupid"* after doing poorly on an examination, but that they had "bounced back" and understand that they will not get perfect scores on every examination at the university.

\* \* \*

**From:** Student J  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 27, 2012 1:16 PM  
**To:** Leptien, Jennifer R  
**Subject:** Re: Research Interview Follow-up

Hello Jennifer,

My spring semester complete tanked, however that had nothing to do with the school. I'm going to start fresh in the summer or fall again. I read over the portion, and everything does seem very accurate. One minor point is I don't live off campus officially, I'm in the student apartments, however it's a minor point, and it's away from central campus, so I don't know if it's even worth changing. Other than that, I was slightly surprised that I wasn't the only one that complained about portions of the learning communities. Everything seems great though! I'll have no problem with things otherwise!

Sincerely,

Student J

On Tue, Mar 27, 2012 at 12:45 PM, Leptien, Jennifer R wrote:

Hi Student J,

I hope your spring semester is going well!

I am sending portions of my dissertation analysis as they pertain to your interview and focus group comments.

Could you please look it over and let me know if you see anything that seems incorrect or misrepresented?



Your feedback is very valuable to me so I sincerely appreciate your time in looking it over.

Thank you again for assisting in my research project!

Jen Leptien

\*\*\*\*\*

Portion sent for review

Section 1:

In general, the transfer students shared positive perceptions of other students on campus as they felt they were friendly, offered greater diversity, and tended to be more dedicated learners than at their previous schools. Three students shared that some of their classmates appeared to be immature or less experienced but they attributed that to a smaller subset of students. This sense of “otherness” was attributed to age differences between themselves and their classmates. Student J1 said:

*I do feel like the old man on campus, and I know I'm not the oldest student by any means. I've met some others that have got a few years on me, but rare and few and far between. I don't mind being in a younger crowd but you notice the little differences right away. When it comes to socializing again, people want to associate with like other people. So being the old guy on campus, people are polite and they'll talk but...I don't expect to get a lot of invitations unless it is a club or by some group recruiting and that's a little frustrating.*

The students indicated a wide variety of understanding about Learning Communities prior to their arrival on campus. Three indicated that they did not know anything about the program, while the other ten students shared that it was recommended to them by an academic adviser, or in one case, a former student. The students shared that they hoped that the learning community would serve as a source for asking questions, developing study groups, networking and team-development. A few specifically described that they had hopes that the learning community would help them learn how to study better, provide extra help with schoolwork and help them get involved on campus.

The students shared that the learning community activities they had engaged in by week three of the semester included covering policies and procedures, discussing preparations for the career fair, taking a field trip as a group to a local business, and signing up for service projects. The students had all broken into small groups at various times and twelve students had received information about the peer mentors hired to assist their learning community.

Reported engagement with the peer mentors at week three revealed that the connections varied with some of the students reporting that their mentors had led some activities, while two students said they had not personally met their mentors yet. Of those who had met the mentors, they found their peer mentors to be friendly and knowledgeable. Some of the mentors had reached out to the students outside of the classroom as well via Facebook and email.

When asked how the learning community was helping their transition to the university at week three, the students shared appreciation for knowing the university policies up-front, getting to know the specifics of their major, and learning about career preparations. One example of the benefits of the learning community that was shared most frequently is the opportunity for getting to know the other students in their program.

**D1 quote:** *Getting to know people on a smaller scale. I think that will probably branch into other people cause you know if you get to know this group of 20 and they take you into their little group of five or more.....making a little network on campus with fellow students...it's probably gonna be helpful in that department and since we're all transfer students, we've got that in common.*

While a majority of the students shared an appreciation for the learning community, two expressed that they felt that it was not influencing their transition to the university. These students shared that they did not need the social support or to learn about university procedures via the learning community. One student indicated that they were comfortable looking up resources on their own, and was not pleased that their learning community was mandatory for their major. The second student felt that the social component was not important to their transition but also included that they felt learning community participation is a good idea for all transfers within the same major.

