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Theory to Practice: Applying the Best Practices Model (BPM) for Living-Learning Communities at Cabrini University

LEARNING COMMUNITY PROGRAMS, like many other forms of higher education, are at risk from the effects of financial constraints, systemic racism, and pressures from outside constituents that are forcing institutional leaders to face difficult decisions that result in cutting budgets and closing programs. During these tumultuous times, learning community programs should not only be retained, but also expanded and improved to align with best practices in order to create inclusive campuses, strengthen community, increase students' sense of belonging, and foster faculty-student relationships. This intentional approach will result in higher student retention, satisfaction, and persistence rates. In 2018, Inkelas and colleagues developed the Best Practices Model (BPM), which presents a pyramid of what they call the "building blocks" of a successful living-learning community program. The purpose of this paper is to provide an application of this model to a well-established, constantly evolving learning community program. Through a reflective analysis of four living-learning communities, this paper seeks to be the first to apply this theory to practice, specifically articulating how this model can be used for reflection on as well as assessment and improvement of a program. Applying the model in this way allows living-learning programs to reinforce the building blocks of their program in an era when these high-impact practices need to become permanent features of a campus's culture in order to survive the challenges facing higher education in the present and beyond.

Our world has encountered an array of complex challenges from systemic racism and gender inequities to a pandemic and extreme poverty. These injustices remain unresolved, and our society is still navigating their impact in the midst of a polarized political climate. In light of these challenges, institutions of higher education, particularly small liberal arts colleges and universities, must rethink what it means to educate today's college student. Navigating this landscape must

occur while simultaneously managing an ongoing financial crisis that has resulted in institutions closing the doors on educational programs and initiatives and, unfortunately for some, their campuses. In a moment when institutional leaders in higher education face difficult financial decisions, high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008) such as learning community programs are at risk for cuts or even elimination. Countering such closures, Benjamin and colleagues (2020) emphasize that learning communities are not only worth preserving but should be leveraged when designing future learning experiences. Such an effort will stabilize and enrich student experiences, which will ultimately reduce costs by improving student retention and satisfaction.

Over the past two decades, studies have discussed the importance of restructuring the experiences offered to students entering colleges and universities, even as this population changes (Smith et al., 2004). Some key changes include demographics, residential choices, and added pressures on students' time and attention. The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (1998) emphasizes the importance of integrating first-year programs and providing spaces for collaborative learning. In an effort to increase critical inquiry in the classroom, Kuh (2008) called for active, student-focused learning opportunities that would challenge students to immerse themselves in their learning processes. This call to action is still relevant today, and learning communities are a response to this call.

There are many learning community (LC) designs: living-learning communities (LLCs), linked courses, residential colleges, and coordinated studies programs. LLCs specifically are most effective in establishing the immersive learning environment discussed above when they are both designed intentionally and rooted in a clear set of goals. These objectives then drive the alignment with and integration of all other LLC elements (Inkelas et al., 2018).

As learning communities (encompassing all the LC designs identified above) have been directly connected to the retention and persistence of first-year college students (Gebauer et al., 2013; Katz, 2015; Voss, 2016), the growth and expansion of learning communities at colleges and universities nationally and internationally has been continuous (Taylor et al., 2003; Tinto et al., 1993). In an effort to improve academic preparedness, learning communities engage students in “processes and collaborative projects” (Watterson et al., 2012, p. 2) that build on one another during and potentially across semesters through a set of connected coursework. To enhance this learning experience, certain LC models will structure communities with a team of faculty having diverse disciplinary backgrounds in order to create an interdisciplinary experience, challenging students to explore content through multiple lenses (Watterson et al., 2012). The effectiveness of this academic experience improves when the divisions of student life and academic affairs are working seamlessly to facilitate this “form of integrative, developmental learning through activities that link exploration and action, both curricularly and co-curricularly” (Gebauer et al., 2013, p. 7). It is this educational space where students, faculty, and staff can—as a community—explore, deliberate, and address interdisciplinary challenges presented by such complex prob-

... in an effort to increase critical inquiry in the classroom the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) called for active, student-focused learning opportunities that would challenge students to immerse themselves in their learning processes. This call to action is still relevant today, and learning communities are a response to this call.

lems as a global pandemic or systemic racism, which require multiple perspectives and collective thought and action (Benjamin et al., 2020).

Malnarich (2005) explains that effective learning communities “infuse intellectually rigorous, inclusive curriculum with high expectations; design developmentally appropriate assignments and award fluid credits” based on the work students are able to do; and “invite students to participate in the creation of knowledge” (pp. 59-60). When most effective, learning communities “practice pedagogies of active engagement and reflection” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 67), community is intentionally built, and academic work is integrated with cocurricular and residential opportunities. Learning communities can be offered to students across the academic spectrum, from developmental learners to honors students, with each community focused on “creating curricular coherence . . . to teach skills in meaningful contexts” (Smith et al., 2004, p. 68).

Though, as indicated above, learning communities can take on many shapes and sizes on individual college and university campuses, Levine and Shapiro (2000) identify several basic characteristics that all effective learning community programs share: the organization of smaller cohorts of faculty and students, an integration of the curriculum, academic and social support networks and programmatic academic support, socializing students to college expectations, collaboration between faculty in meaningful ways, effective learning outcomes at the focal point of the experience, and a direct relationship with the larger first-year experience. These characteristics overlap and align with Goodsell Love and Tokuno’s (1999) key dimensions of learning communities: student collaboration, faculty collaboration, curricular coordination, shared setting, and interactive pedagogy. These characteristics and dimensions communicate that the most successful LC programs are those fully integrated into the college or university, fostering collaboration between and across campus divisions. It’s critical to provide all stakeholders a seat at the table, “bringing together different units of the campus with separate and distinct missions, creating institution-wide involvement in the kind of change that is necessary if learning communities are to thrive” (Levine & Shapiro, 2000, p. 3).

