Learning communities:
Through the lens of a group worker

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Abstract: *Learning communities are becoming increasingly common as a means of assisting incoming students with their transition to college. They have been shown to improve student retention, academic performance, and student-faculty relationships. Learning communities are prime examples of groupwork in action, and can provide opportunities for educators to teach and model social groupwork concepts and principles. This paper 1) defines and describes learning communities, 2) discusses the theoretical basis for the application of groupwork principles to the learning community experience, and 3) describes and assesses three years of experience with the application of groupwork principles in social work learning communities in an undergraduate university in the Midwestern United States.*

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Introduction

A student entering college can discover a world full of excitement and adventures; for some, however, this experience can be overwhelming and isolating. Freshman college students encounter the daunting tasks of selecting classes, navigating an unfamiliar environment, and developing a multitude of new relationships. One way in which campuses are attempting to assist students with this transition is through the implementation of learning communities. A learning community is loosely defined as a structure in which students intentionally enroll in two or more classes together with the goal of linking their learning experiences (Lardner & Malnarich, 2009; Tinto, 2000). Learning communities are also complex groups with many variables. Viewing these communities through the lens of a groupworker makes it possible to enhance the functioning and effectiveness of the learning communities and to expand the understanding of and appreciation for groupwork principles.

Learning communities

Learning communities began to appear in the United States in the 1920's (Pike, 2008). According to the Washington Center Learning Communities National Research Center (n.d.), there are over 600 schools offering learning communities in the United States with 142 of these at public universities (http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/directory_entry.asp). In 2008, Pike predicted that learning communities will be 'so common that they may soon be the norm on college campuses' (p.20). Research has shown that involvement in a learning community improves student retention, academic performance, and personal development (Jaffee, 2007; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), particularly for freshmen students who have historically been subject to lower retention rates. According to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (2009), the United States' retention rate from freshman to sophomore year is 76%. Losing one-quarter of a yearly class is a costly economic and social concern for institutions of higher education. Learning communities are one vehicle for addressing this

problem.

Learning communities can be regarded as communities of practice which are defined as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wegner, 2006, NP). Communities of practice utilize small group activity as a foundation for achieving organizational goals. Such communities depend on a social model of learning and are attuned to the impact of the social experience on the member (Gray, Parker & Immins, 2008). Tolson, Schofield, Booth, Kelly, & James (2006) provide an interesting example of a community of practice framework in an educational setting with the goal of integrating 'the scholarship of practice' with the 'scholarship of inquiry' (p.67). Learning communities within academia aim to integrate both the social and scholarly components of learning.

Learning communities typically incorporate a required universal experience such as the expectation that all participants live in the same dormitory, enroll in some or all of the same class sections, experience similar educational requirements, and/or participate in frequent and in-depth structured faculty-student interactions. Learning communities often focus on academic or extracurricular pursuits such as fields of study, athletics, or service interests. The number of participants in a learning community tends to be small in order to facilitate interaction among students and faculty. Learning communities provide students with increased opportunities for early engagement with peers and faculty, decreasing some of the uneasiness that new students may face in attempting to develop such relationships on their own.

In addition, the classroom interactions within learning communities are designed to be experienced differently than within the more traditional classroom settings. As Vincent Tinto (2000) states, '… learning communities seek to restructure the very classrooms in which students find themselves and later the way students experience both the curriculum and learning in those classrooms' (p.1). Curricula in learning communities are typically structured around a specific theme or field of learning. Students are encouraged to join a learning community whose theme matches their own educational agendas; in this way, the academic experience will be more relevant and meaningful and the students will more likely remain engaged with their learning.

Most importantly, learning community students are encouraged to

develop a sense of connection with the learning community as a whole as well as with the individual members. This sense of cohesion can begin the moment students arrive on campus and realize that they are a part of a small group within the larger college environment. Learning community faculty typically attempt to support this connection by helping students build relationships with one another and by focusing on the community members' similar goals and interests.