As a follow-up to what the learning community had done thus far, the students were asked what the learning community could do to help them more in their transition to the university. The student response to this revealed that they hoped for more social interaction and additional small group opportunities to learn more about their fellow classmates.

**K1 Quote:** *It would be kind of nice to do more social interactions with the other people. They say you're going to network with people in your class, but you spend most of the time covering material.*

**J1 Quote:** *Considering the fact that I live off campus...I don't have any neighbors that are in my learning group....we don't have interaction outside of [class]. 10 minutes of the class time is what the instructor gives us to interact, cause the rest of the time, the instructor is up there talking.*

While the overarching theme for additional support had a social angle, one student expressed an interest in the learning community providing more acclimation with regard to classroom technology used on campus. This student shared that they did not feel prepared or confident in navigating the university-wide course management system and using clicker tools in the classroom. They reported that these technologies were a source of frustration and concern.

Table 4. Overarching Themes – Time One

Classroom Experiences	Peer Networks	Out of Class Experiences
Differences among faculty	Age differences	Looking for club affiliation
Differences in study habits	Variations in mentor connection	Influence of university community culture
Variation in physical environment	Differences in life experience and maturity	Living arrangement: -on-campus -off-campus
Differences in curriculum and technologies	Seeking academic support	Financial motivations -employment -pressure to graduate

## Section 2:

At week eleven and during the focus group, the students reiterated the same goals for their university experience that they had shared at the first interview. They still shared a desire to get more involved and meet more people.

**B2 Quote: Really just getting involved. I'm still kind of getting adjusted. That'll probably be a second semester thing once I have my feet a little more set.**

They wanted to maintain their GPA's, get an internship or job, build their resume, and engage in study abroad, clubs, and honor societies outside of the classroom.

**A2 Quote: There is so much I want to do that I'm afraid I'll either be here for a billion years, or you know.... I'm really excited to just soak up all that the university has to offer cause it's so different from the community college.**

One student shared that they were now more focused on learning, not just getting good grades because they saw the value in the learning process rather than just being motivated by their GPA as they had been in the past. Another student reported that they found the transition to the university to be much more difficult than expected. Because of this difficult transition, they had considered dropping out of the university around week eight of the semester. It was through engagement in a team activity that they changed the student's opinion about dropping out.

**J2 Quote: I severely considered dropping out of school for a while just because I didn't know anyone, felt uncomfortable here, felt like the old man on campus sort of stuff like that. Being involved in a class team exercise, where I had to be part of that every week, for a while I felt like I was carrying that because I could [lend my expertise]. That was really beneficial for me to be at those meetings and our team has been at the top, which we've got a lot of extra credit for, which is a nice little bragging point.**

### Section 3:

Social persuasion manifests within learning communities in the form of encouragement such as provided by the learning community coordinator, peer mentors, and fellow students in the transfer cohort. The students in this study shared how the university environment creates a sense of higher learning and that fellow classmates are also driven and motivated to learn. They described how the learning community was an agent for developing supportive social networks such as revealed in student D's comment that *".....making a little network on campus with fellow students...it's probably gonna be helpful in that department and since we're all transfer students, we've got that in common."* The students described the influence of efficacy and social persuasion in how they had faced academic challenges and would rebound when they fell behind such as in student G's comment about how a roommate warned them that they would have to work harder than ever before to succeed in a particular large lecture course, and while they expected it, they would *"rebound"*. Additionally, student J described how they *"felt stupid"* after doing poorly on an examination, but that they had "bounced back" and understand that they will not get perfect scores on every examination at the university.