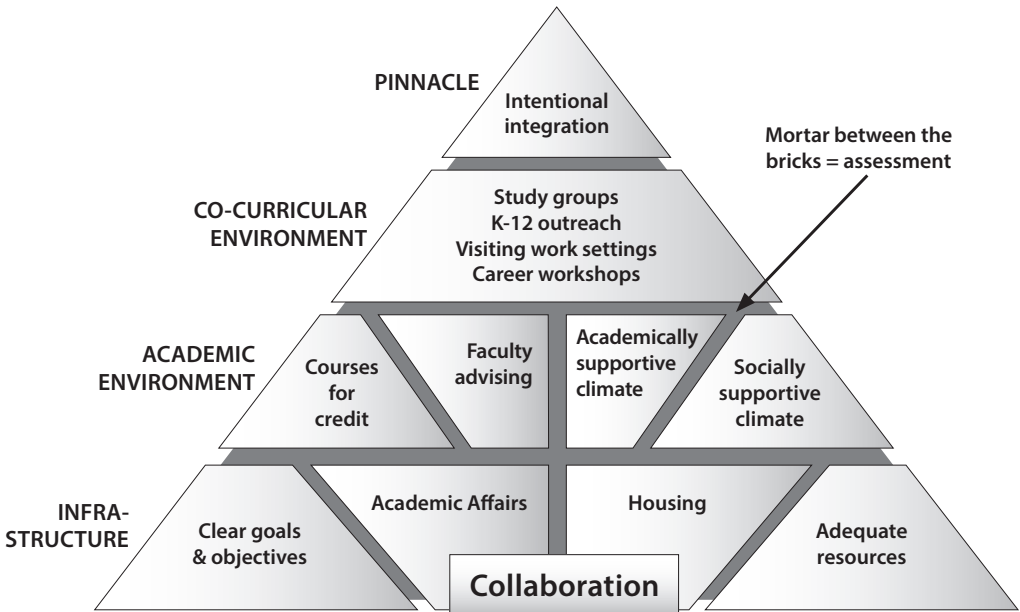
One theory that details such intentional design focuses specifically on living-learning communities and derives from the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP). “Using the quantitative and qualitative data gathered by the NSLLP over 10 years and several data collections, the NSLLP research team developed a Best Practices Model (BPM) that depicts a set of components for successful LLCs” (Inkelas et al., 2018, p. 17). The model (illustrated in Figure 1) is represented as a pyramid, organized similar to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. There are 10 building blocks that stack upwards in four levels: infrastructure, academic environment, cocurricular environment, and the pinnacle. Each building block names critical elements of aspirational LLCs (Inkelas et

al., 2018). The purpose of this paper is to provide an application of this model to a well-established, constantly evolving learning community program at Cabrini University, a small private Catholic liberal arts institution outside the city of Philadelphia. Through a reflective analysis of four LLCs, this paper seeks to be the first to apply this theory to practice, specifically articulating how this model can be used for reflection on as well as assessment and improvement of a program. Applying this model to four intentionally designed LLCs helps reveal the usefulness of the BPM approach: The tiers are accurate, and the concept of assessment as the mortar holding tiers together is fitting. At the same time, evaluating the BPM through this lens points up some directions for further research.

Cabrini University has applied the BPM as a tangible means for reflecting on its established LLC program's growth and improvement. Detailed below are specifics that emerge from using this theory as a reflective lens. Concrete examples from the university's four LLCs are provided throughout, with tangible suggestions for how the integration of these strategies contributes to retention and student success.

FIGURE 1

The Best Practices Model for LLCs



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Cabrini launched its LC program in 2007 to combat student attrition. Since then, program goals have expanded to now include engaging first-year students in integrated learning across a variety of contexts. Cabrini University offers more than a dozen LCs, enrolling approximately 75–80% of first-year students in either an LC or LLC. Over the past 12 years, the assistant dean for retention and student success and LC faculty leaders have reflected on the university's program and its efficacy in meeting the changing needs of its student population, resulting in significantly higher fall-to-fall retention and 4- and 5-year graduation rates for students engaged in an LLC than for their non-LLC peers. To showcase this theoretical model in practice, each level of the BPM and its respective individual building blocks will be discussed in reference to Cabrini University's LLCs, citing examples from its four communities—Body Language, IMPACT, Realizing Dreams, and Voices of Justice—offered to incoming first-year students.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The foundation of the Best Practices Model is the infrastructure. The building blocks that make up the LLC infrastructure, each of which is critical for the LLCs to thrive, are clear goals and objectives, collaboration between academic affairs and residence life, and adequate resources.

Clear Goals and Objectives

Effective LLCs have clear programmatic goals and objectives that are measurable and serve as the foundation for the program (Inkelas et al., 2018). A true community is one where students are interacting and engaging in thought-provoking dialogue that contributes to these shared learning goals (Lenning et al., 2013). As the LLCs' teams design goals and objectives, they must also consider an assessment plan that evaluates the following:

... discrete parts of their programming (e.g., courses, staff, and co-curricular activities) and the extent to which all facets of their program (a) align with the program's goals and objectives and (b) integrate with the other elements of their programs (Inkelas et al., 2018, p. 91)

In this process of design and assessment, staff and faculty (represented by student life and academic affairs, respectively) are provided a voice to contribute to this foundation of the program. Prior to spring 2017, clear goals and objectives existed for the LC program at Cabrini University, but they were not measurable. Despite offering an integrative curriculum—spanning multiple courses and semesters—supported by a robust cocurricular model intended to build community and extend learning beyond the classroom, the university's communities lacked assessable learning outcomes. Although assessment had been ongoing through first-year experience pre- and post-surveys, general education assessment, and annual reporting, the assessment protocol had never been fully aligned with programmatic LC outcomes.