Application of groupwork principles to learning communities

Gray, Parker and Immins (2008) state that 'group work understandings and skills are the essential building blocks of any attempt to develop learning organizations and communities of practice' (p.28). However, there are limited studies that explore which elements of the learning community experience actually enhance student satisfaction and retention (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). One area for exploration is the role of deliberate attention and conscious application of groupwork principles to the learning community experience. Learning communities are, in essence, groups that are influenced by the broad spectrum of groupwork practices and processes. Much of the design, structure, and recommended best practices in learning community development, as identified above, is based upon social groupwork tenets. Cohesion, participation, communication patterns, developmental stages, mutual aid, leadership, activities, and programs are but some of the considerations of learning communities. There is, of course, no reason to expect learning communities outside of social work to incorporate groupwork principles. If the faculty involved with the learning communities are aware of and skilled in groupwork, it would seem logical that the learning community would more likely be a successful, effective experience. Two well-regarded tenets of groupwork - Yalom's therapeutic factors and the developmental stage perspective of groups - provide a valuable lens for assessing the learning community experience (Yalom, 2005).

Yalom's therapeutic factors

Yalom's therapeutic factors provide a critical framework for viewing the

essential elements of an effective learning community. Instillation of hope, universality, imparting information, development of socializing techniques, interpersonal learning, altruism, and cohesion (Yalom, 2005) are particularly relevant groupwork concepts for understanding learning communities.

Instillation of hope

Introduction to the concept of a learning community occurs before the student sets foot on a college campus. Learning communities are advertised through mailings and college websites in order to familiarize students with the opportunity and the potential benefits of a learning community experience. This process serves as a pre-group orientation in which the institution reinforces the positive benefits of involvement in a learning community. Thus, although freshmen typically enter college anxious about what is in store for them, their immediate connection with a learning community can provide hope and encouragement. Interactions with other learning community members and faculty are facilitated during the first weeks of matriculation. Frequently, past learning community participants introduce new students to campus and share stories about their own successful transitions to college as a result of their involvement in a learning community. Such experiences facilitate instillation of hope regarding one's ability to have a positive college experience. Students are reassured that they can be successful and that they will have others in their communities who will be there to support and share their college journeys.

Universality

Through the introduction to other learning community members, students experience the concept of universality. Because these students are typically involved in cohort learning and social activities within the first week of classes, their relationships are likely to develop more quickly than would occur without involvement in the learning community. Learning community members meet other students who have similar goals and who are at similar places in the educational continuum. Students learn that others share their thoughts, feelings, and fears about the college experience, and are encouraged to process

and address these concerns together in a safe, supportive group environment.

Imparting information

Another of Yalom's (2005) therapeutic factors, imparting information, is a cornerstone for all learning communities via didactic instruction, advice, suggestions, and direct guidance from faculty and/or peers. Since students meet with their faculty in a classroom setting, didactic instruction is an integral component of the educational process. This instruction is typically focused around the theme of the learning community. However, students are also provided with advice, suggestions, and direct guidance both in and outside of the classroom. Students are not only encouraged to obtain feedback and support from faculty and peers within the classroom, but also to engage in formal and informal communication outside of the classroom. Furthermore, students are typically requested to connect learning that occurs outside of the classroom with concepts that are being addressed within the class.

Development of socializing techniques

Faculty have the opportunity to encourage the development of socializing techniques, not only with regard to what is expected of students within the classroom or on campus, but also concerning professional standards and ethics. Behavior that could aid or detract from a successful college or professional experience can be identified and discussed. Faculty frequently model characteristics and behaviors of successful professionals and students learn about professionalism via these socializing interactions.

Interpersonal learning

Students engage in interpersonal learning as they continue to grow and to develop educationally and emotionally within their learning communities. They interact with others in the learning community on a consistent basis and must learn to navigate these relationships as

they complete collaborative assignments, participate in the community's extra-curricular activities, or live within the same residential setting. Students are provided with the opportunity to learn about who they are, to clarify their personal and professional goals, and to understand their own interactions within the community setting.

Altruism

Some learning communities implement the concept of altruism by requiring students to volunteer or participate in service-learning activities. A recent trend is the development of learning communities focused on providing service-learning or community service involvement. Tinto (2000) states that 'as an extension of traditional models of community service and experiential learning, service learning combines intentional educational activities with service experience to meet critical needs identified by the communities being served' (p.4). Involvement in the broader community teaches students that they are responsible not only to their learning community but also to the larger society.