One of the most prominent examples of social persuasion that was identified out of the interview and focus group process was how group work had the potential to contribute to efficacy and personal motivation. The students shared that being held accountable within their study group pushed them to stay engaged and achieve the tasks set before them. Student J had considered dropping out of the university; however, maintaining active engagement in a group project bolstered their efficacy as they were seen as someone who could lend needed expertise to the team. This contributed to the students desire to remain at the university. And finally, student A spoke of the importance of the learning community in encouraging them to reach out more to their coordinator and fellow students: *"I feel like I can [succeed] if I remember to ask for help. I'm always a 'suffer in silence' kind of person and I don't really reach out and that's when I start falling behind. That's been kind of helpful with the LC too because it got me more in with my coordinator and other people who have gone through it so I'm not the only one."*

## **APPENDIX E: COORDINATOR MEMBER CHECKS**

**From:** Coordinator A  
**Sent:** Thursday, April 19, 2012 10:36 PM  
**To:** Leptien, Jennifer R  
**Subject:** RE: Transfer Research Study Follow-up

Hi Jen,

Sorry I didn't get to this faster. It all looks good to me... I can't wait to read the whole dissertation ☺...

I'll have to call you about the focus group I did on Monday night...

Thanks,

Coordinator A

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**From:** Leptien, Jennifer R  
**Sent:** Tuesday, April 17, 2012 9:02 AM  
**To:** Coordinator A  
**Subject:** Transfer Research Study Follow-up

Good morning Coordinator A,

I am writing to you this morning to follow-up on my dissertation research by sending portions of my analysis as they pertain to your focus group comments.

Could you please look it over and let me know if you see anything that seems incorrect or misrepresented?

Your feedback is very valuable to me so I sincerely appreciate your time in looking it over.

Thank you again for assisting in my research project!  
 Jen

<< File: Coordinator A.docx >>

**Jennifer Leptien**

### **Section 1:**

The analysis of the data revealed three primary transfer learning community themes in addressing the needs and challenges facing students in the transition from community college to the university. Bolstering academic performance, assisting in social integration, and developing career potential were clearly identified as key objectives within the intended learning outcomes, syllabi, coordinator focus group and supporting student analysis. The transfer learning community experience was viewed as a significant contributor to the attainment of the defined goals in each of these areas.

The coordinators shared that their typical transfer students tend to work more hours than incoming freshmen, are harder to engage outside of class, and have difficulties making connections with their peers. Challenges they encountered in developing programs to address their needs are attributed to the variations among student needs, the need for more one-on-one attention, course seat reservations as there is a tendency for transfers to register for classes late and problems with finding common courses to cluster for the incoming cohort. In addition to these challenges, the coordinators said getting transfer student buy-in to the learning community is the greatest challenge. They shared that transfer students often do not see the value of the learning community experience until the semester is over. Additionally, they reported that their typical transfer student feels they are more mature and do not need the support of the learning community for their transition to the university.

The coordinator participants were asked to share what the students needed most in their transition to the university. The coordinators' responses were unanimous in their assertion that transfer students need academic support and assistance in their social integration to the new academic environment. They also stressed that transfer students have less time to plan and arrange internships since their matriculation at the university will be shortened in comparison to their native student peers. Bandura's four domains of efficacy provide the framework through which each of these objectives has been analyzed. Mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic influences are clearly distinguished in the analysis. A summary of this analysis can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. Transfer Learning Community Outcomes

<b>Situational Context</b>	<b>Mastery Experiences</b>	<b>Vicarious Experiences</b>	<b>Social Persuasion</b>	<b>Somatic Influences</b>
<b>Academic Enhancement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain study skills</li> <li>• Develop repository of academic resources</li> <li>• Engage in research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist one another in coursework</li> <li>• Participate as a cohort with other transfers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish relationships w/faculty and staff</li> <li>• Motivate student engagement through team projects</li> <li>• Create academic atmosphere</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapt to changes in rigor</li> <li>• Engage with others in class</li> <li>• Prepare for course content</li> </ul>
<b>Social Acclimation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contribute personal experiences to team projects</li> <li>• Develop study groups</li> <li>• Enhance other's learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Network with other students</li> <li>• Reside among other transfers</li> <li>• Learn from mentor experiences</li> <li>• Engage in university culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask questions in a comfortable environment</li> <li>• Develop relationships with peers and mentors</li> <li>• Influence peers opinion of university and academic experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contribute to sense of belonging</li> <li>• Increase sense of well-being</li> </ul>
<b>Career Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acquire skills for workplace</li> <li>• Develop leadership potential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in service-learning</li> <li>• Work in teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet industry professionals</li> <li>• Discover career options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance preparedness for future career</li> </ul>