In response to the absence of measurable outcomes, LC faculty and staff engaged in a collaborative process that led to the creation of three measurable learning outcomes

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shared by each of the university's communities. The focus of these three learning outcomes is integrative learning, the central feature of the university's program. These outcomes align with three of the learning outcomes identified in AAC&U's Integrative and Applied Learning VALUE Rubric (2009). Utilizing AAC&U's language to establish a framework, these outcomes address several areas of connection: to self, experiences, and courses or disciplines (2009, p. 2).

Students in this LC Program will do the following:

1. *Demonstrate "a developing sense of self as a learner, building on prior experiences to respond to new and challenging contexts (may be evident in self-assessment, reflective, or creative work)."*
2. *Adapt and apply "skills, abilities, theories, or methodologies" gained in the dynamic interplay between the curriculum and the co-curriculum.*
3. *Observe and articulate connections across LC coursework, disciplines, and perspectives.*

Each LC and LLC can add a fourth learning outcome specific to the theme of their community.

Collaboration Between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs/Housing

Traditional higher education systems showcase a culture in which curricular and cocurricular learning exist independently of one another, and institutional divisions such as student life and academic affairs tend to work in functional silos (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 1996). Often these divisions are guided "by the assumption that students require different programs, services, and environments that are best offered by distinct and separate offices" (Manning et al., 2014, p. 94), rather than offering a truly integrative experience that challenges students to consider how their out-of-classroom experiences influence their academic thinking. Frost and colleagues (2010) argue that this isolation and fragmentation of student learning persists as one of higher education's greatest threats. Without a strong collaborative relationship, in the context of an LLC program communities will never aspire to achieve true integration (Inkelas et al., 2018), and student learning experiences may become detached from one another.

The structure of Cabrini University's LLCs provides a bridge between the two domains of academic affairs and student life by, for example, utilizing full-time staff who have academic areas of expertise to serve as LLC faculty in specific communities. A prime example of this collaboration is leveraging the expertise of the Dean of Student Engagement and Leadership in the IMPACT (Leadership) LLC. Student life staff and faculty collaborate not only on faculty teams within individual communities but also across communities through ongoing professional development opportunities offered as LC faculty development days and active participation in monthly meetings of the

LC Council, a governing body comprising student life and academic affairs contributors. When applying the BPM's building block of collaboration specifically to Cabrini University's LLCs, it could be argued that the focus should be broadened from residence life/housing to student life/student affairs.

Though student life staff serve as LLC faculty, collaborating with faculty both within and across communities, the university's LC program does not maximize usage of the residential space to enhance student learning. Currently, the assistant dean for retention and student success and the assistant director of residence life collaborate to house students in the appropriate residential spaces designated for specific LLCs. However, faculty are neither creating much of a presence nor holding class or office hours in the residence hall. The faculty in the Voices of Justice and Body Language LLCs have, for example, hosted dinners and events in the residence hall lounges or occasionally offered office hours in a residence hall, but the faculty admit there is much more room to be intentional about infusing academics into the living spaces. LLC students likely engage in academic conversations and work on class assignments together in the residence hall; however, it has not been an explicit expectation for students to engage in these types of interactions. If they occur, they do so organically.

In an effort to improve this foundational element of the program, the university's LC Council has begun to work with the Office of Residence Life not only to identify and hire previous LLC students to serve as resident assistants on LLC floors, but also to discuss what more fully collaborative programming might entail. Currently, residence life lacks residential learning outcomes designed to complement the learning outcomes outlined in the core curriculum and, more specifically, first-year student coursework. Faculty and residence life staff working together to design a robust residential curriculum would enhance the collaborative relationship between academic affairs and residence life and deepen our LLC students' residential experience as a complementary academic incubator. However, at the least, the presence of LLC alumni as resident assistants does provide academic support and continuity for current students. The LC Council hopes to develop further its relationship with residence life staff in order to design a residential curriculum that more intentionally connects with the first-year curriculum these students are experiencing across the university's LLCs.

Adequate Resources

Inkelas and colleagues (2018) view resourcing through the lens of physical space, personnel, and funding. In terms of residential space, researchers emphasize intentional living-learning design, for this serves to promote intellectual conversations amongst peers, to establish a culture of ease for engaging in cocurricular programming in close proximity to LLC students' residence, to designate residential space designed specifically to bolster faculty and student interactions, and to increase overall student engagement and involvement. Though programmatic structure and leadership will vary from institution to institution, stronger communities have institutional support at every level (Inkelas et al., 2018). The degree of change in personnel will also vary across institutions, and personnel changes often affect LLC budgets.

Traditional models of higher education view faculty advising as academic advising. Though this conception is accurate to some extent, faculty advising in the context of LLCs has the potential to extend beyond the academic realm of a student's experience.

Research suggests, however, that those programs operating on a tight, limited budget are linked to low levels of institutional support and experience increased difficulty in achieving programmatic goals and objectives (Inkelas et al., 2018).

At Cabrini, the LLCs are housed under the Office of the First-Year Experience and Student Transitions, which is situated within the Center for Student Success under the division of Academic Affairs and led by the assistant dean for retention and student success, who oversees personnel and programmatic funds associated with each LLC. All LLCs are staffed with two or three faculty, serving in a role as either a faculty director or faculty fellow. Both faculty roles are provided financial stipends to compensate LLC faculty for the development of and participation in the curriculum and the cocurriculum. For its part, though, residence life determines which residence halls house first-year students. As a result, the assistant dean, though given the opportunity for input, does not choose the residence halls in which LLCs are housed. Though LLC students do live together in the same residence hall building and on the same floor, not all LLC spaces are conducive to hosting LLC cocurricular programs nor to allowing faculty to create a presence in students' residential space. There is much room for improvement in respect to physical space, and consideration should be given to innovative ways that LLC faculty can best utilize the limited space that does exist in the residence halls.