Cohesion

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the development of group cohesion within learning communities is essential. The greater the cohesion of the group, the more likely it is that the group and the individual members will accomplish their goals (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Hence, learning community faculty need to facilitate support, acceptance and mutual aid among group members by providing both educational and extra-curricular activities that foster and enhance group members' relationships.

Stages of group development

Another lens through which to view learning communities is the concept of predictable stages of group development. The dominant theoretical model for the stages of group development is Garland, Jones and Kolodny's five stage model - pre-affiliation, power and control,

intimacy, differentiation, and separation (Garland, Jones & Kolodny, 1965). While there is disagreement about the validity of the linear development of these stages, as well as the necessity for and actual appearance of the power and control stage (Ciardiello, 2012; Kelly & Berman-Rossi, 1999; Kelly, Lowndes & Tolson, 2005; Schiller, 1997 & 1995), the model offers a conceptual and potentially useful framework for intervening in the life of a learning community.

In the first stage, pre-affiliation, group members are uncertain about joining a group and are concerned about whether they will be accepted by their peers. Typically, students have had no prior experience with a learning community environment or with the other members of the community. Hence, all of the beginning considerations of the first stage of group development apply to learning communities – approach-avoidance, ambivalence about committing to the group, checking out members and leaders, establishing contracts, and inviting trust. It is the faculty's responsibility to provide students with time, encouragement, and structured activities that facilitate trust and participation in the group.

According to Garland, Jones & Kolodny (1965), it is in the second stage, power and control, that the norms of the group are formed, and roles and responsibilities of group members are established. Within learning communities, students assume specific roles, form subgroups, and can experience conflict during this second stage of group development. Faculty members should support the students in addressing conflicts and help to develop appropriate rules and boundaries. In addition, homophily, the 'pressure for normative and behavioral conformity among group members' (Jaffee, 2007, p. 67) may emerge. Students may experience 'group think' or pressure to think/act like others in the group. Faculty members need to create a safe environment in which questions and challenges are encouraged and accepted in order to foster group development.

Intimacy, the third stage, naturally begins to occur as the group members work through their power and control issues, continue to spend time together, and develop deeper relationships. In this stage, students become more comfortable expressing themselves, exploring their beliefs, and learning about themselves. Learning communities provide a valuable opportunity for the development of intimacy, not only because of the amount of time the students spend together, but

also because of the close living proximity of the members. Faculty members, in this stage, facilitate the beginning of cooperative work, honest communication and group cohesion.

In the fourth stage, group members identify as part of the community but also acknowledge their own independence outside of the community. They begin to differentiate, recognizing and accepting the individual goals and strengths of each member. In this stage, group members typically work effectively and efficiently together, acknowledging and appreciating their roles in the learning community. Faculty can now allow students increased freedom and greater autonomy to make decisions, since this is the stage in which the members are most productive.

Lastly, in the separation stage, members recognize individual and group accomplishments and begin to prepare to move on to new experiences. In learning communities, this usually occurs at the end of the freshman year. It is important that faculty help students reach a successful termination from their learning communities by engaging in healthy closure experiences, incorporating review, summary, feedback, evaluation and plans to move forward beyond the learning community experience.

Reflections on three years of facilitating social work learning communities

In order to increase retention rates, a public, Midwestern university initiated learning communities for incoming freshmen. The objective was to establish first-year learning communities in which students would live in proximity to one another and would take core classes together. Initially, the university implemented a pilot program establishing two learning communities, one for incoming education students and one for incoming liberal arts honor students. Membership was open to students who achieved a minimum score of 24 on their ACT (American College Testing) standardized tests. Because of the success of these communities, the university chose to broaden the availability of learning communities across campus and encouraged all academic departments to develop their own learning communities for incoming freshmen. Although a few departments decided to maintain the invitation only

criteria, most opened membership to any interested freshman.

The social work department developed a learning community open to all freshmen who identified social work as their major. The goals of this community were to assist students in 1) making a successful transition to college, 2) building a sense of community, and 3) understanding and appreciating social work concepts. The faculty for this learning community consisted of two members of the social work department, one representative from the psychology department, and a member of the political science department. This faculty cohort facilitated a year-long learning community for incoming freshmen interested in social work over a three year period.Students enrolled in the social work learning communities on a voluntary basis with no other prerequisites.