*Academic enhancement*

Academic experiences defined to enhance mastery include the integration of study groups, sharing and understanding academic resources, and knowledge of, and participation in, academic research. The intended learning outcomes articulated by the transfer learning coordinators described the value of students helping one another to understand course content through study group participation. A second component of the learning community experience designed to enhance academic mastery is to make students aware and direct them to academic resources, such as tutoring services and supplemental instruction, to develop their personal study skills and time management, and to make them aware of university policies and procedures. And finally, another noted outcome was for the students to be aware of, and engage in, research opportunities within the institution. This was addressed through activities such as research presentations from faculty members and informing students of undergraduate research assistantships.

These outcomes were reiterated in the coordinator focus group where the participants described the importance of enhancing mastery. The coordinators shared that their transfer students tend to have high grade point averages at transfer and are often challenged by their high expectations about what they can handle during their first semester.

**A Quote:**

*A lot of my students have really high GPAs and so their expectation is that 'I'm in Honors and I have a 3.9 at the community college' and their expectations of 'I can come here and take four core classes...' [It's about] trying to get them to be more realistic in their expectations, trying to give them resources. We have study nights with them. Trying to get them to be more realistic about the reality...can you do this in exactly two years?*

Being underprepared was reiterated by the other coordinators as well.

**D Quote:**

*I saw that incoming transfer students were experiencing what I thought was pretty extreme difficulty academically. We did a study over several years and saw that the GPAs they had coming from community colleges especially, would suffer significant drops the first year here and subsequently a lot of them would leave or be dismissed.*

Several students also reported an increase in academic rigor upon arrival at the university and most took advantage of academic support such as study groups, tutoring and supplemental instruction as a result. Additionally, many articulated that the development of their four-year graduation plan and knowledge of policies and procedures was enhanced through their learning community experience. While research was listed in the intended outcomes and syllabi for a few of the learning community programs, research experiences were not explicitly described by the students analyzed in this study.

\* \* \*

**From:** Coordinator C  
**Sent:** Tuesday, May 01, 2012 9:50 AM  
**To:** Leptien, Jennifer R  
**Subject:** member check

Dear Jennifer Leptien:

It was wonderful receiving the information on our focus groups and what you learned from us. I believe you succinctly captured our words and have no revisions to your manuscript. Thank you for keeping us in the loop about your project.

Good luck as you wrap-up your research project.

Coordinator C

### Section 1:

The analysis of the data revealed three primary transfer learning community themes in addressing the needs and challenges facing students in the transition from community college to the university. Bolstering academic performance, assisting in social integration, and developing career potential were clearly identified as key objectives within the intended learning outcomes, syllabi, coordinator focus group and supporting student analysis. The transfer learning community experience was viewed as a significant contributor to the attainment of the defined goals in each of these areas.

The coordinators shared that their typical transfer students tend to work more hours than incoming freshmen, are harder to engage outside of class, and have difficulties making connections with their peers. Challenges they encountered in developing programs to address their needs are attributed to the variations among student needs, the need for more one-on-one attention, course seat reservations as there is a tendency for transfers to register for classes late and problems with finding common courses to cluster for the incoming cohort. In addition to these challenges, the coordinators said getting transfer student buy-in to the learning community is the greatest challenge. They shared that transfer students often do not see the value of the learning community experience until the semester is over. Additionally, they reported that their typical transfer student feels they are more mature and do not need the support of the learning community for their transition to the university.