Although there are some limitations in the use of physical space in the residence halls themselves, these do not seem to have been a major hindrance in the overall successes of LLC program integration. After all, the senior administration recognizes and supports the impact LLCs have on the first-year student population they serve. Each LLC is provided with an annual programming budget of \$4,000 to integrate cocurricular programming into the curriculum while also building and fostering community throughout the year. Faculty are issued stipends for their labor since much of this work extends beyond the classroom both in the planning and delivery stages of robust cocurricular offerings as well as the integration of the curriculum spanning two to five courses, which then culminates in a capstone assignment. A \$1,000 budget is also provided to each LLC to hire student leaders, in the form of student fellows, who can serve in leadership capacities both in LLC classes and in the residence hall. This funding to support LLC personnel and programming has significantly contributed to achieving programmatic learning outcomes.

ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

The next level of the LLC infrastructure is the academic environment, "or the intellectual hub of the program" (Inkelas et al., 2018, p. 20), which includes the following building blocks: courses for credit, faculty advising, an academically supportive climate, and a socially supportive climate.

Courses for Credit

In a review of the research on learning communities, various definitions have been employed for this type of campus initiative. Most noteworthy is the work of Lardner and Malnarich (2009), who define learning communities as “a cohort of students enrolled in two or more courses in which they experience at least one explicitly designed opportunity for integrative learning” (p. 30). This definition aligns with other research that characterizes these communities as cohorts of students who take a series of at least two courses together, where learning across courses is integrated, and learning extends beyond the classroom through residential and cocurricular opportunities that advance course content and build community (Andrade, 2007; Barnes & Piland, 2010; Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Keup, 2005; Malnarich, 2005; Price & Lee, 2005; Smith et al., 2004; Tinto, 1997). For many institutions offering LLCs, coursework is absent from the experience. Inkelas and colleagues (2018) argue that courses for credit are essential to the academic environment, strengthening the partnership between housing and academic affairs. These researchers emphasize the importance of not simply offering academic courses, but making sure that they are high quality, rigorous content courses connected to the learning outcomes of the LLC as the avenue that augments and sustains the student experience.

Each of Cabrini University’s LLCs offers two first-year experience seminars: a one-credit College Success Seminar (COL 101) rooted in metacognition to boost student self-awareness and a four-credit first-year writing and informational literacy seminar (ECG 100) that serves as the foundation of a 10-credit, multi-year sequence that embeds all three pillars (academic excellence, leadership, and social justice) of the institution’s mission statement into the core curriculum. In addition to these two courses, each LLC includes two to three other courses that span the first year. Even if the courses count for a major or minor requirement, LLC courses typically are a general education requirement, so students complete graduation requirements regardless of their LLC and/or whether they change their major in their first year.

In the IMPACT community, courses are designed to meet general education requirements, while simultaneously moving students toward the completion of a minor in leadership studies, a course sequence designed to complement all academic majors at the university. The ECG 100 course follows a unique pedagogy called *Reacting to the Past*, where students take on various roles of leaders throughout history and learn more about their decision-making as it relates to the ethical challenges they encounter. This course also serves as the gateway for the minor in leadership studies. Additionally, students take two more courses that are required for the minor—*Metacognition for Leadership* and *Foundations of Leadership*—in their first year, alongside COL 101 and Public Speaking. At the conclusion of the academic year, students have the option to continue into a second year of coursework to complete all the leadership studies minor requirements by the end of their second year. Through this intentional design, students meet this milestone early in their undergraduate experience and are primed to take on more advanced leadership roles throughout the remainder of college.

While the interdisciplinary approach of the IMPACT LLC provides students an avenue to pursue a leadership studies minor, the Voices of Justice LLC engages students in interdisciplinary coursework in Religious Studies, Social Justice, and American Studies. Through these core classes, including two tightly integrated and co-taught courses in American Studies, students in this LLC are halfway to an American Studies minor and a third of the way towards an American Studies major by the end of their first year. Because the field of American Studies is interdisciplinary by design, it pairs well with other majors. Students in the Voices of Justice LLC are not only being introduced to the field, but are also immersed in engagements with multiple views and voices—the deliberative dialogue and engaged pluralism at the heart of American Studies.

Faculty Advising

In the early stages of the LLC experience, students may not recognize the interdisciplinary and integrative nature of their LLC coursework. A strong faculty advising model within the structure of the community helps to bring this integration to life. Traditional models of higher education view faculty advising as academic advising. Though this conception is accurate to some extent, faculty advising in the context of LLCs has the potential to extend beyond the academic realm of a student's experience. The advising that LLC faculty offer students includes helping them to observe the intersections that exist across their LLC experience in order to promote active learning and to recognize their achievement potential (Beckowski & Gebauer, 2018; Cox, 2011; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Inkelas and colleagues (2018) discuss the importance of a more traditional lens of faculty advising due to programs evaluated via the NSLLP serving first-year students who, in the midst of developing their academic and social identities, look to faculty to provide them with direction. Though this guidance may begin as the primary focus of students' relationship with faculty advisors, these researchers acknowledge the potential shift that often arises within the LLC context. Student-faculty interactions may well shift as students move from perceiving LLC faculty solely as sources of knowledge to appreciating them as mentors and partners in learning with shared interests who are willing to help them explore their sense of purpose.

Evaluating the BPM block for faculty advising in relation to Cabrini University's LLCs reveals the extent to which faculty advising is embedded into the one-credit COL 101 course taken in students' fall semester. The LLC faculty member teaching this course also serves as the faculty advisor to students in their LLC. This faculty member continues as the academic advisor to the LLC students until a student declares a major, at which time the student is then moved to an academic advisor within their major department (at the earliest, in the spring semester of the first year). Having a faculty advisor serve as a faculty member within the LLC is critical. It ensures that all students are enrolled in spring term LLC courses and facilitates students considering the intersections between their LLC experience and their major and career.