The first semester of the freshman year was considered by the administration to be the most important semester for maximizing retention. Therefore, in order to enhance connection and interaction in the social work learning community, students were pre-enrolled in the same three classes - a social work class, a general studies class, and a new student seminar. During the second semester the students were not required to be in classes with one another, although they were encouraged to enroll in the same designated political science class section.

The demographics of the participants in the social work learning communities were somewhat different from the campus wide demographics. These students tended to have lower ACT scores (20.7) when compared with the broader campus (22). In addition, twenty percent of students enrolled in the social work learning communities were African American; whereas in the broader community this percentage was much lower (5%). Overall retention rates for African American students within the university lagged behind the retention rates for Caucasian students (60% to 78%). Lastly, many of the social work learning community students were defined as 'high risk' as identified by having a low ACT, coming from an inner-city school, or having high-risk family backgrounds (poverty, teen pregnancy, parental illness, first generation college student, etc.).

The first year

The students in the first year cohort were the most diverse of all three social work cohorts. There were 15 participants, 12 females and 3 males, 10 of whom were Caucasian and 5 African American. The average ACT score was 20.5. This first social work learning community was implemented after the assignments to residence halls had been completed. Therefore, the students in this cohort were dispersed across the campus with only two or three residing in the same dorm. Without a central residential location, it was more complicated for faculty to connect with the learning community students outside of class. When faculty wanted to encourage participation in special events or activities they had to rely on emails, personal cell phone connections, or the assistance of residence hall staff. There was also a lack of coordination among faculty members for this cohort. While the students were enrolled in the same three class sections, the faculty members did not attempt to integrate and coordinate class syllabi. They did share individual syllabi with one another, but did not work as a team to facilitate a cohesive learning experience.

During the second semester of the freshman year, the faculty and the students within this cohort had minimal interaction. While the university encouraged learning community faculty to plan extracurricular activities, there was no expectation that there be a link between these activities and classroom learning. Student identification with the learning community cohort was largely limited to the option of being enrolled in the same political science class section. The faculty did arrange a bowling party and a luncheon gathering; however, perhaps not surprisingly, there was minimal participation in these events. While students did seem to develop relationships with one another as they interacted with other freshmen having similar interests and experiences, these relationships appeared to be superficial and transitory. Students did not demonstrate strong identification with one another or with the learning community group. Moreover, the retention rate of these students (60%) was below the average for all learning community students (77.8%) and below the campus average (77%).

After examining the retention data and assessing their own personal experiences, the social work learning community faculty recognized the need to revisit the structure, goals, and process for the coming cohorts. While they were aware that the cohort's 'at-risk' factors could have contributed to the lower retention rate, the faculty also considered

the impact of their inadequate attention to groupwork principles and strategies. Furthermore, the faculty recognized that proximity was a critical consideration in fostering connection and cohesion, and the geographic dispersion of students throughout campus was an impediment to the development of the learning community. The importance of being able to readily, frequently, and informally interact with other members of the learning community via day-to-day residence hall activities was seen as important for the success of the learning community. The faculty therefore requested that the administration require all social work learning community members to reside in the same residential hall for future social work learning communities. The university concurred.

The second and third years

The second year cohort expanded to 25 students, the maximum number allowed in any learning community on this campus. The composition of the cohort included 18 Caucasians, 6 African Americans, and one Hispanic. The average ACT score was 20.7. There were 23 females and 2 males. This cohort also had the largest number of students from the inner city with 10 out of the 25 students having attended inner city high schools. The students in this group all resided in the same dorm except for two students; one lived in an adjacent dorm and the other lived off campus as a single mother. All students in the third year cohort resided in the same residence hall. The composition of the third year's social work learning community was 23 Caucasians, one African American, and one Hispanic. There were 24 females and 1 male. Their average ACT score was 21, still slightly below the campus average of 22. Four members came from inner city schools.