The coordinator participants were asked to share what the students needed most in their transition to the university. The coordinators' responses were unanimous in their assertion that transfer students need academic support and assistance in their social integration to the new academic environment. They also stressed that transfer students have less time to plan and arrange internships since their matriculation at the university will be shortened in comparison to their native student peers. Bandura's four domains of efficacy provide the framework through which each of these objectives has been analyzed. Mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic influences are clearly distinguished in the analysis. A summary of this analysis can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. Transfer Learning Community Outcomes

Situational Context	Mastery Experiences	Vicarious Experiences	Social Persuasion	Somatic Influences
<b>Academic Enhancement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gain study skills</li> <li>Develop repository of academic resources</li> <li>Engage in research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assist one another in coursework</li> <li>Participate as a cohort with other transfers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish relationships w/faculty and staff</li> <li>Motivate student engagement through team projects</li> <li>Create academic atmosphere</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adapt to changes in rigor</li> <li>Engage with others in class</li> <li>Prepare for course content</li> </ul>
<b>Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contribute personal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Network with other students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask questions in a comfortable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contribute to sense of</li> </ul>

<b>Acclimation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>experiences to team projects</li> <li>• Develop study groups</li> <li>• Enhance other's learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reside among other transfers</li> <li>• Learn from mentor experiences</li> <li>• Engage in university culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>environment</li> <li>• Develop relationships with peers and mentors</li> <li>• Influence peers opinion of university and academic experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>belonging</li> <li>• Increase sense of well-being</li> </ul>
<b>Career Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acquire skills for workplace</li> <li>• Develop leadership potential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in service-learning</li> <li>• Work in teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet industry professionals</li> <li>• Discover career options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance preparedness for future career</li> </ul>

## Section 2:

Social persuasion was addressed in the intended learning outcomes by introducing faculty and staff to the students, motivating student engagement through team projects, and developing an engaging academic atmosphere. The learning community coordinators reported the importance of creating connections between the faculty, staff and students as it would assist the students in their overall adjustment to the receiving institution. The development of these relationships and engagement in team activities were said to contribute to the students' sense of belonging.

### C Quote:

*It doesn't matter if it's a community college or a lateral transfer situation, just having come in later than that traditional first year experience really makes a difference for those that are going through it. They identify [with one another] because they've had different sorts of experiences.*

Additionally, it was reported by one learning community student participant that the university culture felt more like an institute of higher learning than the community college simply due to a sense that other students took the coursework and college experience more seriously at the receiving institution.

## Section 3:

Self-efficacy has been applied in numerous studies, with Bandura's four domain approach most notably being applied toward teaching pedagogy (Margolis & McCabe, 2006; Kirk, n.d.) and the first-year college experience (Hutchison et al., 2006). The efficacy domain framework applied in their study clearly articulates the academic, social and career development defined by the transfer learning community outcomes analyzed in this study. The degree to which the domains were reportedly met varies with the learning communities and the students themselves. In this study, the student analysis showed greater strong connections between the academic and social outcomes of the learning community, while the career exploration and preparation played a secondary role for the students involved. Furthermore, the student analysis revealed a need for greater social networking opportunities than they reportedly experienced during their first semester. This response reiterates both the coordinator perception and student sentiment that networking with others supports the adjustment to the university environment.