An Academically Supportive Climate

Though LLCs may have courses for credit and faculty advisors are included in the larger infrastructure of the academic environment, this does not necessarily mean that the climate is supportive in nature. LLC “research is increasingly focusing on whether and how LLCs create academic support for students through the provision of types of programs and structures” (Inkelas et al., 2018, p. 55). Wawrzynski and colleagues (2009) discuss LLC environments that define community norms and expectations that emphasize community learning, prioritize studying, and make involvement a priority. These researchers discuss academically supportive climates that promote seamless learning, establish a culture that encourages students to take academic risks, and foster creativity.

A closer look at one specific LLC provides an apt example of the academically supportive climate that can be built. The Voices of Justice LLC offers students a rigorous and engaged curriculum, a ready-made set of friends, and close contact with faculty intent on their success. The LLC was shaped as a model for high intensity conversation, emphasizing development of both disposition and skills. With this aim, the LLC’s faculty have repeatedly incorporated a variety of intentional pedagogies—teaching and learning strategies that include reflection and experiential learning—to empower students. They connect first-year students’ experiences to their core values, develop their participation in issues of social justice, and offer opportunities for appreciative inquiry. The faculty facilitate this experience through deliberative dialogue and an interfaith perspective of engaged pluralism, open to multiple views and voices. Through these foci, the Voices of Justice LLC embodies Cabrini’s commitment to an “education of the heart” (Luner, 2016, para. 1) by engaging with the common good.

Fostering a culture of respectful, appreciative engagement within and across communities requires a dedicated effort on the part of all constituents in higher education. One underlying motivation for creating the Voices of Justice LLC was the need for practice in personal cultivation of the civic arts, training in respectful listening, and exposure to valuing productive social change. This core idea requires a particular disposition: an attitude or outlook that revolves around the need to engage responsibly within and across communities.

The Voices of Justice LLC curriculum thus highlights civic engagement as both a skill and a disposition. With this aim in mind, the LLC must foreground an academically supportive environment, creating spaces for students to engage with diverse perspectives and dialogue about experiences, contemporary issues in the world, and theories and practices being used to address social justice issues. The curriculum dovetails with the COL 101 emphasis on metacognition and self-reflection. This understanding then

... these less structured environments have a depth of influence on students: creating a dynamic interplay between the curriculum and cocurriculum while simultaneously allowing faculty to connect and develop a rapport with students that amplifies this interplay between their life experiences and academic endeavors.

carries over to problem-solving, often designed around various scaffolded assignments that repeatedly emphasize the “how”: how to apply theories to contexts or to place contexts in relationship to tangible problem-solving skills. It is this intentional design that develops students’ confidence and mindfulness, particularly when interacting in spaces they feel are uncomfortable: moments of dissonance, contradiction, or ambiguity that may be felt when confronting views and voices that differ from their own. Students are challenged to interrogate, rearticulate, and ultimately embody “their own social identity and location as well as those of others” (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012, p. 43). Once students become more adept at working within their own LLCs, they may widen their scope of interactions beyond campus, readied to engage in mutual, reciprocal, and arguably more nuanced exchanges (Watterson et al., 2012).

A Socially Supportive Climate

While offering a supportive academic environment in the classroom that flows into other physical spaces of the LLC, it is important to consider how this support is complemented by a socially supportive climate. Inkelas and colleagues (2018) argue that establishing integrative, supportive climates increases students’ sense of belonging, creating a multitude of spaces for them to both identify and explore shared interests, even as they embrace diversity amongst community members. Whether the socially supportive climate is enhanced by faculty, staff, or peers, LLCs have become an avenue through which to provide student participants the support they require to respond to the challenges they encounter. Mayhew and colleagues (2016), in a recent report on LLCs, re-emphasized that these communities increase students’ level of engagement and sense of campus belonging.

Upper-division students, in the form of LLC peer leaders and mentors, serve as sources of support to LLC members. Collier (2015) explains that the contributions of peer mentors aid in providing a more seamless transition to college, increase mentees’ academic successes and persistence, and boost student self-confidence. Peer mentors are typically prior members of the LLC experience, and, having observed the leadership exhibited by their peer mentors, they are eager to model a socially supportive climate for future community leaders.

Peer mentors, in the form of student fellows, serve in a variety of roles within the LLCs and LCs at Cabrini University. The faculty teams collaborate to determine the best use of experienced student fellows across the coursework for their community. In the IMPACT community, faculty have opted to have upper-division student fellows working collaboratively with LLC faculty in three courses. In COL 101, students are building their self-awareness and developing metacognitive strategies focused on helping them achieve success within the first semester, first year, and their overall college experience. In this way, it is critical for students to hear from their student fellows about the impact of the course on their own growth and development and how best to engage in its content. In ECG 100, which utilizes *Reacting to the Past* pedagogy, students fully immerse themselves in the leadership experiences of historical periods. This structure can be

Annual assessment practices not only support the rich, continual revision and strengthening of LLC programs, but they also allow for cross-campus dialogue.

quite challenging, and the intentional presence of student fellows provides strong reassurance and encouragement as first-year students continue through the semester. In Public Speaking, students are often apprehensive about speaking in front of others. The presence and support of student fellows helps ease students' transition in this course as the fellows work closely with first-year students on the development of key strategies for success. Since student fellows have taken these courses previously, they can provide valuable guidance for first-year students in each course.