Prior to the beginning of the second year, the university convened a one-day campus-wide retreat for all learning community faculty. Discussions focused on the need for increased organization of the second semester of the freshman year for all learning communities. It was recognized that the absence of a unifying structure for learning community members during the second semester reduced ongoing identification and involvement with the learning community. As a result, an option was created allowing learning community instructors to implement a one-credit class during the second semester. In order

to increase interaction with the students and to build upon group development, the social work learning community faculty embraced this option and developed a one-credit service-learning course. The second and third year student cohorts largely took advantage of this option and enrolled in the new course.

For the second and third year cohorts, the social work learning community faculty paid increasingly greater attention to groupwork principles. They acknowledged their previous lack of coordinated efforts and aimed to enhance attention to the learning community as a group. The faculty met with one another more frequently and focused on the need for greater cohesion within the learning community.

The instructors recognized the importance of finding ways early in the first semester to build relationships among faculty and students. Hence, they decided to be present and interact with students and family members as soon as students arrived on campus during move-in day. This allowed the students to meet their learning community faculty, ask questions, and become immediately cognizant of their membership in the learning community. Incorporating the practices and principles of the pre-affiliation stage of group development, the faculty invited students to participate in experiential interactive activities prior to the start of the semester and initiated easily-mastered group activities during the first week of classes. These activities, including ice-breakers and trust-building exercises, aimed to facilitate cohesion and identification as members of the community. Having learning community members reside in one location also provided enhanced opportunities for connection, participation, and identification. As one student reported, 'Living in the same dorm as other learning community members helped the transition into college occur more smoothly, something first year students have difficulty with'. On several occasions faculty interacted with learning community members for social events within the dormitory. This included watching a movie in a dorm lounge and socializing in the coffee shop. Faculty were able to use their legitimate and indirect, coercive power to encourage group participation. As a result, students seemed more aware of and responsible to other members of their community. Students began to encourage one another to attend events, developed activities for the group outside of classroom assignments, and communicated with faculty if one of their peers was struggling or needed extra support.

Throughout the group's development, faculty utilized groupwork language in the classroom and made a concerted effort to educate students about the role and application of groupwork theory as it applied to the learning community. Initially, the faculty discussed the goals of the learning community group, facilitating instillation of hope that each student could be successful in the transition to college, enhancing students' sense of universalization in sharing similar experiences, and providing socialization into the college experience. The professors also discussed the stages of group development and educated the students on the issues that could arise at different stages of the learning community's development. As issues arose, the professors helped identify the group's stage of development as well as how to use groupwork to facilitate a resolution. For instance, group norms and rules had to be discussed on several occasions in order to help the group function more effectively while completing group projects or classroom assignments. The need to show up on time for group meetings and the importance of staying until the end of the meeting were addressed and were directly linked to considerations of the power and control stages of group development.

During the second semesters of the second and third years, the one-credit service-learning course designed by the learning community faculty drew participation from most of the students. The students engaged in a process to determine the focus of this one-credit course during their first semester New Student Seminar class. They were encouraged to work collaboratively to identify a focal project for the upcoming course as faculty recognized that this would result in increased interest and commitment to the course objectives. In addition, faculty encouraged students to make the project altruistic in nature, valuing the role that Yalom's therapeutic factor of altruism can play in strengthening the group's experience (Yalom, 2005). After learning of the need for books at a local children's hospital, the second year cohort organized a book drive. Students applied their differential skills in their own unique roles (e.g. marketing, leadership, organizing), resulting in a highly successful book drive. While the class design incorporated the readings on leadership that had been recommended for all the one-credit learning community classes, the students did not engage in much classroom discussion related to this material and seemed to regard the reading as another assignment unrelated to their actual interests and objectives.

In the third year, the faculty made a greater effort to develop more thematically focused, student generated course content for the service-learning course. Aiming for students to experience greater responsibility for and commitment to course material, the faculty encouraged students to participate in the selection of the major course project and related course readings via their first semester Introduction to Social Welfare course. The third year cohort selected the topic of poverty, and designed a project to raise money for a local homeless shelter. This participation and self-determination in course design facilitated the intimacy and differentiation of the later stages of group development.