The intended learning community outcomes, and coordinator and student analysis describe mastery experiences such as those gained through study groups, awareness and use of academic support services such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, and knowledge of university policies and procedures. Academic mastery is critical for the transfer population who has a greater likelihood of being underprepared for the rigor of a four-year institution as reported in the literature (Duggan & Pickering, 2008). This study reiterated the value of study groups and knowing major requirements as supported in the



literature (Townsend & Wilson, 2009; Coston et al., 2010)) as well. Vicarious academic experiences were identified through cohort engagement and students reporting that they assisted one another with schoolwork. Social persuasion through academic connections with faculty, staff, and other students were integrated into the design of the learning community but not clearly articulated by the students themselves. The learning communities incorporated opportunities for faculty to visit the learning community class and discuss their research; however, the students did not refer to this as a major component of their experience. It is possible that this element could be better met with additional opportunities to engage with faculty outside of the classroom setting. Coping support for changes in academic rigor were important goals for the learning community and the students themselves. The coordinators shared the perception that transfers have greater difficulty connecting with their peers and can become frustrated by the increase in academic rigor during their transition. The student study revealed that the participants greatly valued having study group support, and some indicated a preference for increased study group activities to support their adjustment to the increased rigor. Students also saw the learning community as most valuable for networking and meeting social support needs.

The importance of social connectedness to retention with the university has been well-documented in the literature (Davies & Casey, 1999; Tinto, 1987). Social acclimation was the second overarching goal of the learning communities and students in this study. The learning community intended to address mastery experiences through study groups, one specifically sought to provide vicarious residential experiences, and all intended to develop the students' sense of connectedness and belonging in the campus community. The coordinators noted that it was more difficult to engage the students in social experiences due to competing factors such as job and family demands. Additionally, one coordinator identified that many transfer students maintain a commuter approach to their university experience and thus are less engaged with the university in general. While multiple roles demands (Duggan & Pickering, 2008) and challenges encountered through a commuter approach, specifically with regard to faculty engagement (Zamani, 2001) are supported by existing literature, the student analysis did not reveal a strong connection between work schedules, family demands, or commuter mentality and learning community or faculty engagement. While coming back to campus after hours could be a hindrance, the student analysis revealed that they wanted to have more networking opportunities during their first semester. Rather than work or family demands, the students often attributed their increased academic workload as a factor that kept them from engaging in out-of-class activities. It was acknowledged that the learning community tried to arrange activities that appealed to the student participants but not all the events were well-attended. One student shared that this was a disappointment as many of the activities sounded fun but did not come to fruition due to low participation. One way to mediate this is through additional networking opportunities within the classroom experience. This could meet the students expressed needs to know their classmates better without adding to the strain of returning to campus after class.

While career preparedness emerged as a component of the intended outcomes for the learning community experience, it was not described as a reason for joining a learning community by the students. Although it may not have been a goal for engaging in the learning community, a number of students indicated that they felt better prepared for career fairs and internships. The application of Bandura's domains of efficacy support that the students' personal obligation to complete activities for the good of the team and being reassured about their major selection suggests that they benefitted in this domain regardless of whether it was their intent in participating in the learning community.

## APPENDIX F: LEARNING COMMUNITY REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL FORM

2011-12 Learning Community  
Request for Proposals (RFP)  
**Midwestern U**  
**October, 2010**

The Learning Communities program invites proposals from the University community for Learning Community funding for the 2011-12 academic year. Use of funds will extend from July 1, 2011 through June 30, 2012.

Learning community proposals should clearly reflect the **learning outcomes** of the departments and colleges represented.

### **Vision for funding Midwestern U learning communities:**

*To support Midwestern U's commitment to student learning, the Learning Community initiative seeks to enhance our undergraduates' experience by providing all interested students dynamic, focused communities in which students, staff, and faculty can learn and grow together.*

In keeping with this vision, the main criteria for funding learning communities will be:

- Programs that foster an integrated curriculum in which course content is connected and course participants interact.
- Programs that build strong, collaborative partnerships between academic and student support services.
- Programs that promote innovative pedagogy and collaborative curriculum development that may incorporate service learning, interdisciplinary teams, cooperative learning strategies, out of class learning connections, and other curricular innovations.
- Programs that have a specific, comprehensive assessment plan that addresses clearly articulated, intended learning outcomes for students.