Residential students have traditionally benefited from having a student living on their floor with them and serving in the student fellow role, in addition to the resident assistant. These fellows are available to offer guidance to residential students, especially during later hours when faculty and staff may not be on campus and when students may have questions or need guidance with coursework. Each of the student fellows (and, ideally, the resident assistant) participates in cocurricular activities that are offered throughout the year for the LLC. This structure provides an opportunity for them to get to know the members of the LLC personally and be an active participant in the community-building experiences so crucial to LLC success.

On the campus of Cabrini University, though a strong support network of upper-division student leaders is critical, faculty must also acknowledge the pivotal role they play in the growth of the community. Cabrini's recent first-year cohorts are much more diverse, with students of color representing more than 40% of the most recent incoming students. As a result, it is critical that the institution's LLCs mirror this enrollment trend and that faculty are aware of this enrollment shift. LLCs can be especially instrumental in providing a socially supportive campus environment for students of color, and faculty must challenge themselves to design both a curriculum and cocurriculum within their communities in ways that embrace this diversity.

Research on the experiences of students of color at predominantly White institutions (PWI) has documented the stress and challenges that these students must overcome in order to be successful in higher education. Students have reported overt examples of racial discrimination as well as more subtle encounters that reflect racial stereotypes or assumptions of their inferiority (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). Pierce and colleagues (1978) coined the term *racial microaggressions* to describe these daily encounters, and Sue and colleagues (2007) elaborated on this idea by defining racial microaggressions as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group" (p. 273). These experiences can have a negative effect on students' self-esteem and overall psychological well-being, as well as their academic experiences (e.g., Hernandez & Villodas, 2020; McCabe, 2009; Nadal et al., 2014). At the same time, these microaggressions are often unintentional, with perpetrators not necessarily being aware of the racism underlying their behavior or the harmful impact for those on

The Best Practices Model should be used not only as a blueprint for building a successful LLC program, but also as a continual guide for strengthening already established programs.

the receiving end (Sue et al., 2007). Additionally, scholars have identified gaps in the ability of PWIs to meet the needs of students of color effectively (McGee & Stovall, 2015). These experiences can lead to students of color feeling marginalized and less connected to the campus community. However, an effective LLC can address the challenges that have been identified in the literature by serving as a point of connection for students of color who might otherwise feel isolated. It can also help White students recognize their biases and work to eliminate the overt and subtle acts of racism that occur on campuses. Ultimately, a racially diverse LLC can break down barriers between racial groups by helping students develop meaningful relationships across racial lines and by engaging students in critical conversations about race and racism (both inside and outside the classroom).

To illustrate, the curriculum for the Realizing Dreams LLC specifically focuses on race, class, and gender inequities, a lens that allows the LLC faculty to engage students in readings and class discussions about the social forces that can divide us. At the beginning of the fall semester, the LLC holds a retreat that focuses on building community, developing leadership skills, and appreciating the value of diversity. Faculty and students engage in community-building exercises with the goal of socializing students from the beginning so that they can experience their community as a family embarking on this first-year journey together. Community members may not always agree with each other, but it is important to establish a foundation ensuring that students will support each other. The retreat helps students to identify points of connection despite differences in their backgrounds. LLC faculty also emphasize that the differences make the community stronger and better equipped for success. One person's weakness is another person's strength, and by working together everyone in the LLC can achieve their goals.

Every year, each new cohort selects a motto that represents the community's shared values, serves as a unifying mantra, and sets the tone for the year. As students engage in academic material about race throughout the year, they also examine their privilege and develop empathy for other people's experiences, which helps to maintain the supportive foundation that was set at the retreat. At the beginning of class and during the cocurricular activities, the faculty check in with the students to see how they are doing, celebrate their accomplishments, and encourage them if they experience setbacks. When there are problems within the group, the faculty have facilitated conflict resolution sessions to help students process and mend the rift. In these sessions, faculty intentionally talk with the students about racial dynamics as well as other points of division within the group. These honest and ongoing conversations about race, as well as the emphasis on the importance of community and respect, provide students of color with the social support they might not otherwise receive at a PWI.

COCURRICULAR ENVIRONMENT

The third level of the Best Practices Model promotes the importance of designing a cocurricular environment enriched by out-of-classroom experiences that strengthen the LC's goals and objectives. Because the building blocks in the model are interconnected, some aspects of the cocurricular environment of Cabrini University's LLCs have been mentioned above. It is important to note that a cocurricular environment—that is, programming designed to build community and enhance the academic environment—may be viewed by some as value-added rather than being essential for LLCs to function. By contrast, Cabrini University views the cocurricular environment as pivotal to establishing a foundation upon which each LC is built. Inkelas and colleagues (2018) explain that these cocurricular programs have the potential to extend learning beyond the classroom while bringing students together in a variety of spaces to learn together and explore their shared interests. Indeed, these less structured environments have a depth of influence on students: creating a dynamic interplay between the curriculum and cocurriculum while simultaneously allowing faculty to connect and develop a rapport with students that amplifies this interplay between their life experiences and academic endeavors (Beckowski & Gebauer, 2018). Inkelas and colleagues (2018), in their BPM model, identify study groups, K-12 outreach, career workshops, visits to work settings, and theme-related activities as LLC best practices, as defined within the NSLLP. Viewing this category in terms of the LLCs at Cabrini University, however, points to programming that extends beyond those identified in the NSLLP with a strong focus on enhancing the thematic culture of these interdisciplinary communities.