To further enhance cohesion, learning community members within the third year cohort went on field trips related to the proposed theme of poverty for the upcoming service-learning course. These field trips enhanced opportunities for active learning and social interaction. As Visher et al (2010) state, active learning involves 'avoiding 'chalk and talk' lectures in favor of heavy use of group or team work, student or team presentations, peer evaluations, reflective writing, and whole-class discussions, as well as giving credit for participating in and arranging field trips or other experiential learning opportunities' (p. 71). Moreover, active, participatory learning facilitates interdependence, engagement and academic achievement (Visher et al, 2010).

At the end of the first semester of the third cohort, students and faculty visited the African American History museum. This facilitated interpersonal learning and cohesion by having the students engage with one another and their faculty mentors for an extended period of time outside the formal classroom setting. While visiting the museum, the faculty tied exhibits to classroom content by highlighting connections to the theme of poverty and requiring students to reflect upon their experiences via journal entries. Following the museum visit, the group spent time interacting socially by eating lunch and shopping together. In order to build upon these connections, another field trip was scheduled for early in the second semester within the service-learning course. Students and faculty took a trip to a local, rural homeless shelter where they helped with cleaning and organizing the facility. Again, social activities followed, including lunch and shopping. Both of these field trips seemed to facilitate greater engagement and connection among learning community members. The completion of the service-learning projects and related activities coincided with the completion

of the learning community experience, allowing students to connect the respective success of the book drive and poverty project with the culmination of the learning community experience.

The third cohort also participated in volunteer activities in coordination with the School's Social Work Student Organization during the second semester. This process facilitated students' integration into the broader social work community as they transitioned out of the structured learning community experience. Students attended meetings as a cohort, providing a safer experience for exploring other parts of the social work community and facilitating greater connection with social work as a major. The learning community students, volunteered with Student Organization members at an inner city high school, visited a homeless shelter in that city, and participated in social events. The freshman learning community members were provided with opportunities to meet other social work students who were further along in their education ,while being provided with the opportunity to join a new community on campus that could support their education through their next years of study. This experience facilitated the separation stage of group development as it gave easy entry into a campus community while students were still members of the learning community.

Feedback from students in the second and third years was positive. One learning community student who was asked to turn in an assignment about her first three weeks on campus stated 'Another thing that I really enjoy here is the learning community. I found it very helpful already with keeping up with our school work. It's nice having people living on the same floor that are in 3 of your classes. It also makes the class more fun because friends are already there.' Another student reported, 'For me, joining a learning community was one of the best things I have done. I met so many of my friends by being in one, and it is really cool that it is a group of people that all have the same major and they put us all in the same classes'.

The retention rate for the second year cohort was 72%, an improvement from the prior year, but still below the learning community average of 81.7%. The campus average was 77.3% for that same year. With additional attention to group principles, the third year cohort continued this positive trend with a retention rate of 76%, still below the learning community average retention rates of 78.3%, but matching the campus retention rates of 76.6%. Given the 'at-risk' nature of the social work

cohorts, this was an important change.

The faculty as a group

During the first year of social work learning communities, the faculty did not work as a group; they were not united in purpose or process. They treated the learning community as an obligation or a new job duty rather than owning their cooperative role in the development of the community. Faculty assumed that the learning community structure where students participated in the same classes would be sufficient to promote a better introduction to college. Because they did not work collectively, the faculty recognized that the students did not experience the benefits of cohesive leadership. The professors realized that it was not enough for the students to simply be in the same space; the faculty needed to pay attention to the process that occurred in that space. Recognizing their lack of success, the faculty made a greater commitment to viewing the learning community as a group, identified the need to work together more closely, and determined to pay greater attention to groupwork principles in the day-to-day learning community experiences.

Prior to the start of the second year, the faculty cooperated to develop a more cohesive and coordinated curriculum. As Jaffee (2007) states, '…when issues, topics, debates and concepts introduced in one class are reintroduced and reinforced in another, there is a greater likelihood that students will develop a deeper understanding of the content and material' (p. 65). The social work learning community faculty collectively decided that students would study a universal theme across their classes. The faculty met as a unit before the start of classes and throughout the semesters to develop and implement the curricular components of this theme. There was more communication, planning, cohesion, integration, and participation by the faculty in this process. This resulted in students studying overlapping topics in each of the classes and attending related events outside of the classroom. For example, in three separate classes – Individual and Society, Introduction to Social Work, and New Student Seminar - students learned about working with returning veterans. In their Individual and Society class they read a book on veterans' issues, in Introduction to Social Work they

read about programs available for veterans, and as a requirement of the New Student Seminar they attended a play on campus related to veterans returning home. The faculty worked closely to ensure that the material they were teaching built upon the students' experiences in the other learning community classes. They aimed to provide a comprehensive, integrated educational learning experience for all cohort participants.

During the third year, the faculty built upon the second year improvements and evidenced even stronger commitment to the group and to each other. This was apparent in the extent of the faculty's participation in extra-curricular activities, their enhanced commitment to facilitating pre-determined curricular activities and assignments, and the language used when talking with one another about individual students. Faculty members would use the possessive pronoun 'our' when referring to the group or the students. They clearly demonstrated increased identification with the learning community and its students, frequently verbalizing their strong feelings of cohesion and commitment to the cohort. In addition, the faculty began to participate in special events in one another's classes. This included attending student presentations and guest lectures, thereby visibly demonstrating cohesive leadership and commitment on the part of the faculty. For example, one of the social work faculty members was invited to provide feedback on oral presentations in the psychology class. Also, the psychology and social work sections combined their classes for a day, so students and faculty could participate in a full afternoon of low ropes course team building experiences.

Thus, the faculty members operated as a group, paralleling the experience of the students within the learning community. They demonstrated cohesiveness with one another, imparting a shared, uniform vision of the learning community experience, optimism about the impact of their joint efforts, and recognition of their own interpersonal growth as members of the community. The faculty even began interacting together socially, meeting for lunch, socializing outside of work, and working together on collaborative projects outside of the learning community.

As a result of these experiences and the recognition of the impact of groupwork initiatives on the learning communities, one of the faculty members shared her experiences with the coordinator of the learning community department, who asked that she present the

groupwork perspective at a campus wide training event. This faculty member subsequently shared knowledge about groupwork practices and principles and their application to learning communities with approximately eighty other staff members. The applicability of Yalom's (2005) therapeutic factors, the stages of group development, and the power of group process were presented. The presenter, drawing upon her three year learning community experience, discussed how to use the groupwork perspective to enhance curricula, improve group dynamics within the cohort, and enrich the learning community experience. As a result of the positive response to this training, additional educational sessions focusing on the groupwork perspective are being planned for all faculty involved in learning communities.

Discussion

Viewing learning communities through the lens of a groupworker seems to be a valuable perspective. While the social work learning communities described in this paper are but one instance of the application of groupwork principles to the learning community experience, it seems logical that there is merit in pursuing this partnership. Learning community cohorts are *groups*. Employing knowledge about group process to enrich and enhance the experience seems a natural fit.

Within the learning communities described in this paper, it appears clear that the conscious attention to groupwork processes had a beneficial impact. When faculty within the social work learning community focused on the application of groupwork principles, there was a positive effect on the students, the faculty, and the attainment of the community's goals. Retention rates increased significantly, as did the interactive and cohesive experience of both the faculty and students. Moreover, the process of these social work communities led directly to the dissemination of the principles of group work among the wider cohort of learning community facilitators.

Additionally, the learning communities described in this article demonstrate a new avenue for teaching and modeling groupwork principles on college campuses. Given the decline in groupwork education at both the masters and baccalaureate levels of social work education in the United States (Birnbaum & Wayne, 2000; Kurland

& Salmon, 2006; Simon & Kilbane, 2012), this may be a particularly timely educational opportunity. While the availability of trained social groupwork educators may be a limitation (Simon & Webster, 2009), social work educators could advocate for the implementation of social work learning communities in order to directly introduce students and faculty to social groupwork concepts, enhance retention rates and increase connection and cohesion among faculty and students. Groupwork educators might embrace learning communities as a means of expanding their sphere of influence.

Conclusion

The application of groupwork principles to the learning community experience appears to merit further exploration. Given the increasing presence of learning communities on college and university campuses, enhancing their effectiveness is a critical consideration. As discussed in this article, the groupwork perspective can facilitate the achievement of learning community objectives and enhance the experience of the students and faculty involved. Institutions offering learning communities to their students should consider training facilitators in groupwork practices and principles. Further research regarding the impact of such a perspective is warranted.

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