Additional emphasis will be placed upon:

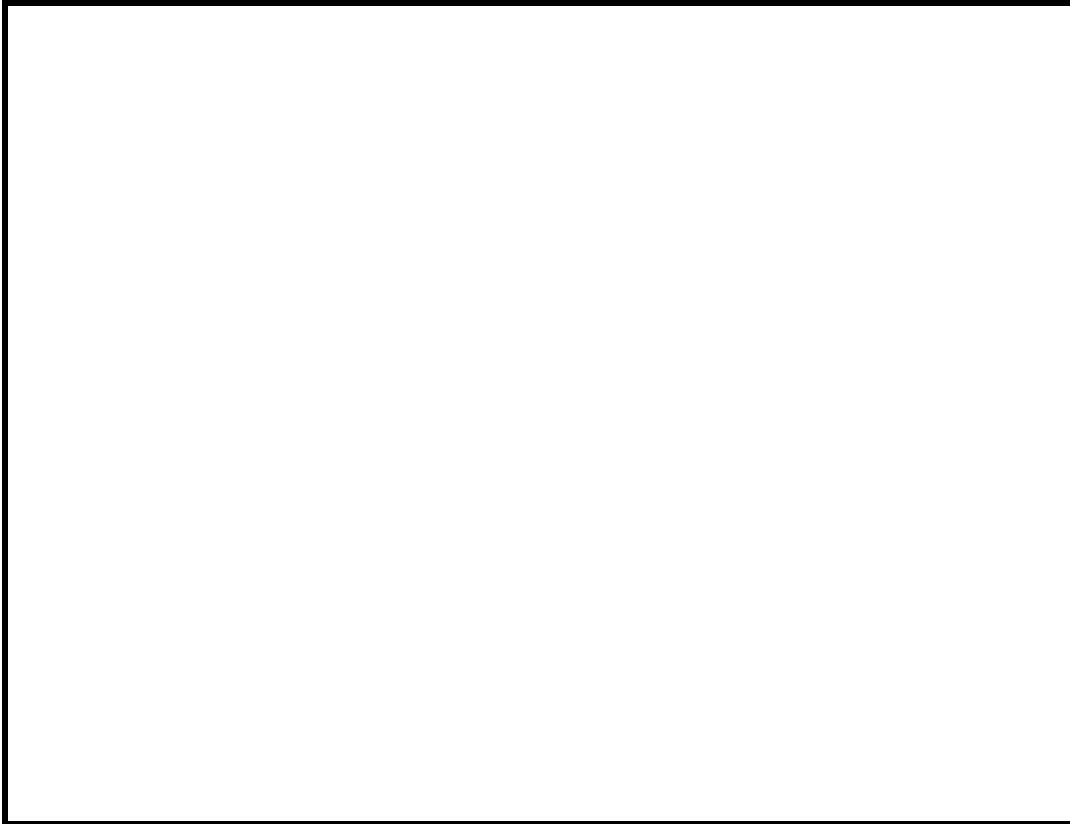
- Programs that promote enhanced success of students in under-represented groups.
- Programs for first-year freshmen that facilitate the students' integration into the University community and extend to the full academic year.
- Programs that integrate a well-defined plan for peer mentors.
- Programs that demonstrate plans for sustainability and demonstrate college and/or departmental financial support

(Revised 10/18/10)

**Name of Learning Community**

**Abstract**

Within the text box below, please provide a brief overview of your Learning Community and describe what you are trying to accomplish with the program.

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for the user to write the abstract of their Learning Community. The box is currently blank.

<p><b>Office Use Only:</b></p> <p># _____</p>
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2011-2012 Learning Community RFP

1. Name of Learning Community (LC):
  
2. Fall 2010 student count:      Anticipated 2011 student count:
  
3. Department(s) involved:
  
4. College(s) involved:
  
5. Primary coordinator (we will only be corresponding with the PRIMARY contact person):

Name

Address

Phone

Email

6. Is your Learning Community:
  - Fall only                       Spring only                       Full year (2 semesters)

7. List other faculty and staff who are directly involved with your learning community:

Name:	Position (faculty, staff, etc.):	Department:	Type of Involvement:

8. Who will handle your accounting and fund transfer? (Separate accounts for programming and mentors specific to this learning community must be identified before the transfer of funds.)
  - Name:      Phone:
  
9. Who will coordinate your assessment plan?

10. In the matrix below, see examples of learning outcomes. List your specific LC outcomes (cognitive, affective, & social), show how they connect to your department/college outcomes, what experiences you have designed to meet the outcomes, and how you will assess the intended outcomes.  
**You are not required to list five outcomes.** You may add more rows as necessary.

Intended learning outcome	Corresponding department/college outcomes	Specific LC experiences which promote this outcome	Assessment Plan: Evidence or artifacts to determine whether outcome has been achieved
Example: Students will develop competency in communication & technical skills to make effective presentations.	Be able to present an effective oral report.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Train students in basic PowerPoint skills</li> <li>--Individual &amp; group presentations in class</li> <li>--Guest speakers &amp; attendance at one or more events in the lecture series</li> <li>--Follow up discussion after lecture series events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Instructor &amp; peer evaluation &amp; critique</li> <li>--Final presentation showcasing skills learned</li> <li>--Video-tape student presentations for self-review and critique</li> </ul>
Example: Students will use critical thinking & problem solving skills in applied situations.	Be able to apply knowledge to solving real life problems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Linked course assignments</li> <li>--Analysis of case studies</li> <li>--Field trips to observe actual work situations</li> <li>--Service learning projects</li> <li>--Study groups &amp; team problem solving exercises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--Instructor evaluations of projects &amp; assignments</li> <li>--Student journals &amp; self-evaluations</li> <li>--Observations of students</li> <li>--Follow up discussions on case studies, field trips &amp; service learning experience</li> </ul>
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

11. **LC Courses**

List all courses that are part of your learning community. Please note with an asterisk if you offer (or will offer) a seminar or orientation class for your LC students.

**NOTE: Listing courses below does not constitute the official “course request form” that will be requested by the Office of the Registrar prior to the RFP due date.**

Fall	Spring

12. List your proposed activities to encourage student-faculty interaction.

13. List specific partnerships with student affairs units (e.g., Multicultural Student Affairs, Residence, Dean of Students, Recreation Services, Counseling Center, Health Center, etc.), service-learning partners, professional partners, etc. – with whom you plan to work. Briefly describe the collaborations.

14. What, if anything, do you think you will change about your learning community next year?

15. Are you interested in linking with English 150/250 or an English 300-level course?  Yes  No

16. Are you interested in linking with Psych 131?  Yes  No

17. If you would like to see Supplemental Instruction offered for specific courses, please contact

Please note that information within this proposal may be shared with other LC coordinators and staff.

**Make sure you have attached the following documents to your email:**

- ✓ **Request for Proposal form**
- ✓ **Budget Spreadsheet (separate Excel worksheet) – see next page for details**
- ✓ **Peer Mentor job description**

We recommend that you copy the department chair and associate dean with the electronic submission of your RFP as well.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank all who have supported me through this dissertation process. First, I would like to extend my appreciation to Dr. Christine Cook for her guidance and support throughout the creation of this document and completion of my degree program. Her valued expertise has shaped my writing and influenced my overall doctoral experience. I would like to thank Drs. Dianne Draper and Brenda Lohman for their service on my committee and encouragement throughout my course of study. And finally, a heartfelt thank you to Drs. Corly Brooke and Doug Gruenewald to whom I attribute both my interest in this dissertation topic, as well as my desire to improve the academic experience for all students at the university. I sincerely appreciate all of the opportunities provided to me through my work with the Learning Communities program and hope that this research endeavor will enable me to best support the Learning Community mission.