All of Cabrini University's LLCs launch their year with a retreat, an intensive experience within the first few weeks of the fall semester. These retreats are designed to help build community amongst the students, faculty, and upper-division student leaders who serve as student fellows within the LLC. For example, during the IMPACT retreat, the cohort is presented with a series of challenges intended to foster team-building and problem-solving skills. These experiences set the foundation for leadership learning and growth for all participants. The Realizing Dreams LLC retreat concludes with everyone reading "Start-Stop-Continue" statements that the students revisit throughout the semester. Such statements first help them establish goals for themselves for the fall semester and, later, for the remainder of their time at Cabrini. In the Body Language LLC, the retreat helps students understand some of the trauma and hardships that every student has experienced in the past. This experience facilitates a foundation of community based on empathy and compassion, which proves essential as students navigate living and working together. The focus of each of these retreats is to help establish a safe environment for students' growth across the first year. The process of sharing with one another, fostering a sense of camaraderie through team building, and establishing goal statements designed for community members to hold one another accountable creates a sense of solidarity.

Beyond the initial retreat experience, the LLCs offer at least one cocurricular event each month. Within IMPACT, students have a variety of opportunities to engage meaningfully in experiences that build their leadership capacity and assist in the development of key skills. One example is the opportunity to visit leaders in Philadelphia and hear about their career paths and leadership journeys. Students are introduced to leaders from a variety of fields who share their traditional or non-traditional leadership journeys, reflecting some of the challenges and opportunities they encountered along the way. Participants in the LLC often comment on the value of these experiences in helping them better understand the importance of leadership in all aspects of life. Students in IMPACT are also required to actively participate in LEADStrong, the university's cocurricular leadership certificate program. Through this program, they connect the value of what they are learning in the classroom to their out-of-class engagement, while building their self-awareness and metacognitive abilities. Students also work in teams and begin to understand the responsibility they hold to contribute meaningfully to the communities they serve while also working to create positive change. In this way, they directly connect to the university's mission of leadership development and a commitment to social justice and begin to see leadership as a lifelong process that continuously evolves.

The Realizing Dreams LLC challenges students to establish goals for themselves and to reflect on their progress toward meeting those goals—toward realizing their dreams. Beyond the academic curriculum, in which students gain knowledge of American history and culture and of the factors that shaped the dreams and realities for different people, these students experience cocurricular programming that links that history with their experiences. The LLC takes a day trip to Lancaster County in order to see how the Amish realize their dreams among Pennsylvanians who follow more modern lifestyles. The experience provides students with opportunities to analyze differences between the self-segregation of the Amish and the legalized segregation of African Americans in the years following the Civil War. As the Amish population has continued to grow and farmland is diminished, the trips to Lancaster have challenged students to consider how the Amish can continue to realize their dreams as they expand into businesses different from those of earlier Amish generations. Those and other cocurricular programs, including trips planned by the students, complement the LLC's theme and academic curriculum and provide students with hands-on experiences in building community.

In the Body Language LLC, fall cocurricular programming focuses on self-care and community building. In November, Body Language students visit the Art Ability exhibit at Bryn Mawr Rehab Hospital, which features artwork created by individuals with disabilities. This cocurricular programming opportunity allows students to reflect on what it means to be disabled or able-bodied and how visible or invisible disabilities affect our perceptions of others. The fall semester also includes several group dinners that feature communication, diversity, and leadership-building activities. The start of the spring semester revolves around a mini retreat to help refresh and strengthen

the group, as some cohorts at this point have lost a few community members due to financial or academic reasons. The cocurricular programs represent a distinguishing characteristic of Cabrini University's LLCs, demonstrating the faculty's commitment to helping their students make the transition from high school to college while building a lasting community with them.

THE PINNACLE

To achieve the highest level, the pinnacle of the Best Practices Model, Inkelas and colleagues (2018) explain that "all of the lower levels of the pyramid must be satisfied" with "all facets of the LLC . . . emanat[ing] from the LLC goals and objectives" (p. 83). All BPM blocks must be integrated, and this integration strengthens the individual building blocks that establish the larger pyramid (Inkelas et al., 2018). The pinnacle of the BPM pyramid

. . . serves to remind LLC leadership and practitioners that the effective strength of the LLC lies not in the individual "blocks" in the pyramid but in the extent to which they integrate to form a comprehensive and cohesive living and learning environment. (Inkelas et al., 2018, p. 88)

The final aspect of the BPM is the mortar between the bricks, which is representative of the assessment that is vital to evaluating all facets of the LLC. Assessment plays a pivotal role in driving the learning, instruction, and program evaluation in higher education and, in the process, provides a direct look into faculty values and student minds (Boix Mansilla, 2009). A shared conceptual language that describes the core qualities of sound academic work is of the utmost importance to shed light on individual student work (Boix Mansilla, 2005). As faculty shift from viewing their teaching as a private endeavor to seeing it as a shared experience with LC colleagues, the process of designing integrative assignments becomes a collaborative experience. Lardner and Malnarich (2009) explain that ongoing faculty inquiry is critical to creating deep change and that participation in ongoing assessment is a necessity to give coherence to the curriculum. At Cabrini University, these guiding principles have driven the assessment processes to evaluate the LLCs.

Utilizing AAC&U's Integrative Learning VALUE Rubric (2009), each of the LLCs represented here shares three learning outcomes that are rooted in integrative learning and closely mirror three distinct variables in this rubric: self-reflection and assessment, connections to experience, and connections to disciplines and courses. These three shared learning outcomes drove the development of an annual assessment process that

An academically supportive climate is more likely to stimulate academic conversations in the residence halls when students return to their living quarters, which contributes to students collaborating on coursework in residence, at times yelling down the hall to one another about LLC courses and assignments.

was implemented in two phases over two academic years. This assessment process within Cabrini University's LC program is two-fold, assessing student perceptions of their integrative learning and assessing student performance via an integrative learning capstone assignment. The first step in this assessment protocol includes the administration of an integrative learning pre- and post-survey (Wade et al., 2021) designed to measure student perceptions of their integrative learning at the start and conclusion of the academic year. The items in the survey are clustered to align with the university's three shared learning outcomes, measuring the three integrative learning variables discussed above. In addition to this pre- and post-survey, students submit an integrative learning capstone assignment at the conclusion of the academic year. Though this assignment differs from one community to another, each LLC faculty team creates one that fits the larger community's curriculum while meeting the following shared criteria:

- *A written assignment with detailed instructions that is a minimum of three pages and addresses the self-reflection and assessment, connections to experience, and connections to discipline and course learning outcomes of the university's LC program.*
- *Integrates course content from at least two academic courses within the LC and assesses the interplay between the curriculum and cocurriculum.*
- *The LC faculty team must collaborate and agree upon the design and implementation of this assignment.*
- *The assignment must be administered near the conclusion of the spring semester.*

Following a rubric norming session with all LLC faculty, the student artifacts are reviewed and scored blindly by each LLC faculty team using an adapted version of AAC&U's Integrative Learning VALUE rubric, which specifically aligns with the LC programs' three shared learning outcomes.

Though it is important to evaluate the impact of LLCs on retention, persistence, and academic progress (a statistically significant relationship exists between LLC participation and academic progress at Cabrini University), it is critical to understand the value-added impact that results from purposefully designed LLCs. The administered pre- and post-survey help to evaluate the change in students' perceptions of the integrative learning practices because of their intentionally designed LLC experience. The assessment of student work via an adapted version of AAC&U's Integrative Learning VALUE rubric allows LLC faculty to evaluate student performance and determine if a correlation exists between student perception and performance as it relates to integrative learning.

For any assessment to be truly effective, there must be communication, feedback, and action for improvement. Annual assessment practices not only support the rich, continual revision and strengthening of LLC programs, but they also allow for cross-campus dialogue. Communicating annual assessment results to administrators is crucial in continuing to advocate for LLC resources. While LCs are the hallmark of the first-year experience at Cabrini University and strengthen student retention rates, the sweeping financial concerns in higher education as an industry keep them from being a guaranteed part of an institution. LLC practitioners have witnessed the evap-

oration of many nationally renowned programs. Assessment forces us to revisit all of the building blocks of the Best Practices Model so that we continually renew our relationships with constituents across campus to ensure that we are serving our students and reminding the campus that LCs are essential for the sustainability of successful undergraduate programs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Designing and implementing an LLC program is a continual process that takes time and includes difficult, cross-divisional decisions, each of which should be made to benefit the student experience. The Best Practices Model may be viewed by some as impossible to achieve due to the number of building blocks, the reliance of each building block on the others, and the various stakeholders needed to offer a comprehensive LLC. However, the authors here would encourage readers to view the model as not only aspirational but also inspirational in nature, with the understanding that it takes time and leadership to offer all the pieces outlined in this model in an effective manner.

The integration of these building blocks, as stressed by Inkelas and colleagues (2018), has had a direct impact on retention and persistence at Cabrini University. In collaboration with the Office of Institutional Research, learning community administrators track retention and persistence data annually. Over the past 12 years, fall-to-fall retention of students engaged in an LLC is, on average, 9.5% higher than it is for their non-LLC peers. In addition, 4-year graduation rates for LLC students are 5–8% higher than they are for non-LLC peers, while 5-year graduation rates for LLC students are more than 10% higher than they are for non-LLC students. Such success, in regard to retention and persistence, is a direct result of the comprehensive and holistic nature of the LLC experience offered to incoming students, which rests on the intense collaboration that exists between student life, academic affairs, and full-time faculty.

The Best Practices Model should be used not only as a blueprint for building a successful LLC program, but also as a continual guide for strengthening already established programs. Just as Cabrini University used the model as a means for self-reflection and assessment of their program's strengths and weaknesses, other LLC programs should use it as a means for programmatic review. This framework can be implemented into an LLC faculty/staff retreat or professional development opportunity designed to gain perspective on where the program needs to be reinforced. By applying the theoretical BPM to practice, LLC programs will find a source of mortar—a means of assessment—as campuses reflect on opportunities for growth within their LC program.

For an LLC program to be truly successful, it is essential that a program have a director or administrator who champions this campus initiative, seeking to embed it into the fabric of the institution. It is this leader who brings to the table the key players from all divisions of the institution who can help establish clear and consistent messaging to both students and campus constituents. It is this leader who advocates the return on investment to the presidential leadership team and who puts succession plans in place for when faculty retire, go on sabbatical, take a health leave, or decide that their LLC contributions have become exhausted.

Institutional and divisional culture changes over time, supporting or potentially interfering with the ability to collaborate cross-divisionally and to secure the appropriate resources to support LLCs. Leaders must be prepared to adapt in the face of these changes and be willing to evolve as institutions encounter crises that infiltrate the lives of faculty, staff, and students and their communities. It is in these moments that LLC leaders must be willing to engage in dialogue about how campus culture influences LLC efforts (Leary et al., 2022). Designing an LLC model that applies theory to practice effectively may be aspirational in nature, but it is also an endeavor that is possible and should be what LLC practitioners strive for their communities to achieve. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you applied the Best Practices Model framework to developing your campus's current LLCs, how might these LLCs change?
2. What intangible or anecdotal impacts do LLCs have that are not captured by the model?
3. Gebauer and associates attempt to effectively translate a model for LLC implementation and practice to a framework for assessment. Is this approach effective? What would this look like for your campus?
4. The authors primarily relied on a method of "reflecting on its established LLC program's growth and improvement." Would using another model of application or measurement be more effective?
5. The LC model at Cabrini University relies on three shared learning outcomes and one program-specific outcome. What are the benefits and drawback to such an approach?
6. Perhaps an unintentional highlight of this article is the lack of expertise overall for LLCs specifically (i.e., faculty experts in academic content, student life experts on residential matters). How do studies like the one undertaken by Gebauer and colleagues help broaden the understanding of both academic and student life for faculty and student life educators?

Discussion questions developed by James Penven, Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia