

**THE IMPACT OF PARTICIPATION IN A LEARNING COMMUNITY
AT INDIANA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA: CRIMSON CONNECTIONS**

by

Michele A. Norwood

B.S., University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 1980

M.A., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA 1992

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This dissertation was presented

by

Michele A. Norwood

It was defended on

July 19, 2010

and approved by

Dr. Stewart Sutin, Clinical Professor, School of Education

Dr. Charlene Trovato, Associate Professor, School of Education

Dr. John Weidman, Professor, School of Education

Dissertation Advisor, Dr. John Yeager, Associate Professor, School of Education

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Michele A. Norwood, Ed.D.

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The Crimson Connections Learning Community was designed as a means of providing support to a select population of students as they became members of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) community. The program provided students who were exploring majors with a shared experience, strived to blend the academic and residential experience, and served to ease the transition from high school to college academically and socially with an emphasis on career development. Students received tutoring, advising & other support services to help them to succeed. The program was intended to support participants as they made new friends quickly, to enhance their decision-making abilities regarding their future and to establish study groups that would result in better academic performance. The purpose of this study was to explore how student's participation in the learning community impacted their academic success and their retention to the sophomore year. Specifically, the study looked at undeclared majors in the College of Fine Arts and the College of Health and Human Services that participated in Crimson Connections during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years.

The research focused on the academic success and retention of students participating in the learning community. The study found that the retention of students was strong although not at the university-wide level for each year. Students were academically successful and selected a major in a timely fashion, both goals of the learning community.

The results of the study provide a learning community framework for working with undeclared majors that promotes retention and academic success. In addition, the study identified areas of need for undeclared majors at Indiana University of Pennsylvania that were not being addressed.

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PREFACE

This dissertation is dedicated to my family in recognition of their support along the journey. A special thanks goes to my husband, Jim, and son, Zachary, for their never ending faith; to my mother, Gerry, for a life-time of encouragement and to my father, Bob. Although he never actually saw my completed work, his influence continues to be felt on a daily basis.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Crimson Connections is a Learning Community for first-year students entering as undeclared majors in Indiana University of Pennsylvania's (IUP) College Fine Arts (CFA) and College of Health & Human Services (CHHS). The program was created to provide academic and social support for this select population of students. The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of participation on students in the Crimson Connections Learning Community, implemented at IUP during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years. Specifically, the study will examine the effect of program participation on student academic success and retention of participants to the sophomore year.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research has shown that students participating in learning communities are more connected to the institution and are overall academically successful. In support of these theories this study sought to answer the following questions:

- Does participation in Crimson Connections lead to an increased retention rate for students with an undeclared major in the College of Fine Arts and College of Health and Human Services?
- What influence does the framework of Crimson Connections have on student academic success?

Regarding student retention, additional questions addressed in this study were:

- Does the extent to which a student participated in Crimson Common Hours correlate with the student's retention to the sophomore year?
- Does the student's academic success (grade C or higher) in ADVT 170 correlate with the length of time until selection of a major is completed?

Regarding student academic success, additional questions addressed in this study were:

- Does the number of Crimson Common Hours attended by a student in Crimson Connections correlate with the student's CGPA?
- Is there a connection between academic success (grade C or higher) in LIBR 151 and overall GPA at the end of the program year?

1.2 THE EVOLUTION OF CRIMSON CONNECTIONS

In May 2007 Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) adopted a five-year Strategic Plan that provides eight Strategic Goals. Student Development and Success, one of the key goals in the Strategic Plan, is defined as "the achievement of academic and personal goals through programs and services which address the growth and development of the whole person." An objective of this goal is the promotion of living-learning experiences for students. In response to the university's recognition of the importance of learning communities the researcher began to explore the perceived need for support of Undeclared Majors within these colleges. As data were gathered the results became obvious that this select population of students was indeed in need of guidance and encouragement to meet their varied academic pursuits. The Crimson Connections Learning Community was developed to meet these needs. The program is in direct

support of the university's Strategic Plan as a strategy to meet and exceed the goal of student success.

During the spring 2007 semester a review of the academic status of students entering CFA and CHHS as freshman in the Fall 2002 semester with an Undeclared Major was conducted. The purpose of the review was to determine the rate of retention and persistence of this population of students. It was theorized that this group of students might become "lost in the system" without the appropriate connections to faculty, advisors, and the university that can be provided through participation in a learning community.

In total 109 students entered as undeclared majors in these two colleges during the fall 2002 semester; 64 were members of the College of Health and Human Services, while 45 were in the College of Fine Arts (Table 1.1). Over the course of the following five-year period 40 of the 64 CHHS students (63%) declared a specific major. Of the 40 students who declared a major, 27 or 68% declared a major housed within the college. Twenty of the CFA students declared a major during the same time period; 8 students selected majors within the college while 12 sought degrees in other colleges. Of the original 109 students 33 (30%) earned bachelor's degrees from IUP within the five academic years reviewed. Fourteen of these students (42%) earned a degree in a major housed within the College of Health and Human Services and only 3 completed a degree from those offered by the College of Fine Arts. The remaining students earned degrees in majors outside of these two colleges. Of those students graduating from the university 16 graduated with a major housed outside of the Colleges of Fine Arts and

Health and Human Services. As a result, 52% (17) of the students reviewed were retained to the college in which they entered as an undeclared major with 48% (16) retained to the university as a whole. However, slightly more than one-half of the students that selected a major (n=60) completed a degree (n=33).

Table 1.1 *Status of Undeclared Majors Entering College of Fine Arts and College of Health and Human Services in Fall 2002*

	Entering as Undeclared Major	College in which Major was Declared	Graduated within 5 year period
Total Number of Students	n = 109 (100%)	n = 60 (100%)	n = 33 (100%)
College of Fine Arts	n = 45 (42%)	n = 8 (13%)	n = 3 (9%)
College of Health and Human Services	n = 64 (58%)	n = 27 (45%)	n = 14 (42%)
Other		n = 25 (42%)	n = 16 (49%)

Note. IUP Banner, 2007

As predicted the academic performance of undeclared majors entering the College of Fine Arts and College of Health and Human Services in the 2002 academic year was poor. A total of 70 or approximately 64% of the 109 Undeclared Majors did not complete a degree program and were not currently enrolled in coursework at the university as of May 2007 (Table 1.2). Thirty of the 70 students (43%) who left the institution were in good academic standing, 8 (12%) were on academic probation, and 23 (33%) were academically dismissed from the institution. Nine students (12%) were continuing to pursue a degree at the time of the review. These rates of persistence are below the university's rate of student persistence at 73% for the cohort entering in the fall of 2002. According to the IUP Trendbook 2,438 students began their academic career at IUP during the fall of 2002 with 1,784 returning to their studies as sophomores in the fall of 2003.

Table 1.2 *Academic Standing of Undeclared Majors Leaving the University*

Academic Standing	Number of Students
	n = 70 (100%)
Good Academic Standing	n = 30 (43%)
Academic Probation	n = 8 (11%)
Dismissed	n = 23 (33%)
Still Pursuing Degree	n = 9 (13%)

Note. IUP Banner, 2007

Based upon the poor retention rates and the limited academic success for undeclared majors a variety of initiatives were explored. A learning community initiative, Crimson Connections, was designed to provide the support systems necessary for these students to become academically successful, to develop a sense of community which would lead to retention, and to complete the transition from high school to college. The program strived to guide students in the selection of an academic major as they gained insight to their personal goals and abilities.

The freshman class of 2007-2008 included a total enrollment of 2,542, with a total university enrollment of 14,018. The freshman class represented 18% of the total student body. The 2008-2009 freshman class was larger with 3,076 students or 22% of the total student body (14,310). Undeclared majors in 2007-2008 totaled 21% (546) of the total incoming freshman class (Table 1.3). The undeclared majors in the College of Fine Arts represented 11% (60) of this group. Those in the College of Health and Human Services with an undeclared major (180) represented 33% of the incoming freshman class. The 2008-2009 incoming freshman class included 19% (578) undeclared majors (Table 1.3). The College of Fine Arts had 67 undeclared majors

(11%), while the College of Health and Human Services had 141 undeclared majors (24%).

Table 1.3 *Population of Undeclared Majors*

	College of Fine Arts	College of Health and Human Services	College of Education	College of Humanities and Social Sciences	College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics	Eberly College of Business	Total
2007 – 2008	60	83	7	98	36	165	546
2008 – 2009	68	90	13	114	38	205	578

Note. IUP Progression Reports, 2010

All students selecting a major in the College of Fine Arts must successfully complete an audition for acceptance into the Music or Theater departments. Students seeking admission to the Department of Art must submit an art portfolio for review. The major for students that are not successful is changed to Undeclared Fine Arts. Students may choose to prepare for another audition or portfolio review during their first semester or they may select another major. Retention rates reflect that undeclared majors in the college often choose to leave the institution rather than select another major (Table 1.4). The retention rates for Undeclared Fine Arts majors are consistently lower than the university's overall retention rate.

Table 1.4 *2004 – 2008 Retention Rates*

	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2007-2008
College of Fine Arts	73%	68%	72%	68%	63%
College of Health and Human Services	73%	67%	67%	68%	70%
University	76%	73%	73%	74%	75%

Selection of a major in the College of Health and Human Services has few restrictions with the exception of the nursing major. All students entering the nursing program must do so in the fall semester of an academic year. Interest in the major is among the highest across the college with a rigorous SAT and high school GPA admission standard. Students not successfully entering the program may select the undeclared major until application can be made for consideration during the sophomore year. Other incoming students may elect the undeclared major while seeking or exploring majors within the college.

Undeclared majors in the College of Fine Arts and College of Health and Human Services receive academic support from the Dean's Office in each of the colleges. Academic support and advising in the other colleges of the university is decentralized to the faculty using a variety of methods. The Eberly College of Business assigns students to faculty advisors based on the first letter of the student's last name; in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences students are assigned across the college as well as to faculty serving as university librarians. The ability for students with an undeclared major to have a single point of contact was a strong factor as the Crimson Connections learning community was being developed as such Fine Arts and Health and Human Services joined together.

Recruitment into the Crimson Connections Learning Community was conducted on two levels. Each year the incoming freshman with an undeclared major received a program flyer and an application with a letter from the Dean's Office of their respective college during the summer before the start of their freshman year. Interested students

submitted an application indicating their intent to participate prior to attending Freshman Orientation. During each Freshman Orientation advising session eligible undeclared majors within the colleges were again informed of the program and invited to participate. Upon completion of an application these students were included in the learning community. A total of 48 students participated in the 2007-2008 year and 42 participated in the 2008-2009 year (Table 1.5). Maximum enrollment in Crimson Connections was limited to 50 due to the maximum enrollment of 25 in each section of ENGL 101; the program included 2 sections of ENGL 101 in each of the Fall semesters.

Table 1.5 *Population Participating in Crimson Connections*

	College of Fine Arts	College of Health and Human Services	Total
2007 – 2008	17	31	48
2008 – 2009	21	21	42

Note. Crimson Connections Program Records, 2007, 2008

The learning community framework selected for Crimson Connections involved a combination of the Linked Courses and Cohort Large Group/Freshman Interest Group (FIG) models. Students enrolled in Crimson Connections completed special linked courses that applied toward Liberal Studies requirements for graduation. During each fall semester students completed English 101 – College Writing (4 credits) and ADVT 170 – Career Exploration (1 credit). The Career Exploration course was selected because the premise of the course provides students with the opportunity to work with others as they examine majors and future careers. Activities in both classes were coordinated by the teaching faculty and supported the activities presented during the Crimson Common Hour sessions. During the spring 2008 semester students completed

Geography 104 – Geography of the Non-Western World (3 credits) linked with LIBR 151 – Library Resources (1 credit). Students participating in year two completed HPED 143 Health and Wellness (3 credits) along with the LIBR 151 course in the spring 2009 semester. Both GEOG 104 and HPED 143 are options to meet liberal studies requirements for all academic programs of study. The library resources course provides an information literacy foundation as students explored their academic future.

In addition to linked courses students participated in the Crimson Common Hour, this one-hour out of class experience was held in the residence hall. Examples of experiences included Pizza with the Dean along with invited faculty from various academic departments, guest speakers from the Career Development Center and the Liberal Studies Program, and representatives from the Counseling Center to discuss stress management and preparing for finals. In the 2007-2008 academic year six Crimson Common Hour sessions were held each semester for a total of 12 sessions. During the 2008-2009 academic year six sessions were held in the fall semester and five in the spring semester for a total of 11 sessions.

Students in both program years were required to attend two activities outside of the Crimson Common Hour and linked classes. These activities were selected from sessions of the IUP Six O'clock Series, performances of the Lively Arts Series, or Student Success Workshops. At least one activity was required to focus on the IUP Common Freshman Reader program. The Lively Arts Series provides performing and visual arts events presented by the College of Fine Arts and its departments of Music, Art, and Theater and Dance. These events include a variety of touring national and

international performing artists, exhibits at the University Museum and the Kipp Gallery. Over 200 events are offered each year to the university and regional community. IUP students, faculty, and community members are provided an opportunity to learn about current issues and to approach familiar topics from new perspectives as part of the Six O'clock Series offered by the Center for Student Life. Programs occur throughout the semester on Monday evenings with topics that are directed toward the interest of the student community. The Department of Developmental Studies provides students with a series of noncredit workshops addressing a variety of study strategies and other academic success topics. Sessions include, *It's Your Time: Manage It Well*; *Ways to Interact with Professors*; *Reading and Note Taking Tips*; and *Spring Fever and Motivation*. The sessions are one hour in length and are designed to provide specific tools for academic success. The Common Freshman Reader Program provides all incoming freshman with a linked experience, a common reading program. Events are hosted throughout the academic year that incorporate the themes from the book; these include Table Talks, the Author Visit and Lecture, and the Provost's Essay Competition. Attendance at these events was part of the class requirements for the linked classes in each semester.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to provide information regarding the effect of participation in a learning community on the academic success and retention of

undeclared majors in the Colleges of Fine Arts and Health and Human Services at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Specifically, the study looked at students participating in the Crimson Connections learning community during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years. Existing data housed in the university data warehouse (Banner) was used to answer the research questions. Attendance at the Crimson Common Hours, a program component, was included as a data variable.

The study focused on two theories or models utilized to enhance academic achievement and retention of college students. First, the understanding that learning communities are curricular structures that link together several courses, resulting in enhanced student learning and success (Tinto, 2000, 1993; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Second, the understanding that building a sense of community plays a role in student learning and retention (Astin, 1993; Kurotsuchi Inkleas, Zeller, Murphy, & Hummel, 2006; McMillian & Chavis, 1986). The research study focused on the development of the Crimson Connections Learning Community implemented at IUP during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years.

1.4 DEFINITION OF TERMS

For the purpose of this study the following definitions are provided.

Learning Community – A defined cohort of students that participate in two linked courses with out-of-class activities that support their academics; this research utilizes

the Linked Courses and Cohort Large Group/FIG learning community models as defined by Tinto (2000), Gabelnick et al. (1990), and Shapiro et al. (1999).

Academic success – Good Academic Standing with a Cumulative Grade Point Average of 2.0 as defined by the university academic policy.

Enrollment status – Full-time is defined as 12 or more credits per semester, part-time is defined as fewer than 12 credits.

Program-related factors – These include the linked courses (English 101 – College Writing, Career Exploration, and Library Resources) and the Crimson Common Hours held during the academic year.

Student-related factors – These include student data such as SAT/ACT scores, high school class rank, predictive grade point average, academic grade point average, and academic standing.

Community – A student group of any size whose members share common academic and social experiences and who reside in university-based housing.

Retention – Attendance, full-time status, in the first semester of the sophomore year; to include retention to the university and/or to the college

Selection of a major – student academic record reflects a formal change of major by the end of the first semester of the sophomore year.

Participation in Crimson Connections – attendance at 2 or more Crimson Common Hour sessions per semester.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The results of this study will be used by the Divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs at IUP to further develop learning communities that meet the special needs of IUP students. The university is finalizing the largest Residential Revival Project in the nation. The Revival includes construction of new residence halls that directly support the learning community concept. The development of a learning community model upon which future communities can be structured will strengthen the connections between academic and student affairs resulting in the recruitment and retention of students across all disciplines and colleges.

As the university examines overall retention rates and student needs, this study may provide a basis for the examination of policies and advisement procedures of the undeclared major. In addition, the manner by which the university admits and supports the undeclared major may be impacted by the results of the research.

2.0 A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 THE UNDECIDED MAJOR AT INDIANA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Ranked as the 5th largest university in the state, Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) is one of the fourteen member institutions in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE). Founded in 1875, IUP has evolved from a State Normal School to a State Teachers College to a nationally ranked university hosting six colleges and two schools that today offer more than 140 majors ranging from business to education to sociology to nursing to the fine arts. Program offerings are at the undergraduate and graduate levels with IUP serving as the only doctoral granting institution in the PASSHE (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Office of Admissions, 2010).

The first step for prospective students seeking to enroll at IUP for full-time studies at the undergraduate level is to complete an application. The application process is available to prospective students both electronically from the Office of Admissions web site and in hard copy format. Both applications clearly state that students are required to select a major from the list of available majors at their time of applying (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Office of Admissions, 2010).

You must select a major. If you are still deciding, please choose the major in which you are most interested at the time of your application. If you are truly undecided, choose an undecided major in the academic college that includes most of your interests; each college has an undecided major. You will be able to choose a major in a different

college in the future, should your interests change. We will be unable to finalize your application, and your decision will be delayed if you leave your major blank.

Core curriculum for each undergraduate major requires a combination of Liberal studies and Academic Major courses (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Office of the Registrar, Undergraduate Catalog, 2010). The Liberal Studies requirement includes courses that provide instruction in knowledge areas, learning skills, and synthesis. Content areas include English, history, philosophy/religious studies, social sciences, natural sciences, health and wellness, and fine arts. Students across all majors complete required (i.e. College Writing – ENGL 101) and self-selected liberal studies courses as part of their schedule during their first semester at IUP. The progression of these courses is most often defined by the student's academic major.

Students selecting a major within the College of Fine Arts (Table 2.1) are required to complete an audition or submit an art portfolio for review after they have been admitted to the university (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Office of Admissions, 2010). If accepted into the major the student begins their studies in the freshman year according to the progression of courses as defined by the department housing the major. If the audition or portfolio review is unsuccessful the student's major becomes undecided. At this time the student may choose to select another major or to not attend IUP. Selection of an undecided major in the College of Fine Arts most often is the result of an unsuccessful audition or portfolio review.

Table 2.1 *Academic Majors in the College of Fine Arts*

Department	Major
Art	Art Education, B.S.Ed.
	Art/History, B.A.
	Art/Studio, B.A.
	Art Studio, B.F.A.
Music	Music Education, B.S.Ed.
	Music/General, B.A.
	Music/History and Literature, B.A.
	Music/Performance, B.F.A.
Theater and Dance	Music/Theory and Composition, B.A.
	Theater, B.A.
	Interdisciplinary Fine Arts, Musical Theater, B.A.
	Interdisciplinary Fine Arts, Dance Arts, B.A.

Note. IUP Viewbook 2009-2010, 2010

Selection of a major in the College of Health and Human Services has few restrictions with the exception of the nursing major. All students entering the nursing program must do so during the fall semester; interest in the major is among the highest across the institution with a rigorous admission standard. Students not successfully entering the program may select the undecided major until application can be made for consideration at a later semester. Other students may elect the undecided major while seeking or exploring majors within the college (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 *Academic Majors in the College of Health and Human Services*

Department	Major
Criminology	Criminology, B.A.
	Criminology/Pre-law, B.A.
Food and Nutrition	Nutrition, B.S.
	Nutrition/Dietetics, B.S.
Health and Physical Education	Athletic Training, B.S.
	Health and Physical Education, B.S.Ed.
	Physical Education and Sport/Aquatics, B.S.
	Physical Education and Sport/Athletic Training, B.S.
	Physical Education and Sport/Exercise Science, B.S.
	Physical Education and Sport/Sport Administration, B.S.

Hospitality Management	Hospitality Management, B.S.
Human Development and Environmental Studies	Child and Family Studies, B.S.
	Family and Consumer Science Education, B.S.Ed.
	Fashion Merchandising, B.S.
	Interior Design, B.S.
Nursing and Allied Health Professions	Clinical Laboratory Science, B.S.
	Nuclear Medicine Technology, B.S.
	Nursing, B.S.
	Respiratory Care, B.S.
Safety Sciences	Safety Science, B.S.

Note. IUP Viewbook 2009-2010, 2010

2.2 LIVING AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES DEFINED

Learning community names vary from institution to institution – Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs), Academic Clusters, Linked Courses; models include team-taught courses, residential based programs, and interdisciplinary learning experiences. Regardless of the model or title, research shows that Learning Communities provide students with the skills to relate to the college experience in a positive manner; they are more likely to succeed in the classroom while developing personal and social skills (Tinto, 2000).

A learning community is “any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses” – or allow for the restructuring of existing curricular material – allowing students to have a deeper understanding and the ability to integrate the material learned (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, Smith, 1990). The concept of a learning community allows students to become a “collaborative partner in the learning experience” (Tinto, 1993). Research shows that the experience of participating in a learning community results in an increase in student satisfaction and retention. The

structure of a learning community allows for a response to the fragmentation of curriculum across disciplines with the promotion of an interdisciplinary curriculum, the creation of a social community and the recognition of common purpose with the classroom (Lapoint, 1995). Outside of the classroom the dynamics within a learning community allow for special bonds of friendship to be developed creating a sense of unity; such bonds also influence a student's academic success and retention.

The concept of learning communities has received interest in most part as a response to the needs of students. A structured learning community provides the institution with an effective way to introduce students to a more holistic, integrated learning experience (Cross, 1998). General agreement exists within the literature that a high percentage of students either withdraw or fail academically because of adjustment or environmental factors rather than a result of poor academics (Tinto, 1993, Astin, 1993). Factors contributing to this include a lack of clearly defined academic goals, a mismatch between the student and the course or university culture, and feelings of isolation. Whereas, students that have frequent contact with faculty in and out of class are more satisfied with their college experience, are less likely to drop out of college, and perceive to have learned more than students with little interaction (Cross, 1998). Institutions that integrate learning communities should consider these factors as they develop a framework in support of such initiatives.

Because of the differences between universities, each institution must understand the needs and experience of its student population as learning communities are developed. Research conducted by Pitketkly and Prosser (2001) found that the

model selected must “recognize that any change or initiative in relation to (learning community) programs and processes must be relevant to the schools and faculties, must address issues that are of importance to them, and must be within the scope of their available resources.” Reoccurring themes throughout the research support the idea that each institution must design their learning communities with the unique needs of its students in mind, with faculty expertise considered and with the financial support of the administration (Brewster, 2006; Tinto, 2003, 2000; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). As a result, learning communities will have varying characteristics. These may include students living together on-campus, taking part in shared academic endeavors, utilizing the resources in the residence halls designed specifically to support the learning community, and participating in structured social activities in the residence halls that stress academics (Inkelas, Zellar, Murphy, & Hummel, 2006). Themes that link all definitions of learning communities include a common or shared purpose, collaboration or partnership in the learning process, enhanced potential and outcomes, common interests or geographic location, and a respect for diversity (Kirkpatrick, Barrett, & Jones, n.d.).

2.3 OBJECTIVES OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The objectives of many learning community models are to provide students with a more coherent learning experience, to allow for learning to occur at a deeper level, to provide connections between the classroom and out-of-class activities, and to increase faculty

and student satisfaction resulting in persistence (Masterson, 2008; Lichtenstein, 2005). Additionally, learning community models may bring students and faculty together to build connections with alumni and peers within an institution. Research by Inkelas and others (2006) showed that integrating out-of-classroom experiences with in-class activities improved student learning. Learning communities become a means for students to become affiliated with an institution, to connect with other students from a variety of disciplines, to expand a student's view of diversity while also introducing new learning strategies (Gabelnick, et al., 1990; White, 1998).

Prior research conducted by Lichtenstein (2005) has suggested that participation in learning communities results in higher levels of persistence and academic achievement for freshman. Lichtenstein found that learning communities which provide a strong sense of community among the members resulted in positive learning experiences allowing students to make a smooth transition from high school to college. Characteristics of effective learning communities included instructors that were engaged in the learning experiences, a safe classroom environment in which students felt connected to each other, and consistency between the faculty in other courses linked to the learning community. The data showed that students participating in learning communities with these positive characteristics experienced higher rates of persistence and displayed a stronger academic performance.

Prominent researchers in the field of student affairs, such as, Astin, Tinto, Shapiro, Gabelnick and others, have attempted to provide frameworks for the development of Learning Communities across higher education. In a *Journal of*

Institutional Research article Tinto (2000) affirmed that, "learning communities seek to restructure the very classrooms in which students find themselves and alter the way students experience ...learning within those classrooms." Learning Communities provide an opportunity to address a variety of issues across an institution from student retention, to an interconnected academic program, to faculty and institutional revitalization (Smith, 2001). However, it is important to note that a program can not simply be adopted by an institution; it must be adapted to fit the new environment. An institution must commit to and support the development of the new program; this commitment goes beyond the individual faculty member or staff member, encompassing a change in culture. In most instances this involves a shared responsibility for learning across the institution (American College Personnel Association, National Association of Student Personnel, Administrators & American Association for Higher Education, 1998).

2.4 FOUNDATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The Learning Community concept is not a new idea that today's higher education administrators and faculty created to support students. Roots of the movement can be traced to John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn in the early part of the 20th century, at a time when society and higher education were both experiencing rapid change. Today the movement continues to grow and can be found in public and private institutions, in

two-year and four-year institutions, in commuter and residential institutions and in fact, was part of the early beginnings at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

During the 1920's and 30's small experimental colleges emerged with a focus on strong student and faculty commitment to a 'community of scholars.' According to Chaddock (2008) institutions such as Black Mountain College, Bennington College, Sarah Lawrence College and others promoted concepts of learning communities with students and faculty working together in their residential setting, in the classroom, and in support of social and cultural activities. These institutions supported the ideal that student and faculty interaction was key to academic success.

Perhaps the most widely recognized learning community endeavor was that of Alexander Meiklejohn who established the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in the 1920's with a desire to bring together a "community of liberal learning" (Rudolph, 1962). An overarching concern of Meiklejohn's was the movement from an interdisciplinary curriculum to one that focused on distinct course offerings supporting the introduction of the research institution; he saw this as the downfall of 'modern education.' The separation of subjects into specialties was perceived as threatening to the success of the institution and the education of the student. Meiklejohn strived to create a climate of learning that would motivate all students to learn across disciplines. The Experimental College was founded upon a pedagogy which stressed active participation in the learning process. The experiment involved lower-division students full-time, for a period of two years, focusing on a curricular theme of democracy. The pedagogy included group discussions and seminars; students took the theory from their

classrooms and put it into practice (Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Rudolph, 1962). Meiklejohn has been widely recognized for his insights into the importance of structure, curricular coherence, and community. While the Experimental College lasted a brief five years, the influence it has had on learning communities is profound (Smith, 2001).

Following the establishment of the Experimental College higher education turned to the works of John Dewey for direction. His influence had more to do with the teaching – learning process than it did with the structure of higher education (Dewey, 1938; Gabelnick, et al., 1990). Dewey influenced the collaboration of curriculum's that previously stood apart; newly created American Civilizations, American Studies and American Cultures brought together disciplines such as history, government, literature and sociology. Dewey believed that learning was a social process; that students came to education with diverse backgrounds and goals that must be taken into consideration when structuring a program of learning (Gabelnick, et al., 1990). Further, Dewey (1938) encouraged the education of students to prepare them to think "widely and wisely." These same principles form the foundation upon which learning communities, in many of today's universities, have been developed.

In the 1960's the Learning Community model underwent a transformation. This was a time of growth in higher education with the systems nearly doubling in size as a result of the GI Bill and the creation of the community college system (Rudolph, 1962). An interdisciplinary approach was the cornerstone of many of these programs. Joseph Tussman, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley and former student of Meiklejohn, created a learning community model at Berkeley during this time. Much

like the program at the University of Wisconsin the Berkeley program was short-lived, 1965-1969. However, it provided an alternative method for structuring curriculum around programs that required collaboration among faculty, resulting in a cross-disciplinary approach to teaching. Tussman believed that "curriculum must grow out of a simple idea and be developed by a group committed to the idea" (Gabelnick, et al., 1990). While the program was short-lived, much like Meiklejohn's, it has provided a structure upon which future learning communities have been developed.

The structure of learning communities in the 1960s at large institutions, such as Rice University, Michigan State University and University of North Carolina at Greensboro, included options located in the residence halls such as extra tutoring, visiting faculty, academic programming, seminar rooms and common areas that provided students with a comprehensive academic experience (Chaddock, 2008). Of these models, Chaddock remarked that, "such arrangements share a commitment to the value of close-knit community and faculty-student interaction for their potential effect on shaping students' academic achievement and character formation (p. 15)." These models continue to influence the framework of today's learning communities.

2.5 FRAMEWORK FOR LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The research clearly states that student achievement and success is positively impacted when learning occurs in community with others (Tinto, 2003; Gabelnick, et al., 1990; White, 1998) and that campus structure and culture influence student access to

activities that promote a sense of community. Framework for learning communities on an urban campus must take into consideration that most students commute to the institution; bringing a need for flexibility in providing integrated learning experiences that are designed to build a sense of connectivity.

A review of the typologies of learning communities (Tinto, 2000, 2001; Gabelnick et al, 1999; and Shapiro et al., 1999) identifies a number of possibilities (Table 2.3). Tinto provides four definitions of common types of learning communities: Linked, Freshman Interest Groups, Cluster, and Coordinated. Research conducted by Gabelnick and her colleagues identify five major types of learning communities: Linked Courses, Learning Clusters, Freshman Interest Groups, and Federated Learning Communities. Likewise, Shapiro and Levine identify four structures for learning communities: Paired or Clustered Courses, Cohorts in Large Groups, Team-taught Programs, and Residence-based Programs

According to Tinto, (2000) by linking two courses together to provide a shared academic experience the learning community takes on the most basic of structure. The Linked Courses model permits students to attend both courses as a cohort, working together to develop a sense of community with a common goal of academic success. These cohorts are generally small, allowing for a high level of group interaction – student to student and faculty to student (Tinto, 2000). The linked course model is provided through block scheduling. Dependent on the topic that joins the courses, a seminar session may be added in support of the First-Year Experience.

Another configuration defined by Tinto provides students with the opportunity to take all of their courses in a “Cluster” with a common connection. The courses may be linked together by a common seminar or group session in support of their academic work. Students do not necessarily attend the same courses but will attend the seminar session as a group.

In a third model, students complete the entire first semester together, studying the same material. Set in a large university, students in this learning community model may attend lecture courses with several hundred other students then come together for smaller discussion sessions. The discussion sessions, often referred to as Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) are led by graduate students or upper level students.

A final model defined by Tinto includes one large group of students that meets several times per week in an academic setting, defined as Coordinated Studies. A variety of disciplines or courses are offered during this meeting. Often students are connected by a common living experience as well as the instruction.

In each of Tinto’s models the courses selected are not random. Often the courses fulfill a general education requirement and are centered on an organizing theme. Students may select a learning community based on their personal interests or academic major; most communities are cross-disciplinary or cross-subject allowing for instruction from varied perspectives to be presented. Faculty may be required to reframe their course syllabi to include collaborative work. These shared learning experiences allow for students to work in small groups, taking responsibility for personal learning and that of the group.

Gabelnick and colleagues (1990) report that in learning community settings students and faculty experience “courses and disciplines not as arbitrary or isolated offerings but rather as a complementary and connected whole” (p76). Further, she and her colleagues find that five major structures for learning communities include, linked courses, learning clusters, freshman interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies. The manner in which these communities are administered varies from institution to institution, however several qualities are similar to those presented by Tinto.

Gabelnick’s model for linked courses offers courses that are co-listed requiring students to co-register for them. The faculties teaching in this model present their class independent of the other course but will more often coordinate syllabi and course assignments. The courses selected build upon each other resulting in a skills class being linked with a content class, such as a writing course connected with a large lecture class or a math course that supports a business management course.

Cluster learning communities, as defined by Gabelnick and others, are an expansion of the Linked Course learning community which creates a broader experience for students. Courses are completed by students in a given semester as a cohort however, the faculty members teach the courses as distinct sections. Cluster learning communities can be identified as Honors Programs where students select a specific thematic community or as a community connected by theme within an academic major.

The Freshman Interest Group (FIG) model links three large lecture courses with seminars lead by a peer advisor for smaller groups of students. Faculty members

teaching in this model do not coordinate course syllabi or provide collaborative learning activities. Community development is an integral part of the small group seminars where students are connected by their personal interest. Both Tinto (2000) and Shapiro (1999) offer this model of learning community in their definitions.

A Federated Learning Communities (FLC) most often occurs in larger research universities where the student experience may be disparate. Faculty involvement is vital for a successful model to be implemented. Cross disciplinary courses are identified around an overarching theme; an example of an FLC theme provided by Gabelnick and colleagues (1990) is *World Hunger*, with courses titled The Ecology of Feast and Famine, The Economics of Development, and the History of Latin America.

The Coordinated Studies model is most closely aligned with the original models offered by Meiklejohn and Tussman. Faculty and students participate in an interdisciplinary experience that engages them across the entire semester in courses centered on a general theme. The program is taught by a team of faculty in a diverse mode of delivery involving 15 to 16 credits in a semester. Coordinated Studies Learning Communities exist within larger traditional university settings as well as community colleges.

Shapiro (1999) provides four models of learning communities as adapted from models originally defined by Gabelnick and others in 1990. In one model, a student may participate in a group activity with a large number of students, such as a lecture, and then participate in a smaller group discussion session. Shapiro and Levine (1999) refer to these as "Cohorts in a large group setting." These subgroups often evolve from

a common interest and may also result in weekly seminars. Such small groups are referred to as Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs). A faculty member may present the large lecture with the smaller sessions being lead by a graduate student (Shapiro et al., 1999). A second large group model is a Federated Learning Community (FLC) that integrates a course around a broad theme with the faculty member facilitating a weekly seminar to help students synthesize learning (Shapiro et al., 1999).

In his research on residential colleges Blimling (1998) identified three forms of learning communities; living-learning centers which have some academic programming and tutoring with associated live-in faculty, honors living units for high achieving students which provide in-house classes and seminars, and specialized academic residencies which bring together students from a particular academic discipline. It is clear that a number of models or frameworks for Learning Communities exist in the research. Whenever the framework varies from institution to institution, it is due in part, to the needs of a diverse student body and the faculty. Most institutions have adopted the framework that will meet a wide variety of academic programs and have been flexible to allow for changes to be made as needs evolve.

Table 2.3 *Typologies of Learning Communities*

<i>Defined by:</i>	Linked Courses	Paired/ Cluster Courses	Cohort Large Group – FIGs*	Federated Learning Communities	Coordinated Studies/ Team-Taught Courses	Residence-based Communities
Tinto	Cohort of students, attend both courses, work	Courses are linked together by a common seminar or	Students complete entire semester	N/A	Student cohort meets several times per week with a variety	See Coordinated Studies/ Team-Taught

	together to develop a sense of community, most basic of structures	group session, student do not necessarily attend same academic course but attend seminar as a group	together studying same material in large classes, come together in smaller discussion groups (FIGs)		of courses/ disciplines taught across the session, often includes a common living experience	Courses
<i>Defined by:</i>	Linked Courses	Paired/ Cluster Courses	Cohort Large Group – FIGs*	Federated Learning Communities	Coordinated Studies/ Team-Taught Courses	Residence-based Communities
Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith	Cohort of students, enrolled in two courses, often a skills and content course	Cohort of students, enrolled in two, three, or four courses, linked by a common theme	Cohort of freshman students, enrolled in together in large courses, meet regularly with a peer advisor	Cohort of students, along with a Master Faculty Member, enrolled in three specific courses, participate in a content-synthesizing seminar	Cohort of students, taught by a team of interdisciplinary faculty in a block mode, central theme directs course content	N/A
<i>Defined by:</i>	Linked Courses	Paired/ Cluster Courses	Cohort Large Group – FIGs*	Federated Learning Communities	Coordinated Studies/ Team-Taught Courses	Residence-based Communities
Shaprio & Levine	N/A	Cohort of students, enrolled in two courses, linked by a common theme or Freshman Seminar	Students participate in large group setting and then come together in a sub-group designed around a common interest	Large group model the offers a course around a broad theme with a weekly seminar to synthesize learning	N/A	Student cohort meets several times per week with a variety of disciplines taught across the sessions, includes a common living experience

Note. Tinto, 2000, 2001; Gabelnick and others, 1990; Shaprio and others, 1999

*Freshman Interest Groups

Case studies show that institutions are utilizing a combination of learning community frameworks that best meet the needs of their students. For example, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis communities (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, Housing & Residence Life, 2009) provide opportunities for students to participate in Themed Learning Communities (TLC) and Residential Learning Communities (LC). In the 2007-2008 academic year more than 90% of the incoming freshman participated in a Learning Community offered within a variety of academic disciplines; participation is required for entering students taking 7 or more credits or transferring with less than 17 credits. Students selecting Themed Learning Communities take part in linked courses centered on an overarching theme. Courses are taught by an instructional team consisting of faculty, an advisor, student mentor and a librarian. This framework incorporates three models – Coordinated Studies, Linked Courses, and Team-taught Courses. Residential Learning Communities share a living environment with a specific academic focus while students receive additional opportunities to meet with faculty and staff in support of their academic endeavors. Research at IU-PUI shows that students participating in learning communities have higher GPAs than nonparticipants, have lower DFW grade rates and experienced a higher fall to spring retention rate (Borden & Rooney, 1998).

The University of Maryland offers learning community experiences utilizing the Course Cluster framework, each cluster includes linked courses designed around a discipline specific theme. The Cluster includes a course designed to provide support to

students as they transition from high school to college. Coursework with each cluster fulfills general education requirements with enrollment limited to 20-25 students per cluster (University of Maryland, First Year Learning Communities, 2009). Iowa State University has, among its 70 learning community opportunities, a *WiSE* community designed for Women in Science and Engineering, a *Connections* community linking large lecture classes with a seminar session designed for discussion on critical issues of the day, and *Esprit de Corps* a music community designed to provide support to entering freshman majoring in music (Iowa State University, Learning Communities, 2009). In each instance the institutions are striving to meet the academic needs of their students and to provide a foundation for deeper learning across disciplines.

Further research has shown that when students have frequent contact with faculty in and out of class they are more satisfied with their college experience, are less likely to dropout of college and are perceived to have learned more than students with less interaction (Cross, 1998). Research indicates that the idea of students taking two or more courses as a group results in fostering a sense of community and responsibility to others (Tinto, 2000, 2001). With this core understanding of the definitions of learning communities, it suggests that a learning community that includes the integration of students into social and academic activities would be essential to student success.

2.6 PROGRAMS, STRATEGIES, AND APPROACHES

For the sake of students' academic success and the economic stability of an institution, it is imperative that innovative, stimulating, and exciting learning communities be created which respond to the needs of the diverse student population on campus. A joint report of the American College Personnel Association, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and the American Association for Higher Education (1998) suggests ten guiding principles that serve as a foundation for learning communities:

- Make and maintain connections,
- Create compelling situations,
- Stimulate an active search for meaning,
- Create a developmental process,
- Relate individuals to others as social beings,
- Construct an effective educational climate,
- Provide occasions to use and practice what is learned,
- Facilitate informal and incidental learning,
- Enable students to monitor their own learning,
- Transform learning grounded in particular contents and individual experiences into broader understandings.

These principles support the concept that learning communities are most successful when they are fully integrated across an institution. Today's Academic

Affairs and Student Affairs personnel are revisiting the mission statements and strategic plans of their institutions and exploring how best to meet the learning needs of their students. A Learning Community structure that is embraced by all entities, and built on these guiding principles, is widely viewed as a promising model for restructuring undergraduate education. Connecting learning community efforts to other institution-wide initiatives will benefit all endeavors (Gabelnick & et al., 1990).

2.6.1 Programs and Models

All types of learning community models have been found to bring about significant positive change in student learning if they are well presented; among the most important factor to consider is what model best fits within the institutional culture. Research suggests that a more concentrated, longer-term approach that involves faculty as active, intentional participants will lead to higher retention and greater academic achievement for students (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). It is important to consider the duration of the learning community. While most are designed for one semester, in some cases additional time may have a long-term impact on students. If the learning community is effective students will want to return to it in the next semester.

A variety of learning community models and programs are taking shape in today's college and university residence halls (Alexander & Robertson, 1998; Tinto, 2001; Tinto, 2003). Underlying strengths of these models include the input provided by faculty and the inclusion of residence life staff in support of student learning. At

Auburn University and East Carolina University faculty are engaged in presentations to freshman within the freshman-only residence halls; residence hall staff offer seminars in note-taking skills, test-taking skills, time management and study skills (Auburn University: Learning and Living-Learning Communities, 2009; East Carolina University: Office for Learning Communities, 2009). Residents that participate in the sessions receive a certificate at the end of the semester in recognition of their efforts. Additionally, this academic support serves students well across all levels of their studies. A return to the “early days” of higher education can be found at the University of Oklahoma with the implementation of a faculty-in-residence program (University of Oklahoma: University College, 2009). A faculty member, with an appointment in an academic department, is housed in the residence hall where they provide support to student learning. A similar program at Oklahoma State University (OU) pairs faculty with a residence hall floor of students where they make presentations and spend extra time on the floor in an advising capacity (Oklahoma State University: University College, 2009). The faculty at OU often informally dine with students, creating an atmosphere of learning across all areas of the college experience and reinforcing a sense of community.

Providing facilities within the residence hall that support student learning outside of the classroom is important. At the University of Alabama (University of Alabama: Housing and Residential Communities, 2009) several residence halls have been jointly administered by residence life and an academic college with an emphasis on learning in the residential setting. Funding to support the programs has, in the past, been

provided by alumni. In a similar fashion, Middle Tennessee State University has provided special classrooms within their residence halls where faculty teach a variety of linked classes; at the University of South Carolina freshman seminars are taught in freshman residence halls by faculty and peer-mentors (Middle Tennessee State University: Housing and Residence Life, 2009; University of South Carolina: Resident Student Learning, 2009).

The responsibility for learning is shared across academic affairs and student affairs with residence hall staff co-teaching freshman seminars at Auburn University and at the University of Missouri where peer advisors and faculty are co-facilitators. The Freshman Connection at Ball State University requires freshman to complete two faculty team-taught courses that are tied to academic advising, the counseling center, and career development with support from the residence hall staff and peer mentors (Ball State University: Housing and Residence Life, 2009). Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) at the University of Missouri are co-facilitated by peer-advisors and faculty.

Clearly the task of educating today's college student is one that both academic affairs and student affairs must collaboratively embrace if an institution is to succeed in helping students achieve their academic and personal goals. The model selected will depend on the institution, the faculty, and the needs of its student population.

2.6.2 Strategies: Aligning Campus Culture

Creating a campus culture that embraces learning communities, according to Shapiro and Levine (1999), is the foundation upon which successful learning community initiatives should be built. As structures are developed it is key to be sensitive to institutional culture and to identify ways to meet resistance that accompanies change. The identification of strategic stakeholders early in the planning process will gain support for the learning community initiatives. Be inclusive rather than exclusive as stakeholders are identified; selection of faculty and staff should be broad-based and representative of groups that will likely be involved in the learning communities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Input by current students provides a viewpoint that academic and student affairs staff might not consider, as such, the identification of students to serve on the planning group is important. As Terenzini and Pascarella (1994) suggest, achievement of a quality undergraduate education requires a collaborative effort between faculty, administrators, staff and students. Creating a campus culture that is supportive of learning communities will assure a positive college experience for students.

Hunter (2006) suggests that an institution is also impacted by the background and experiences that the students bring to it. Students are moving from one culture to another throughout their academic career. Recognition of this movement and efforts to assimilate students to the new academic culture are vital in the development and modification of learning communities.

2.6.3 Strategies: Building Community

Simply stated, building a sense of community enhances student learning (Astin, 1993; Kurotsuchi & et al, 2006). Collaborative learning essentially involves “making and maintaining connections” (American College Personnel Association, et al., 1998).

Successful learning experiences are those that provide linkages between the curriculum and other aspects of the college experience through the integration of learning communities. According to McMillian and Chavis (1986) building a sense of community involves shared emotional connections; successful learning communities in higher education provide students with such connections. Additionally, research shows that the more people interact, the more likely they are to become close; while the more positive the experience and relationships the greater the bonds that develop (McMillian & Chavis, 1986). When the shared event is important to those involved a greater connection results.

In order to develop a sense of community the structure of a learning community must assure that the needs of the members will be met by the resources provided. Fulfillment of the student’s need for academic support and social development should be addressed with programming and activities.

As an institution begins to develop the foundation for learning communities in support of student success it is important to infuse the key characteristics of community building. McMillian and Chavis provide the following characteristics for building community across an institution:

- Feeling at home in the community,
- Feeling like an important part of the community,
- Interest in what goes on in the community,
- Agreement with the values and beliefs of the community,
- Feeling of belonging in the community,
- Satisfaction with the community,
- An attachment to the community.

A learning community that provides opportunity for validation of students will result in strengthening the community.

2.6.4 Strategies: Revision of General Education

The fundamental philosophy of general education is the development of a broad range of knowledge and skills. In a survey conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) in 2009, chief academic officers at 433 colleges and universities provided input on the structure of general education on their campus (Hart Research Associates, 2009). A majority (78%) of these institutions indicate the use of a common set of learning outcomes for all undergraduate students on their campus.

These outcomes address skills such as “writing, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and oral communication skills” (pp 1). Knowledge areas include the humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, global cultures and mathematics. Models of general education programs are increasingly turning to collaborative programs to achieve student learning; more than two-thirds of the AACU institutions reported an integration of

courses with learning communities or thematic required courses in order to achieve the intended outcomes (Hart Research Associates, 2009). The growing trend toward the revision of general education has institutions placing more emphasis on engaged learning practices such as first-year experiences, thematic courses, and learning communities.

A survey of employers conducted by the AACU and reported in the Chronicle of Higher Education (Glenn, 2009) shows that employers in today's workplace seek graduates with experience working collaboratively as members of a team, with the ability to interact with diverse groups, and that have enhanced writing and oral communication skills. Engaged learning experiences, such as learning communities, provide students with the opportunity to learn and demonstrate these skills. With an increasing emphasis on the restructuring of general education across an institution, the need to include methods of learning that involve collaborative techniques will continue to grow; learning communities that support the transition to college rank at the top of the list of these models (Hart Research Associates, 2009).

2.6.5 Approaches: Pedagogy within Learning Communities

Learning communities are usually associated with collaborative approaches to learning and often some form of team-teaching (Inkelas, 2006). Team-teaching can be achieved across the curriculum with linked courses in varying disciplines that share academic experiences. Pedagogies found within learning communities include service-learning, writing across the curriculum, problem-centered learning, and collaborative

learning. Many of these efforts are cross-disciplinary, promoting innovations in teaching and learning. Learning communities provide the framework for supporting each of these pedagogies.

2.6.6 Approaches: Academic and Student Affairs Partnerships

Research in the field of learning communities has grown in recent years with more institutions taking part in some form of collaboration across Academic and Student Affairs in support of academic success and student retention. The trend on campuses is toward a more holistic, less fragmented picture of higher education (Masterson, 2008). Efforts to meet student needs have resulted in faculty and student affairs personnel working together to provide better learning experiences. In his research, Masterson (2008) finds that effective partnerships in support of learning communities have similar characteristics:

- Faculty and student affairs work as equal partners in the learning process,
- The recognition that all members of the partnership bring skills and knowledge to the effort that will enhance the experience,
- Partnerships seek means to find solutions that are cross-disciplinary and cross the division of academic affairs and student affairs,
- Desired outcomes are clearly stated and addressed across the learning community,
- Assessment is done and results are used to make program adjustments and changes.

Collaboration and partnering in support of learning communities allows institutions to shape a completely new response to locally defined student needs. Regardless of the strategies implemented the efforts of the partnership will impact student success.

Partnerships between academic and student affairs are an approach to bridge the academic, social, and student experiences creating a 'seamless' learning environment. Successful partnerships take on a variety of forms; each with a goal of fostering the growth of the student by providing opportunities for students to work with faculty out-of-the classroom (Kellogg, 2008). Research shows that collaboration among faculty, academic affairs units, and student affairs are associated with high levels of student engagement and success, contribute to personal and academic growth among students, and result in retention of students. (Kellogg, 2008; Nesheim et al., 2007). The Boyer Partnership Assessment Project (Whitt, Elkins Nesheim, Guentzel, Kellogg, McDonald, & Wells, 2008), a FIPSE funded study conducted at Messiah College, explored the outcomes associated with partnerships across academic and student affairs at 18 institutions. The researchers found that partnerships helped students acclimate to their institutions; the programs fostered a sense of community that resulted in persistence in college. Additionally, the researchers found that the most successful programs, providing assistance to students as they made the move from high school to college, included learning communities. Several of the programs studied fostered the sense of community among participants with students feeling connected to the institution based on relationships that were developed as a result of their participation.

While limited research has been conducted on the outcomes of partnerships among academic and student affairs it is clear that the students receive benefits from such collaborations. Students taking part in programs with such collaborations receive the opportunity to learn both in the classroom and out of the classroom (Kellogg, 2008) and receive the benefit of working with and getting to know faculty and staff while working collaboratively (Harvey-Smith, 2006). As Masterson (2008) states, partnerships allow for collaborations that seek possibilities and solutions which may exceed the ability of individual divisions to meet the needs of students and ultimately, “we educate better when we discuss with one another the outcomes we seek and the means we have collectively to achieve them” (pp 21). Partnerships across academic affairs and student affairs may be the only way to fully implement programs that result in an environment providing students with an enriched educational experience (Tinto, 2000). These partnerships work when they stress the importance of student learning.

2.7 OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT OF PARTICIPATING IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

According to Zhao and Kuh (2004) three areas of research support the implementation of learning communities at an institution (1) developmental research, (2) cognitive science, and (3) learning outcomes. Developmental theory supports the design of learning experiences that will challenge students to achieve academically at a higher level resulting in student growth. Successful learning communities support such

student development by providing diverse opportunities, introducing complex ideas and concepts, and establishing nurturing learning environments. Cognitive theory provides that learning is enhanced through the connection with that which was previously learned. These researchers indicate that learning communities, by virtue of peer-to-peer connections, provide an environment that allows for student growth to be achieved at a deeper level. Learning outcomes, as identified by Zhao and Kuh, include higher grades, student persistence, student engagement across an institution, and greater gains in social development. Learning communities provide students with more occasions to interact with peers in social settings as well as the classroom, with activities that encourage broader thinking in relation to complex ideas, and with connections to faculty. Each of these outcomes has been identified as key to student retention (Tinto, 1993), student engagement (Shapiro, et al., 1999), and student academic success (Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997).

The methods utilized to define student learning outcomes in relation to participation in a learning community should consider the academic and social growth of the student. Development of student outcomes within the College Park Scholars program at the University of Maryland became a three-year endeavor for faculty, students, and administrators (Stewart, 2008). The assessment model included a self-study of the 12 Living-Learning Programs seeking input from current students, program alumni, faculty, and residence life staff via a variety of venues. The assessment resulted in the identification of best practices in the categories of instruction (Program Content and Culture) and implementation (Organization and Systems). Teams of

faculty participating in the learning communities came together to define learning outcomes, based on these practices. These efforts resulted in an assessment plan that encompasses student and faculty perspectives, provides data for informed decision making, and directs the growth of future programs.

Measuring student outcomes begins with a clear plan for assessment; that plan is developed in response to the goals and objectives of the learning community and the institution's strategic plan for implementation of such initiatives. The assessment of student outcomes in a learning community is based on principles that reflect an understanding that learning is multifaceted and occurs in a variety of settings across an institution. Assessment and evaluation work best when they are embedded within the ongoing operation of the learning community, providing information for faculty and administrators to make informed decisions about program development, program offerings, and faculty involvement (Shapiro et al., 1999; Stewart, 2008). The plan for assessment requires consideration of the stated student outcomes and program goals but should also encompass the experiences that lead to student learning and success.

Assessment is defined as a "process of collecting, synthesizing, and interpreting information" (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009, p. 148). Evaluation or measurement of the information collected can be categorized as either formative or summative according to Shapiro (1999). Formative evaluation provides direction for process improvement in existing learning communities and the growth of new communities. Summative evaluation focuses on the impact a learning community has on the student and faculty.

In both cases, formative and summative data will shape the direction an institution takes in the ongoing development of learning communities.

The assessment plan should allow for feedback loops providing students and faculty with an opportunity for input on program changes. Providing a mechanism for the dissemination of data across the institution allows faculty and staff to become engaged in learning community initiatives (Shapiro et al., 1999). The assessment plan should include qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Surveys, classroom observations, individual interviews, focus groups and end-of-semester evaluations are suggested mixed methods to collect the data (Shapiro et al., 1999).

Learning Reconsidered, a report that takes a campus-wide view of the student experience, states that assessment tools should include “formal written inventories, questionnaires and web surveys; faculty, staff, and mentors’ observations of student behavior; peer assessments; individual interviews; presentations, journals, and portfolios; and data gathered from group work, focus groups, and case studies” (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA] & American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 2004, p23). Equally important is a follow-up assessment with program alumni and employers that provide input on learning that was retained and applied.

Clearly a variety of methods exist; the method, or combination of methods, that provide meaningful data to faculty and administrators for program improvement should be incorporated into the assessment plan.

2.7.1 Quantitative Measures

Quantitative measures of student achievement include retention, student performance, and student intellectual development (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Student retention is an ongoing concern across higher education today; research shows that the retention rate of students participating in learning communities is consistently higher than those not participating (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Tinto, 2003).

In most cases, participation in a learning community requires students to take a 'package of academic courses' designed to meet their interests, abilities, and needs in combination with social and out-of-class activities. This combination requires students to make a commitment to themselves and the other members of the learning community. The members' ties to other students, to faculty members, and to the institution created by participating in a learning community strongly support the retention efforts across an institution.

Studies of student performance in learning communities relative to other students indicate that students achieve higher grades and produce above average work in their courses when they participate in learning communities (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Faculty indicated that they are able to assess student performance in different contexts than in a traditional class setting. Because instruction extends beyond the walls of the classroom faculty are able to demand more from students in a learning community; in response to these demands students are producing work of a higher quality. When academic performance is connected to student success; retention rates increase (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Tinto, 2003).

2.7.2 Qualitative Measures

The collection and analysis of quantitative data limits the insights into the impact a learning community has on a student. It does not allow for the student's voice to be heard nor does it provide valuable feedback to the faculty and administrators seeking input for program development. Methods to gather such data include student journals, focus groups during the semester, and essays that highlight the experiences. Gabelnick and her colleagues (1990) identify the following themes that evolve as students reflect on their experiences,

- Friendships and a sense of belonging,
- Learning collaboratively,
- Intellectual energy and confidence,
- Appreciation of other students' perspectives,
- Discovering texts,
- Building of intellectual connections,
- Embracing complexity,
- New perspectives on their own learning process,

Each of these themes allows the student to provide their perspective on the successes or failures of the learning community. When combined with the quantitative data collected a complete picture of the learning community develops. From this faculty and administrators can begin to make changes, can develop new programs and can learn more about the student experience.

2.7.3 Collaborative Evaluation

The collaborative nature of a learning community promotes an evaluation method that engages all stakeholders and that provides findings to support program improvement. The evaluation should encompass both the student and faculty perspectives on classroom experiences, out-of-class activities, and overall functioning of the community. Shapiro and Levine (1999) identify three collaborative approaches to the evaluation of learning communities: (1) classroom research; (2) reflective interviews; and (3) external evaluators.

Classroom research provides the traditional model of evaluation in a university setting; the approach is “learner-centered, teacher-directed” (Shapiro, et al., 1999, p159) with students providing feedback on how teaching affects their learning. Data collected should be shared with faculty and used as a tool for professional development to improve teaching in all classrooms.

Reflective interviews conducted with students in the learning community can provide great insights into the learning that has taken place. Interviews can be conducted one-on-one with the program director or can be held as a focus group with participants representative of the learning community. Feedback is gathered and provided to faculty and administrators for future program improvement and growth. It is equally important for program administrators to gather feedback from the faculty that participated in the learning community (Shapiro et al., 1999; Lenning et al., 1999). Faculty that may have worked as an interdisciplinary team to provide instruction will

provide valuable insight into how successful they perceive the program. Much like the student input, faculty information should be used to shape learning community initiatives campus-wide.

External evaluators may not be necessary for program evaluation following every semester; however, the use of an external evaluator will provide creditability to the program evaluation (Shapiro et al., 1999). Panels of evaluators may be identified from peer institutions with learning community initiatives and experience or can be a panel of faculty from within the institution (Stewart, 2008). Regardless of the composition of the evaluation team, a review by external evaluators will provide program administrators with information that participating students and faculty may not have been comfortable sharing with members of the learning community. The external review should become part of the overall program evaluation.

Regardless of the tools for collecting data, incorporating feedback into program development and sharing the results of program evaluation is an important step. The results should be shared with all stakeholders – faculty, students, and prospective students (Shapiro et al., 1999). The results of the evaluation can be used to determine the direction and viability of growing new programs, to encourage faculty support for learning community initiatives, and to secure financial support for existing programs from the institution (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Shapiro et al., 1999).

Finally, Shapiro and Levine (1999) provide the following 8 steps to guide the evaluation of learning communities programs:

1. Develop a research plan that addresses why the evaluation is being conducted, what it being evaluated, and how the evaluation will be conducted;
2. Involve program stakeholders – the faculty, the students, program administrators – in all phases of the evaluation;
3. Review the literature on program evaluation and assessment of learning communities;
4. Consider using mixed research methods to assure a complete picture of the program – take into consideration the learning that takes place in- and out-of-the-classroom;
5. Consider small, faculty-led evaluation as a method to describe what occurs in the learning community;
6. Create an evaluation timeline and calendar in order to not *'over evaluate'* participants;
7. Begin with a small evaluation plan and expand as the programs grow;
8. Identify the audiences that will be interested in the results, create a plan for disseminating the results to those audiences.

“Systematic and consistent assessment of student learning in all domains should be a way of life – part of the institutional culture” (NASPA & ACPA, 2004, p23). Evaluation of the learning community initiatives across an institution should be part of the implementation plan from the inception of the initiative. Results will provide administrators with data to seek funding, will provide faculty with professional development opportunities, and will strengthen communities for future students.

Evidence of the impact of learning communities on student academic and social development is necessary for program growth.

2.8 INSTITUTIONAL TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The integration of learning communities across an institution requires collaboration among administrators, faculty, and student affairs staff. As with other collaborative efforts the implementation of learning communities requires transformation on several levels. Consideration of academic practices, of student needs, and of institutional mission influence the development of these engaged learning practices (Shapiro et al., 1999).

2.8.1 Higher priority on General Education

A recent American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) survey found that colleges are moving away from “cafeteria-style” general education requirements. The survey, completed by chief academic officers at 433 colleges and universities, found that more than two-thirds of the institutions implement a general education model that combines course choice with other engaged learning practices such as learning communities or theme required courses (Hart Research Associates, 2009). Differences exist in the emphasis that institutions place on a variety of engaged learning practices. First-year experiences that support the transition to higher education rank high with

73% of the institutions reporting such programs. First-year seminars and learning communities continue to gain interest with more than one-half of the institutions reporting their use in support of student success (Table 2.4).

Table 2.4 *Institutions Placing More Emphasis on Engaged Learning Practices*

Practice	Percentage
Undergraduate research	78
First-year experience	73
Study abroad	71
First-year academic seminars	54
Learning communities	52
Practicum and supervised fieldwork	47

Note: Hart Research Associates, 2009

2.9 LEARNING COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Tinto's theory of freshman development states that a key factor in retention is the student's ability to make the successful transition from the communities of home and high school to the social and academic communities of college (1993). Learning communities provide a foundation upon which students can successfully make this transition. Opportunities to combine academic and social experiences in support of learning result in connecting the student to the institution and their peers.

Consequently, learning communities are effective in helping students become engaged learners (Lenning et al., 1999).

2.9.1 Perceived Strengths: Community Building

Connections made with other students and faculty are direct benefits reaped by students that participate in learning communities. One student's perspective on the importance of making connections reinforces the importance of community building,

"Unless you're extraordinarily independent, the only way to survive is to develop a college 'family' in the form of your friends,"

(Students Helping Students, 2005, p89)

Community building is a key principle in the development of learning communities that result in an increase in student retention (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

Other emerging strengths identified by researchers include developing friendships and a sense of belonging, learning collaboratively, experiencing intellectual energy and confidence, gaining an appreciation of other students' perspectives, discovering texts, building of intellectual connections, embracing complexity, and identifying new perspectives on their own learning process (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

2.9.2 Perceived Strengths: Student Academic Success

Learning communities that emphasize engaged learning result in academic success as measured by GPA, student retention, and satisfaction in the higher education experience (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Tinto, 2000). This suggests that active involvement by students and faculty in the learning process results in higher academic achievement, attainment of educational goals, and retention. Participation in a learning community

strengthens a student's academic success with experiences in and out-of-class; the chance to assume leadership roles, to investigate a discipline or to pursue a personal passion all lead to an enhanced learning experience.

2.9.3 Perceived Strengths: Faculty Development

The focus of faculty development should include the importance of learning communities, the role of the faculty member in developing the learning community, and the exploration of teaching techniques that support the engaged learner. Traditionally faculty members that report having a positive experience with a learning community are those that are "less traditional and more flexible in their pedagogical style" (Jaffe, 2004). According to Jaffe (2004), faculty participating in learning communities tend to "...emphasize student active learning, encourage class discussions, use small-group activities in the classroom, and look for opportunities to interact with students in and out of the classroom." Assisting faculty in developing curriculum and classroom experiences that support engaged learning requires a concerted effort. By involving faculty and staff in seminars and workshops that direct the development of learning communities a sense of ownership and commitment evolve. Learning communities and enhanced faculty development programming become a component of recruitment for both faculty and staff.

2.9.4 Perceived Weaknesses: Financial Cost

Research has shown that a lack of ongoing financial support from an institution results in learning community efforts that ultimately fail (Lenning et al., 1999). Successful programs require an integrated campus-wide initiative in support of learning communities. Such an effort requires financial support for faculty development and staff growth, 'hidden costs', which may deter a program from expanding and growing. Along with financial support is the ability for those involved to schedule time to interact with colleagues in the development of learning communities. Collaboration across academic affairs and student affairs requires an understanding and appreciation of academic schedules, faculty commitments, and administrative commitments that impact the level of assistance to be provided. Support of faculty collaboration in course development; designing exercises and activities for students engaged in the learning communities requires an institutional commitment to maximizing the learning community experience. An institution must provide significant administrative support and assistance in the development and on-going maintenance of student learning communities. In order for learning communities to be successful financial support and time invested must be evenly balanced.

2.9.5 Perceived Weaknesses: Faculty Development

Lenning and Ebbers (1999) found that faculty participation in learning community initiatives had an adverse effect on scholarly productivity. Subsequently such an effect

influenced a faculty members' chance for tenure and promotion in a setting that holds productivity in scholarship and research in higher regard. This limits program growth, especially when faculty become less likely to participate if the service is not recognized by their peers and the institution in key decisions such as tenure and promotion.

2.9.6 Perceived Weaknesses: Engagement of Students

Nationwide the traditional-aged college student population continues to decline (Ashburn, 2008), particularly in the Midwest and Northeast. With this decline institutions are seeking ways to attract and retain students. While learning communities provide avenues for student to explore academics in an environment outside of the classroom and the successes of such communities are evident in the retention and the recruitment of students to an institution, it is important to consider the negative side of student engagement and community building.

In his personal reflection on learning communities Jaffee (2004) points out that an 'unintended consequence' of learning communities are the internal dynamics that occur with students. Participating in linked courses, residence-based communities, and even Freshman Interest Groups students may exhibit attitudes and behaviors that resemble those indicative of high school-aged students. Often times the insolated communities provide for little or no interaction with upper class students, resulting in a missed opportunity to model positive academic endeavors. Such lapses may result in negatively impacting the transition from high school to college, a clear goal of many learning communities for freshman students.

The decision to implement learning communities at an institution requires careful planning and foresight. Today's institutions face a declining population of traditional-aged college students, shrinking budgets and funding, and a need to provide an expanding number of services to meet student demands. Learning communities are one model that can assist an institution in meeting some of these obstacles. It is important to note that the development of these initiatives often includes a need to change the culture of an institution, a need to redefine faculty roles, and a need to strengthen cross-discipline partnership in order to be successful. At some institutions these changes may be difficult to embrace; much time and energy are required to integrate the communities into an existing culture. However, the common goal for which all members of the university must strive to achieve is that of enhancing the student's learning.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of student participation in the Crimson Connections learning community. Student data, extracted from the university data warehouse system, provided a profile of students participating in the program, their level of academic success, and the retention of those students to the sophomore year. This chapter describes the research questions, the statement of the problem, the context under which the study was conducted, the population sample, and the procedures for data processing.

The study sought to answer the following primary questions:

- Does participation in Crimson Connections lead to an increased retention rate for students with an undeclared major in the College of Fine Arts and College of Health and Human Services?
- What influence does the framework of Crimson Connections have on student academic success?

Regarding student retention, additional questions addressed include:

- Does the extent to which a student participated in Crimson Common Hours correlate with the student's retention to the sophomore year?
- Does the student's academic success (grade C or higher) in ADVT 170 correlate with the length of time until selection of a major is completed?

Regarding student academic success, additional questions addressed include:

- Does the number of Crimson Common Hours attended by a student in Crimson Connections correlate with the students CGPA?

- Is there a connection between academic success (grade C or higher) in LIBR 151 and overall GPA at the end of the program year?

3.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Research indicates that participation in learning community initiatives results in a higher level of academic success and an increased rate of retention for undergraduate students (Tinto, 2003, 2000; Gabelnick et. al., 1990; Astin, 1993). It was determined that academic support services for undeclared majors across IUP's six colleges varies by program and college, it was therefore important to identify models and programs that would enhance the academic experience for this population of students. The Crimson Connections learning community was developed to meet these needs of undeclared majors.

3.3 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

3.3.1 Setting

The research examined the newly developed initiative of living and learning communities at Indiana University of Pennsylvania to gain a better understanding of how to meet the academic and social needs of undeclared students. The research focused on the academic success and retention of students participating in Crimson Connections, a learning community for freshman-level students entering the College of

Fine Arts and College of Health and Human Services at IUP with undeclared majors in the academic years 2007-2008 and 2008-2009.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania is a member of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. The largest of the 14 member system, IUP is a comprehensive, doctoral/research university that grants degrees through the doctorate with more than 140 undergraduate majors housed in six colleges. In recent years the university undergraduate enrollment has seen a steady increase from 10,500 to a current high of more than 12,000. The freshman class has peaked at more than 3,000 in the 2008-2009 academic year (Table 3.1)

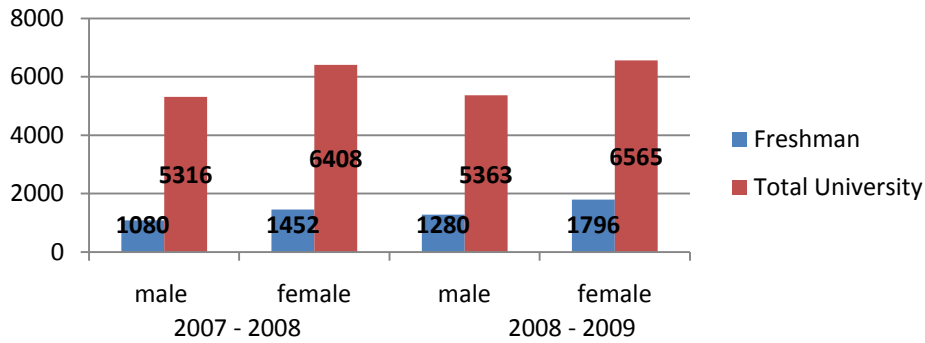
Table 3.1 *Undergraduate Enrollment*

	Freshman	Total Undergraduate Population
2007 – 2008	2,542	11,724
2008 – 2009	3,076	11,928

Note. IUP Common Data Set, 2009, 2008

The ratio of male-female students is consistent across the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years with more females than males entering the university (Table 3.2). During both of these academic years 83% of the freshman class lived in campus housing.

Table 3.2 *Undergraduate Student Male/Female Ratio*



Note: IUP Common Data Set, 2009, 2008

Within the freshman population entering in 2007-2008 the majority of the students (75%) were Caucasian, 15% were African-American, 2% reported their ethnicity as Hispanic, less than 1% were of American Indian or Asian descent. Approximately 8% of the students did not report their ethnicity to the university on the application for admission. The freshman class of 2008-2009 was similar in ethnic dispersion. The majority of students (80%) were Caucasian with 13% African-American. Other ethnicities represented less than 4% of the population with 3% not providing their race.

3.3.2 Population Sample

Participants in Crimson Connections were identified from the incoming freshman class of the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years based on a selected major of undeclared (UNDC-FA and UNDC-HS) in each of the participating colleges. Based on enrollment limits in linked courses a maximum of 50 students were recruited for each program year. A total of 90 students participated; 48 in year one and 42 in year two.

In year one 17 students from the College of Fine Arts and 31 from the College of Health and Human Services participated; in year two 21 students from the College of Fine Arts and 21 students from the College of Health and Human Services participated.

All incoming freshman with an undeclared major received a program flyer and an application with a letter from the Dean’s Office of their respective college. Interested students submitted an application indicating their intent to participate prior to attending Freshman Orientation. At the start of the Freshman Orientation Advising sessions in both years a limited number of seats remained open. As a result, during each Freshman Orientation Advising session students with an undeclared major in each college were informed of the program and invited to participate. Upon completion of an application these students were included in the pool of participants.

Students participating in the program were required to successfully place into ENGL 101 College Writing. Placement testing for all incoming students was conducted during Freshman Orientation; those students with an undeclared major that did not place into ENGL 101 or that were exempt from English were not included in the program (Table 3.3). All eligible students that applied were accepted into the program.

Table 3.3 *Students Eligible to Participate*

2007-2008	Number of Students Placed in ENGL 101	Number of Students Placed in ENGL 100	Number of Students Exempt from English	Number of Eligible Students Participating
College of Fine Arts	42	11	1	17 (40%)
College of Health & Human Services	111	24	3	31 (30%)
2008-2009	Number of Students	Number of Students	Number of Students	Number of Eligible

	Placed in ENGL 101	Placed in ENGL 100	Exempt from English	Students Participating
College of Fine Arts	52	3	1	21 (40%)
College of Health & Human Services	95	3	5	21 (22%)

3.4 PROCEDURES

3.4.1 Data Processing and Analysis

All quantitative data was analyzed using the statistical computer program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). All data was coded for individual students participating in the program for both academic years but was analyzed and reported in aggregate format. Student data, which was extracted from Banner, the university data warehouse system, included:

Student Demographics

- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Birth date

Academic Performance data

- Cumulative Grade Point Average – end of second semester
- Academic standing – end of second semester/freshman year
- Academic standing – end of third semester/sophomore year
- College – start of first semester/freshman year
- College – start of the third semester/sophomore year
- Enrollment status – start of the sophomore year – full-time/part-time
- Selection of major
 - o Academic Major
 - o Semester of selection

Common Hour Record

- Attendance at Crimson Common Hours held during each program year

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 CRIMSON CONNECTIONS FRAMEWORK

The Crimon Connections learning community was designed to support students with undeclared majors as they began their freshman year of college. The program provided students who were exploring careers with a shared experience, strived to blend the academic and residential experience and assisted students in making the transition from high school to college.

The framework in which the Crimson Connections learning community was developed included linked courses and small group discussion sessions titled Crimson Common Hour. During Academic Year 2007-2008 the linked courses (Table 4.1) included ENGL 101 College Writing and ADVT 170 Career Exploration in the fall semester; GEOG 104 Geography of the Non-western World and LIBR 151 Library Resources were linked in the spring semester. ENGL 101 and ADVT 170 were selected as linked courses for the fall semester in academic year 2008-2009; however, HPED 143 Health and Wellness was selected to link with LIBR 151 in the spring semester. Each course offered met a Liberal Studies requirement for all majors across the university.

Table 4.1 *Linked Academic Courses*

Semester	Courses	
Fall 2007	ENGL 101 College Writing	ADVT 170 Career Exploration
Spring 2008	GEOG 104 Geography of the Nonwestern World	LIBR 151 Library Resources
Fall 2008	ENGL 101 College Writing	ADVT 170 Career Exploration
Spring 2009	HPED 143 Health and Wellness	LIBR 151 Library Resources

Note. Crimson Connections Program Records, 2007, 2008

The Crimson Common Hour sessions were held in the residence halls during both academic years. During academic year 2007-2008 ten sessions were held, five in each semester. Topics ranged from campus resources to test taking skills to student organizations. Eleven sessions were held during academic year 2008-2009; six sessions in the fall semester and five in the spring. Several topics were repeated from the 2007-2008 academic year in response to student needs and interests.

4.2 STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of student participation in the Crimson Connections learning community. Data was collected and analyzed for participants in the AY 2007-2008 and AY 2008-2009. The program continued in the 2009-2010 academic year with 47 participants; data for this program year are not yet complete and are not included in this study.

Participants in the academic years studied were recruited from incoming freshman classes of approximately 3,000 students. The participants in academic year 2007-2008 totaled forty-eight (48) students; seventeen (17) entered as Undeclared Fine Arts majors (UNDC-FA) in the College of Fine Arts and thirty-one (31) as Undeclared

Health and Human Services majors (UNDC-HH) in the College of Health and Human Services. The cohort in the 2008-2009 academic year totaled forty-two (42) students with a distribution of students equal across both colleges (Figure 4.1).

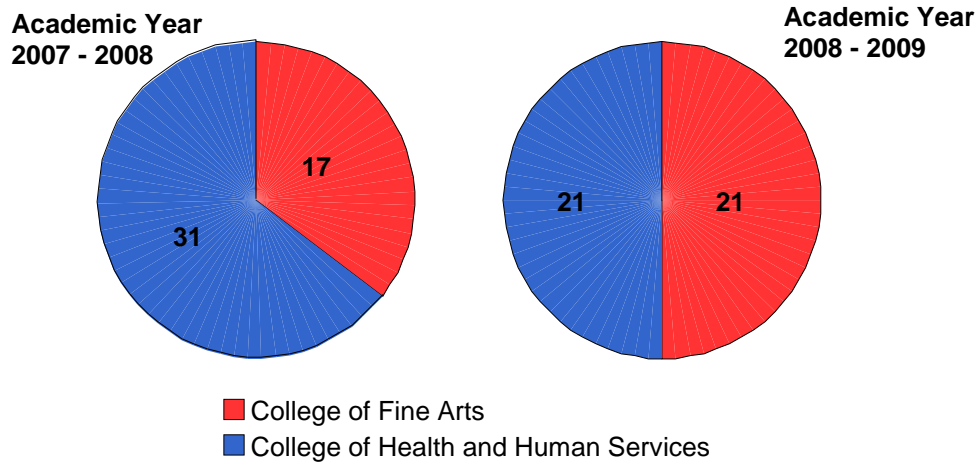


Figure 4.1: *Entering College*

An overwhelming percentage of students participating in Crimson Connections during both academic years were Caucasian, 85.6 percent in the first year and 75 percent in the second year. This is reflective of the university's student population in the academic years studied with 75 and 80 percent respectively reporting their ethnicity as Caucasian (Figure 4.2). Minorities represented in both years included African-American (8), Asian/Pacific Islander (2), and Hispanic (4). Four (4) participants did not report their ethnicity to the university on their application for admission.

Fifty-eight (58) females and thirty-two (32) males participated in the program across both academic years. The ratio of males to females is reflective of the overall university population with more females attending than males.

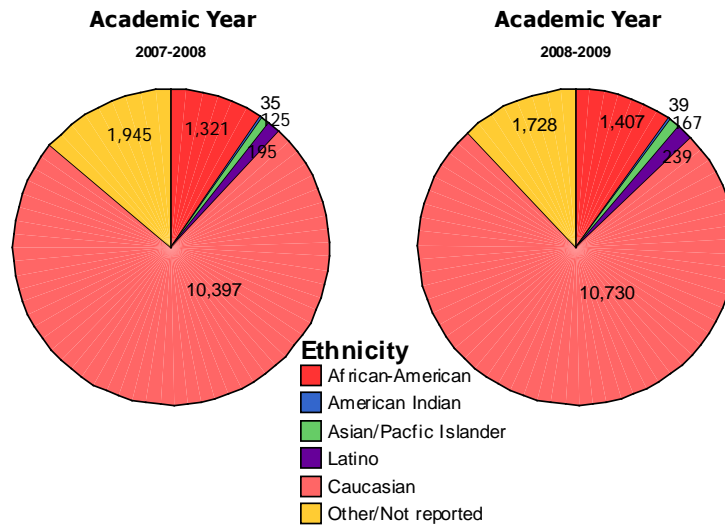


Figure 4.2: *University-wide Ethnicity*

4.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For the purpose of this study two primary questions directed the data collected and the analysis completed. Additional questions related to student retention and student academic success were explored. The following is a representation of the findings for each question.

4.3.1 Research Question 1

Does participation in Crimson Connections lead to an increased retention rate for students with an undeclared major in the College of Fine Arts and College of Health and Human Services?

Retention to an institution is influenced by many variables; for this study the influence of academic success and the selection of a major were analyzed to determine their impact on participants in Crimson Connections. Data related to the retention of the participants included attendance in the spring semester of the freshman year, attendance in the fall semester of the sophomore year, and academic standing at the end of the freshman year. Additional inquiry regarding student retention included analysis of the student's academic success (grade of C or higher) in the ADVT 170 Career Exploration course in relation to the length of time until the selection of a major was completed to determine if such a selection might impact the retention of the student to the sophomore year. The timeliness of selecting a major was defined as the formal change of major completed by the Office of the Registrar by the end of the fall semester of the sophomore year.

The student retention rate in AY 2007-2008 from the Fall to the Spring semester was 89.6 percent with 43 of the original 48 students returning to the university. It should be noted that of the 5 students not returning, academic success was a factor in only one instance with the student achieving a 0.0 GPA. According to the university's Academic Policy the student was dismissed and not permitted to return in the spring semester. The Academic Standing of two (2) of the students was Academic Probation which may have impacted their decision to return; however, the remaining two students that did not return were in Good Academic Standing with grade point averages of 3.78 and 4.00. In both cases, academic standing would not have prohibited their return in the spring semester.

Retention to the fall semester of the sophomore year resulted in thirty-two (32) of the students from the freshman year returning to their studies. This reflects a retention rate of 67 percent, while slightly lower than the university-wide retention rate for this academic year (74%) the rate is improved from that of previous undeclared majors in the College of Fine Arts and College of Health and Human Services studied (64%). The retention rates for all undeclared majors across the university were also lower than the university-wide retention rate for the 2007-2008 academic year (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2 2007 – 2008 Retention Rates for Undeclared Majors Across the Institution

College	Fall Freshman Year	Fall Sophomore Year	Retention Rate
Education	7	4	57%
Fine Arts	60	41	68%
Health & Human Services	180	122	68%
Humanities & Social Sciences	98	65	66%
Natural Sciences and Mathematics	36	22	61%
Business	165	116	70%
TOTAL	546	370	68%

Of the eleven (11) students that did not return in the sophomore year academic success was a factor for eight (8) students with six (6) students being academically dismissed and two (2) falling into Academic Probation status (Table 4.3). Contrary to this are three (3) students that did not return to the university; each had achieved Good Academic Standing with cumulative grade point averages of 3.42, 3.63, and 3.75 on a 4.0 scale.

Table 4.3 *Retention and Academic Standing 2007-2008*

AY 2007-2008	Returning Students	Academic Standing of non-returning students			
Fall Term – Freshman Year	N = 48	Good Academic Standing	Academic Probation	Dismissed	Total
Spring Term – Freshman Year	43 (89%)	2	2	1	5
Fall Term – Sophomore Year	32 (67%)	3	2	6	11

The retention rate of students in the 2008-2009 academic year was slightly higher than that of the previous year, although not at the university-wide level of 73%. Thirty-six (86%) students attended the spring semester of the freshman year, showing a loss of six (14%) from the previous term. Of the six students not returning, two (2) left in Good Academic Standing, three (3) were on Academic Probation, with one (1) being Dismissed, as in the previous academic year, with a 0.0 GPA.

Retention to the fall semester of the sophomore year yielded twenty-nine students resulting in a retention rate of 69 percent, two points greater than the previous program year. The retention rates for all undeclared majors across the university also increased in 2008-2009 (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4 *2008-2009 Retention Rates for Undeclared Majors Across the Institution*

College	Fall Freshman Year	Fall Sophomore Year	Retention Rate
Education	13	10	77%
Fine Arts	67	42	63%
Health & Human Services	141	99	70%
Humanities & Social Sciences	114	80	70%
Natural Sciences and Mathematics	38	31	82%
Business	205	159	78%
TOTAL	578	421	73%

Seven students did not return to the university for the Fall semester of the Sophomore year. Academic standing for these students showed four (4) were dismissed, two (2) were on academic probation; these standings could have had an impact on the student's decision to return to the university. One student that did not return was in Good Academic Standing with a GPA of 3.48 at the end of the Spring semester (Table 4.5).

Table 4.5 *Retention and Academic Standing 2008-2009*

AY 2008-2009	Returning Students	Academic Standing of non-returning students			
Fall Term – Freshman Year	N = 42	Good Academic Standing	Academic Probation	Dismissed	Total
Spring Term – Freshman Year	36 (86%)	2	3	1	6
Fall Term – Sophomore Year	29 (69%)	1	2	4	7

Students participating in Crimson Connections during the 2007-2008 Academic year were, for the most part, academically successful. At the end of the fall semester 68 percent of the students (n=33) were in Good Academic standing with a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 2.0 or higher. The average GPA was 2.54 with three students achieving a 4.0 GPA for the semester. Eleven students were on academic probation during the spring semester and received additional academic support services from their respective college as a component of their Academic Recovery Program.

At the end of the spring semester 32 (74%) of the 43 students that attended remained in Good Academic Standing. The average semester GPA was 2.47, a decrease from the previous semester with only one student achieving a 4.0 GPA. The mean Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) was 2.54 for the freshman year.

A greater number of students were academically successful in the second program year with 83% (n = 30) achieving a grade point average above 2.0, defined by the university as Good Academic Standing. The mean Cumulative Grade Point Average at the end of the spring semester was 2.56, not a significant difference from the previous year. The data shows that overall students participating in academic year 2008-2009 were academically more successful than those in academic year 2007-2008 (Table 4.6).

Table 4.6 *Comparison of Academic Success for Returning Students*

Academic Success	Academic Year 2007-2008	Academic Year 2008 - 2009
	N = 43	N = 36
GPA > 2.0	32 (74%)	30 (83%)
GPA < 2.0	11 (26%)	6 (17%)
Mean Cumulative GPA	2.54	2.56
4.0 Cumulative GPA	0	1

Thirty-three students in AY 2007-2008 were in Good Academic Standing at the end of the fall semester of the freshman year, thus they were able to change their major. Fifteen students were on Academic Probation or Dismissed; according to university academic policy students must be in Good Academic Standing to change their major. Of those selecting majors in the spring semester three choose majors outside of the College of Fine Arts and College of Health and Human Services. At the end of the fall semester of the sophomore year twenty-eight students remained in Good Academic Standing with twenty selecting a major. Students selected majors across all Colleges with the exception of the College of Education and Educational Technology (Figure 4.3).

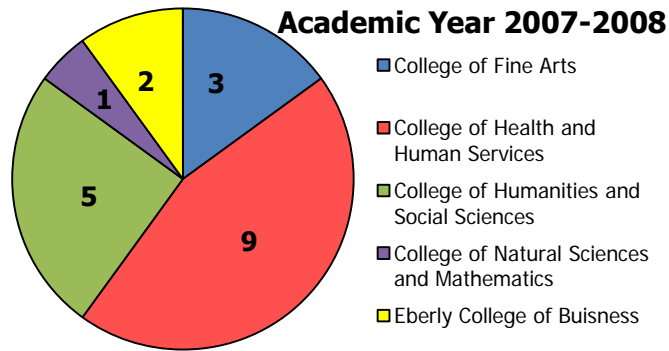


Figure 4.3: College of selected major academic year 2007-2008

Academic majors selected ranged from Computer Science to Communications Media to Nutrition to English. Only three students were successful in the submission of their art portfolio or audition for acceptance into the College of Fine Arts with majors in Music Education, Art Studio and Art Education. Five students remained as UNDC-FA majors, seven as UNDC-HH. Of those entering as freshman in the College of Fine Arts only eight were retained by the college. However, seven selected majors from across the institution and were retained by the university, meeting the program objective to retain students.

Students participating in AY 2008-2009 did not make a change of major during the fall semester even though twenty-eight were in Good Academic Standing, allowing them to make the change. During the spring semester six students declared a major outside of the College of Fine Arts and College of Health and Human Services with students making the transition to majors such as Communications Media in the College of Education and Educational Technology and Social Studies Education in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Twenty-nine students were retained to the sophomore year; twenty-six of these students declared a major by the end of the fall semester (Figure 4.3). The College of Health and Human Services retained 16 students to a variety of majors within the college such as Nursing, Hospitality Management, Child Development and Family Relations, and Athletics. One student remained as Undeclared Health & Human Services. The College of Fine Arts retained only four students, two as Art Studio and Art Education majors and two continued as Undeclared Fine Arts majors.

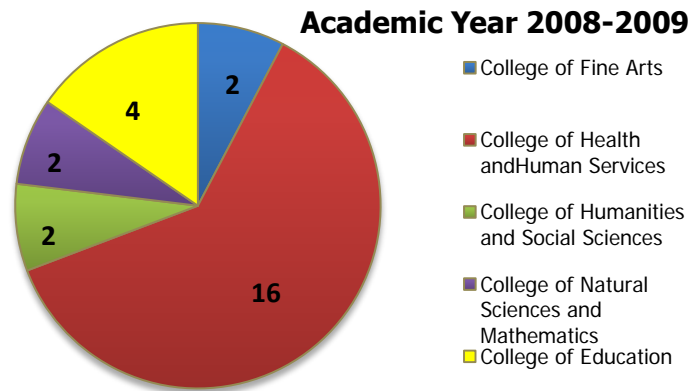


Figure 4.4: College of selected major academic year 2008-2009

Eleven (11) students during Academic Year 2007-2008 that were academically successful (grade of C or higher) in ADVT 170 Career Exploration selected a major before the end of the freshman year. Of those students declaring a major, 10 returned for the fall semester of the sophomore year in addition to 22 students with an undeclared major. By the end of the fall semester of the sophomore year 20 of the 32 returning students had declared a major (Table 4.7). Of these 20 students 18 were academically successful in ADVT 170 Career Exploration.

Academic success in ADVT 170 was again a factor in the selection of a major by students in the 2008-2009 academic year. At the end of the spring semester of the freshman year 13 students that were academically successful (grade of C or higher) had selected a major (Table 4.7). Of the students returning to the fall semester of the sophomore year a total of 26 had declared a major. Two of these students did not complete the ADVT 170 course and are documented in Table 4.7 as Other. Successful completion of ADVT 170 had an impact on the timely selection of a major in both program years which in turn may have influenced the retention of students to the institution as they began to pursue their degree.

Table 4.7 *Declaration of a Major*

2007-2008	Major – Spring Semester			Major – Fall Semester – Sophomore Year		
	UNDC-FA	UNDC-HH	Other*	UNDC-FA	UNDC-HH	Other*
Grade ADVT 170						
A	2	1	4	0	0	5
B	4	5	4	2	2	8
C	0	7	3	0	4	5
D	1	2	1	1	1	1
F	5	4	0	2	0	1
Total	12	19	12	5	7	20
2008-2009	Major – Spring Semester			Major – Fall Semester – Sophomore Year		
	UNDC-FA	UNDC-HH	Other*	UNDC-FA	UNDC-HH	Other*
Grade ADVT 170						
A	4	4	12	1	1	17
B	0	4	1	0	0	5
C	1	2	0	0	0	2
D	3	0	0	1	0	0
F	2	1	0	0	0	0
Other**	2	0	0	0	0	2
Total	12	11	13	2	1	26

* Defined as any major other than UNDC-FA and UNDC-HH

** Did not complete the course

4.3.2 Research Question 2

What influence does the framework of Crimson Connections have on student academic success?

The relationship between the number of Crimson Common Hours attended by a student and the student's retention to the sophomore year were analyzed to learn if the framework of the learning community influenced the student's retention to the institution. One goal of the Crimson Common Hour was the building of community among participants that would result in an increased rate of retention. In addition, analysis of the student's academic success (grade of C or higher) in LIBR 151 Library Resources and Cumulative Grade Point Average at the end of the fall semester of the sophomore year was completed to determine if such success led to overall academic achievement, thus increasing retention of the students. The LIBR 151 course is designed to provide students with the foundation for research and exploration within the university library system in support of academics.

Students in Good Academic Standing attended more Crimson Common Hours than those students who were not academically successful. In academic year 2007-2008 nineteen (19) of the returning thirty-two (32) students attended 4 or more Crimson Common Hours during the program year (Table 4.8). Six of the eleven students that did not return for the sophomore year attended less than 3 Crimson Common Hours and were on academic probation or academically dismissed. Both variables could have an impact on the student's return.

Table 4.8 *2007-2008 Attendance at Crimson Common Hour and Academic Standing*

2007-2008	Attendance at Crimson Common Hour					
	Returning Students			Non-returning Students		
	Good Academic Standing	Academic Probation	Dismissed	Good Academic Standing	Academic Probation	Dismissed
6 or more sessions	9	1	1	1	0	0
4 – 5 sessions	10	0	1	2	0	2
0 – 3 sessions	7	1	2	0	2	4

Attendance at Crimson Common Hours in year two was significantly lower than in year one; only eleven (11) of the twenty-nine (29) students retained to the fall semester of the sophomore year attended 4 or more sessions during the program year (Table 4.9). The majority (57%, n=7) of the students not returning attended less than 3 Crimson Common Hours, as in the previous year academic performance of these students was poor resulting in academic probation or dismissal. It is important to note that attendance at Crimson Common Hours was a condition of Academic Recovery for those students on Academic Probation during the Spring semester of each program year, thus the attendance is influenced.

Table 4.9 *2008-2009 Attendance at Crimson Common Hour and Academic Standing*

2008-2009	Attendance at Crimson Common Hour					
	Returning Students			Non-returning Students		
	Good Academic Standing	Academic Probation	Dismissed	Good Academic Standing	Academic Probation	Dismissed
6 or more sessions	5	0	1	0	0	1
4 – 5 sessions	6	0	0	1	0	1
0 – 3 sessions	16	0	1	0	2	2

A review of the academic success of the students in LIBR 151 Library Resources shows that those in Academic Year 2007-2008 were overwhelmingly successful in the course, twenty-seven (27) of the thirty-two (32) students that returned for the fall semester of the sophomore year attained a grade of C or better (Table 4.8). At the end of the fall semester 24 of these student were in Good Academic Standing with 3 being Academically Dismissed.

Students participating in the 2008-2009 Academic Year were also academically successful in LIBR 151. Twenty-two (76%) of the students completing the course achieved a grade of C or higher; 20 were in Good Academic Standing at the end of the sophomore year fall semester with one on Academic Probation and one being Academically Dismissed from the institution (Table 4.10).

Table 4.10 *LIBR 151 Grades and Academic Standing*

2007-2008	Academic Standing		
Grade LIBR 151	Good Academic Standing	Academic Probation	Dismissed
A	6	0	0
B	10	0	1
C	8	0	2
D	0	0	0
F	0	0	1
Other *	4	0	0
Total	28	0	4
2008-2009	Academic Standing		
Grade LIBR 151	Good Academic Standing	Academic Probation	Dismissed
A	3	0	1
B	10	0	0
C	7	1	0
D	1	0	0
F	0	0	0
Other *	6	0	0
Total	27	1	1

4.4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results of a study which explored the impact of participation in a learning community on the academic success and retention of undeclared majors in the College of Fine Arts and the College of Health and Human Services during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The study is framed with the understanding that learning communities are curricular structures that link together several courses resulting in an enhanced student learning experience and academic success. The building of community within the learning community plays a significant role in the student learning and retention to the university. For the purpose of this study success of the learning community is measured by student academic success, retention to the fall semester of the sophomore year and selection of a major. Data was collected for participants during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years. A total of 90 students participated in the learning community across both academic years.

Research question number one asked, "Does participation in Crimson Connections lead to an increased retention rate for students with an undeclared major in the College of Fine Arts and College of Health and Human Services?" In addition, the extent to which a student was academically successful in ADVT 170 Career Exploration was considered in relation to the length of time until the student selected a major. According to the literature, selection of a major allows for the building of relationships

among students and faculty, thus impacting a student's retention. Data analyzed included attendance in the spring semester of the freshman year, attendance in the fall semester of the sophomore year, grade earned in ADVT 170 and the student's academic major in each of the semesters.

The rate of retention of students in academic year 2007-2008 was sixty-seven percent with thirty-two of the original forty-eight students returning to the fall semester of the sophomore year. Retention in the 2008-2009 academic year showed an increase in retention with twenty-nine of the original forty-two students returning to the sophomore year.

Research conducted by Lichtenstein (2005) found that students participating in learning communities were retained at a higher level than those that did not participate. His research suggests that learning communities provide freshman with a strong sense of community and a learning environment that promotes academic success. This study found that participation in Crimson Connections resulted in an increased retention rate for students in both program years, exceeding that of the undeclared majors entering the colleges in the previously studied 2002-2003 academic year. However, analysis of the attendance at the Crimson Common Hour, a key community building component of the learning community framework, showed that students in year one attended a greater number of sessions than those in year two. This would lead to the expectation that the retention rate of the first year students would be greater, a direct opposite of the findings of the study. Retention rates in year two were greater than those of year one, 67% in 2007-2008 and 69% in 2008-2009. Additional research to determine why

students did not attend the Crimson Common Hour could provide a greater understanding of the impact of this component on retention and the development of a sense of community among the students studied.

Research question number two asked, "What influence does the framework of Crimson Connections have on student academic success?" Components of the Crimson Connections learning community were examined in relation to student success, such as the number of Crimson Common Hours attended in relation to the student's grade point average. Academic success in the LIBR 151 Library Resources course was considered in relation to the student's Grade Point Average (GPA) at the end of the fall semester in the sophomore year.

As with the research of Tinto (2003) and White (1998) this study found that academic success was positively impacted when students took part in collaborative learning experiences such as a learning community. Students in the Crimson Connections Learning Community were, for the most part, academically successful. The range of Cumulative Grade Point Averages in the 2007-2008 academic year was .13 to 3.96 with the majority (74%) of the students achieving good academic standing by the end of the freshman year. Students in the 2008-2009 academic year were also academically successful with 83 percent achieving good academic standing at the end of the freshman year. While academic success of the students participating in year one was significant, a greater percentage of students in year two that achieved good academic standing were retained than in year one. While many variables can impact GPA it should be noted that this increase in academic success might be attributed to the

linked courses completed in year two; students completed different liberal studies required courses (GEOG 104 and HPED 143) in the spring semester of each year which may have impacted academic success.

With a variety of learning community frameworks to select from (Tinto, 2000, 2001; Gabelnick, et al, 1999; and Shapiro et al, 1999) Crimson Connections was developed to provide students with academic linked courses and the Crimson Common Hour. Students in good academic standing attended more Crimson Common Hours than those in academic probation status. While it can be pointed out that students that perform better in the classroom may also be more conscientious about meeting commitments, the purpose of the Common Hours was to promote a social interaction among the students, not specifically to increase academic success. The majority of students (63%) attended 4 or more Common Hours during the 2007-2008 academic year; however, retention was lower than in year two. Contrary to this finding, over 58 percent of the students participating in the 2008-2009 academic year attended less than three Crimson Common Hours but their retention rate was higher than year one. This contrast showed that participation in the Crimson Common Hours may have had little influence on the building of community which resulted in an increased retention. This finding requires additional research specifically targeting student feedback on the Common Hour sessions to determine if changes in the framework should be made for future Crimson Connections learning communities.

While impact on the selection of a major can be connected to the student's academic success in ADVT 170 by analysis of the length of time the student took in

making a change of major in relation to the grade earned in the course, it is not clear if other external influences may have impacted the selection by the student. The data shows that more than 90 percent of the students selecting a major in both academic years earned a C or better in ADVT 170 and had selected the major by the end of the fall semester of the sophomore year. The combination of a student's academic success and timely selection of a major after the completion of ADVT 170 strongly suggests that the course should continue to be a linked course in future Crimson Connections learning communities.

All students completing the LIBR 151 Library Resources course were academically successful during the first program year with only one student in year two earning a grade of D. It is unclear whether student's academic success in the course influenced their performance in other courses during the program year. However, the majority of those students, in both years, returning to the sophomore year were in Good Academic standing. Once again additional research is needed to determine if the LIBR 151 course impacted this retention and academic success. However, the course appears to have been a successful link in the framework of the learning community and should be considered for future learning communities.

In conclusion, this study helped to define a framework of support for undeclared students at Indiana University of Pennsylvania that allowed them to explore majors, to be academically successful and to become a member of the university community. The Divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs have begun to explore support systems for undeclared students as a result of Crimson Connections.

5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter provides discussion on the impact the study has had on the future of the learning community initiative at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Specifically looking toward the changes in how the institution engages the undeclared major.

5.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIANA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Indiana University of Pennsylvania has joined institutions across the nation in the revision of their general studies program. During Academic Year 2007-2008 the institution began the journey of exploring and defining learning outcomes for students across the Liberal Studies curriculum. The endeavor has resulted in the addition of a first-year experience or freshman seminar. The results of this study have been used to guide the discussion for such a seminar in the College of Fine Arts. The Crimson Connections framework, which supported academic success and university-wide retention of the students, has provided one foundation for future courses.

The opportunity to engage students from their initial exposure to the campus led to an increased involvement between faculty, staff and students. The Crimson Connections Learning Community connected students with faculty at the start of their freshman year; guiding their interactions and encouraging the exploration of personal strengths. These connections influenced student successes which resulted in an

increased retention rate. The university has begun to examine the manner in which undeclared majors are recruited and the support structures that exist to encourage success. As a result of this review the Center for Student Success was created in partnership between the Division of Academic Affairs and the Division of Student Affairs. The Center provides advising and academic support to students across the institution with a specific charge to support populations such as the undeclared major, veterans, and the non-traditional student.

As the third year of Crimson Connections comes to a close the framework for future communities has been revised based on this study. Changes in the length of the program will see students attending linked courses only in the fall semester. The linked courses, ENGL 101 College Writing and ADVT 170 Career Exploration, will remain an integral component of the program. Results of this study clearly support the need for students to systematically explore career options in order to make a timely selection of a major, thus the ADVT 170 course remains a strong element of the program. The Crimson Common Hour will be restructured with only four sessions offered in each semester; student input following each Common Hour has identified the topics that were strongly received. These will be repeated in future years, continuing to gather student feedback at each session to assure that student input guides the topics presented. Attendance at the Common Hours was low during the second semester in year two of the study; as a result these sessions will be restructured to serve as support sessions rather than information sharing sessions.

5.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Reoccurring themes throughout the research support the idea that each institution must design their learning communities with the unique needs of its students in mind, with faculty expertise considered and with the financial support of the administration (Brewster, 2006; Tinto, 2003, 2001; Shapiro, 1999).

While the frameworks of a learning community will vary, the importance of helping students to make the transition to college and to be academically successful is vital. According to Kellogg (2004) designing a learning community that provides students with an opportunity to learn both in the classroom and out of the classroom through co-curricular activities is a benefit to both the faculty member and the student. The student has the benefit of working with and getting to know faculty while working collaboratively. The development of these relationships is essential for student success.

It is realistic to think that learning communities are instrumental in bringing together Academic Affairs and Student Affairs in support of student academic success. Likewise, institutions need to continue to work together to help students focus on becoming members of the community both in and out of the classroom. Specifically, institutions need to assure their efforts in guiding the student with an undeclared major are strengthened. These efforts will result in an increased retention rate, increased student satisfaction, and increased level of academic success. The need for integrated planning to enhance student learning will result in open lines of communication which

can expand the opportunities for collaboration. As Masterson (2008) states, “partnerships allow for collaborations that seek possibilities and solutions that may exceed the ability of individual divisions to meet the needs of students.”

5.3 IMPACT OF THE CRIMSON COMMON HOUR

A study during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic year was completed by the researcher in support of the Crimson Connections Learning Communities at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Survey instruments and data collection techniques were approved by the IUP Institutional Review Board for the two year study. The following section details student feedback collected following each Crimson Common Hour session. The underlying purpose of the Crimson Common Hour sessions was to engage these students in the university community by providing a time for social interaction as well as a period of instruction. The typical experiences included sessions with the College Deans and Department Chairpersons, discussions with invited faculty from various majors, and guest lecturers who were of special interest to the group (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 *Crimson Common Hour Topics*

Academic Year 2007-2008	Academic Year 2008-2009
Getting to know each other...	Getting to know each other...
What can I do with a major in...?	Academic Integrity – what does that mean??
What do I need to know about scheduling for spring semester??	What do I need to know about scheduling for spring semester??
Liberal Studies Education	Meet the Chairs (one-on-one meetings with a department chair)
Stress Management. How to deal with it all!	What can I do with a major in...?

Final Exam preparation	Final Exam preparation
Balancing academics, social life and work-study. HOW DO I DO IT ALL???	Stress Management. How to deal with it all! Mindfulness and Yoga
Student Organizations...which to choose and why?	Social Networking – How do Facebook and email impact my academics??
Academic Integrity What does that mean?	True Colors – Personality defined by Color
Preparing for finals...round 2	Preparing for finals...round 2

Note. Crimson Connections Program Records, 2007, 2008

A feedback survey (Appendix A) was administered to all participants after each Crimson Common Hour session, the one-hour out-of-class experience was held in the residence hall during each academic year. The feedback survey contained three open-ended questions related to the presentation provided during the session. These responses were reviewed to identify common themes; a maximum of 15 themes were identified for each question with a numeric code assigned to each for the tabulation of answers.

The second level of feedback included a Focus Group conducted at the end of each semester. Discussion during the Focus Group sessions was guided by three broad questions (Appendix B) to illicit responses from participants: *Overall, what worked best to meet your needs? What didn't meet your needs? and What would you change?* An analysis of the data collected during the focus groups was conducted with common themes identified and numeric values assigned to each. A maximum of 25 themes were identified for each question from a review of the responses collected.

Analysis of data from the feedback surveys and the focus group sessions was conducted to determine the success of the program in its effort to provide academic and social support to the participants in the learning community. The data collected from each Crimson Common Hour and the Focus Groups provided the foundation for

future program development. Students consistently reported that the sessions provided them with useful information and were helpful in making choices of an academic major.

5.3.1 Crimson Common Hour Feedback

A key theme identified in the responses from the first Crimson Common Hour each year, 'Getting to know each other...', was the positive impact students felt upon meeting members of the college administration. Students were pleased that "*many different professors from different fields were available to question.*" Several students indicated that after attending they would now recognize and be able to speak with the people who can help them decide on a career/major. A second theme showed that students had a better perception of what would be expected of them as a student within a selected major. Students reported that they "*got to know more about the (specific) program and what is involved.*" Information concerning particular activities for majors was shared with students, such as auditions for the Theater Department productions, resulting in students that had never considered this major becoming interested in how they could participate in upcoming productions. Most importantly this session allowed students to "*see that other freshman feel the same way I do right now, a little nervous and confused still.*" A key to the success of bringing the students together outside of the classroom is that they are able to interact with each other in a social setting and to hear questions others might ask that they had not considered.

One student reported finding the Common Hour offered by the Office of Career Development, What can I do with a major in...?, as "*very informative.*" Many students

indicated they were unaware of the opportunities for internships and student exchange programs; *"I found the part about going to Florida or another country to learn interesting and maybe a possibility for me,"* stated one student. Students attending these sessions indicated that they were now more interested in exploring other careers that they never would have considered. The feedback from several students showed that the connection between academics and career planning became clear after this presentation.

As freshman neither group of students had ever experienced meeting with their academic advisor to discuss scheduling for upcoming semesters. The topic was presented early in each fall semester to allow students ample time to schedule individual meetings with their advisors. Following the session, 'What do I need to know about scheduling for spring semester??' one student indicated *"I never looked into ANYTHING dealing with registration and taking the right classes...now I know how!"* An overarching theme from the student responses in both years showed that they were unprepared to meet with their advisor and were unclear on how to register for the upcoming semester. Following each session students reported a sense of understanding the process, *"...more comfortable and not so uninformed."* Topics ranged from transferring courses from another institution to declaring a minor to reading the undergraduate catalog. Overall students reported that the discussions at the sessions helped them to understand the importance of the decisions they make and the need to discuss options with their academic advisor.

As a result of student feedback a session highlighting academic integrity was added to the roster of Crimson Common Hours in the 2007-2008 academic year and was held again the next year. The university policy for academic integrity was shared with the participants, the discussion centered on the types of violations and the resulting consequences of violating the policy. Students understood plagiarism and cheating on an exam but were surprised to learn that sharing of computer files and accounts was also in violation of the policy. Several students stated the session provided them with "*...things I didn't know were violations*" while also providing them with tips on "*what to do when pressured by friends in class*" and how to "*decide what is right and wrong.*" The students in attendance stated they benefited from the discussion with their peers on academic integrity in the classroom. The students indicated that this session was enlightening in that they were unaware of the Academic Integrity Policy and the level of instances that could impact their academic progress.

Discussion at one of the Common Hours addressed social networking and the importance of presenting yourself in a positive manner via online technology. Students were receptive to the discussion; however most felt the topic was something that "*will help me in the future*" or that "*I already knew what we were talking about.*" Only a few students found the session to be applicable to their academics, in most cases this centered on the manner in which they corresponded with faculty via email. Several noted they would now be more aware of the messages they sent to faculty. While the session provided students with an awareness of their actions, they did not feel it would have a significant impact on their academic performance or selection of a major.

In the 2008-2009 academic year a representative from the Center for Student Life presented a session titled *True Colors*, a tool for personality identification. The purpose of the session was to help students identify their strengths and the ways in which they can adapt those strengths as they work in groups in the classroom. The overall response from students in the session was positive with students indicating the presentation helped them learn more about themselves. One student reported their results gave them "*an outlook on how I am and how others perceive me.*" Another student indicated the session would "*help with interviews and describing myself.*"

Students participating in the 2008-2009 academic year attended a session centered on the concept of mindfulness as a means of dealing with stress. A Counselor from the Counseling and Student Development Center engaged students in several yoga and meditation techniques. Following the session one student reported, "*life is easy when not stressed, learning is easy when not stressed!*" While students were uncomfortable at the start of the session their responses showed that the techniques were successful with one student indicating "*it made me feel all mush, like (the stress) was gone.*"

Department Chairpersons from the Music and Theater departments and the Nursing and Health and Physical Education Departments met to discuss program and academic major questions with the students during a session in the 2008-2009 year. The session provided students with an opportunity to ask questions related to specific majors and the requirements for acceptance into them. Students reported this session made a difference in the direction they took with their studies. After the session one

student conveyed that, *"my mom is a nurse and she's always been pushing nursing but I figured out nursing isn't for me."* Another determined that, *"I really want to be in the nursing program now!"* The students found that *"everything the speakers said was helpful and inspiring."* The opportunity to discuss careers and academic expectations with faculty at this session was the turning point for some students in their pursuit of an academic major.

The importance of becoming active in student organizations was highlighted in the 2007-2008 year with student response mixed. Several students provided that the session *"showed me organizations (that) are related to my major and (that) will help me grow within my major"* and that *"I didn't know how important joining organizations was."* The session was held in the Spring semester with students already identifying organizations that they were participating in, for one student this session *"encouraged me to get more involved with my time here at IUP."* The discussion helped one student see the importance of finding activities that will *"help me to be more outgoing."* Becoming active in student groups is one way for students to further develop their personal sense of belonging to a community, this the session reinforced the importance of participating.

A Common Hour session designed to help students prepare for finals was presented at the close of each academic semester. Presentations were made by a variety of speakers from across the campus including the Department of Developmental Studies and the Academic Support graduate assistants in each college. Tips and techniques for studying across the entire semester in preparation for finals were

provided by all speakers with students indicating the session provided information that *"will help me to work out my finals and study for the rest of the 4 years here at IUP."* During each session students were informed of the schedule for final exams during finals week with an emphasis that the schedule did not follow the semester class schedule. This tip was new information for most students with only a small number of students identifying that they *"know where finals are and how to prepare."* The sessions were helpful to the majority of students that attended and are considered a vital topic for student success; as such the topic remained as a Common Hour topic for both program years.

The Crimson Common Hours presented during both academic years were successful in meeting the needs of the students. As one student stated, *"Crimson Common Hours are full of surprises!"* Students participating in both years indicated that the topics presented in the Crimson Common Hours were helpful and impacted their academic success; as such it can be concluded that the sessions are as integral a part of the framework of the Crimson Connections Learning Community as the linked courses.

5.3.2 Focus Group Feedback

At the end of each semester students responded during a Focus Group discussion that the topics presented at the Common Hours were relevant to their growth as a student and member of the university community. Students participating in the focus group during the Fall 2007 semester (N=16) were asked if their participation in the program

helped them to become a member of the IUP community. A significant number (69%) indicated that their participation in the program had an impact on helping them to feel a part of the IUP community. Twenty-five percent responded that it was somewhat helpful. Responses from students in the Focus Group at the end of the Fall 2008 semester (N=15) were less certain about the impact of the program on their ability to become a member of the IUP community. Responses were evenly spread between the response choices of yes, no, and somewhat. Attendance at the Crimson Common Hours in 2007-2008 was higher than 2008-2009 (Table 5.2). This could account for the students in the 2007-2008 year expressing a stronger sense of community following their participation in the program. The purpose of the Crimson Common Hour was to enhance the sense of community among students, as such when students participate at a higher level in the activities the expectation is that stronger connections among those students will develop than among students that do not participate.

Table 5.2 *Crimson Common Hour Attendance*

Number of Common Hours Attended	AY07-08	AY08-09
	n = 48	n = 42
6 or more sessions	12 (25%)	7 (17%)
4 – 5 sessions	16 (33%)	8 (19%)
0 – 3 sessions	20 (42%)	27 (64%)

During both academic years the students reported finding the guest lecturers to be helpful. Of particular interest were those sessions that provided specific skills such as preparing for finals and stress management tips. Several students reported having

time to talk with others as a positive outcome of the Common Hours, thus allowing them to *"meet people that are now my best friends."*

One point that was not successful was the timing of the Common Hour meetings. Students consistently indicated that the time of the meetings did not meet their needs. As a result meeting times were altered in the second semester of the first year (Table 5.3). Alternative times in the second year were not deemed necessary as students did not express a concern; however attendance may have been impacted by the meeting times. Creating the alternative schedule allowed students to attend the sessions that did not conflict with their class schedule such as Marching Band practices in the fall semester and Chemistry labs in the spring semester.

Table 5.3 *Crimson Common Hour Meeting Schedule*

Program year	Meeting Time
Fall 2007	Thursdays, 5:00 pm – 6:00 pm
Spring 2008	Tuesdays, 5:30 pm – 6:30 pm <i>and</i> Wednesdays, 5:30 pm – 6:30 pm
Fall 2008	Wednesdays, 5:30 pm – 6:30 pm
Spring 2009	Wednesdays, 5:30 pm – 6:30 pm

Other changes that the students proposed during the Focus Groups included the timing of the topics. While all topics were generally perceived as positive, students indicated that presenting a session that provided tips to prepare for finals early in the fall semester might have proven more helpful. Test taking tips and study skills that were discussed during that session could have been used throughout the semester. During the Fall 2007 semester students requested more information on student organizations across campus. To meet this request a session in the spring was

scheduled that highlighted organizations across the colleges and included student members of the groups. Likewise, in the Fall 2007 semester several instances of plagiarism and cheating were discussed by a few students, in response to which a spring session addressing Academic Integrity was presented.

While academic success can be defined in many ways – high Cumulative Grade Point Average, number of credits attained, scholarly recognition – based on the data gathered during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years it can be concluded that the Crimson Connections Learning Community achieved its program goals. Based on student feedback the program overwhelmingly supported the students in their transition from high school to college, promoted academic success and helped them become a part of the university community.

5.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As a result of this study, recommendations for future research that can be conducted in conjunction with Crimson Connections include:

1. A follow-up study with students in the Academic Year 2007-2008 program to determine their potential for a 4-year or 5-year graduation, their level of academic success, their retention to the institution or college, and their future plans. There is a benefit to a long-term study with these students to determine the impact of participation in Crimson Connections across all levels of their academic career. The development of future programs to meet the specialized

needs of such populations would be well served by the collection of such data.

2. A second study would explore the sense of community building among participants in both academic years; the study would be designed to determine the impact of the activities outside of the linked courses framework on the student's successes. The study would seek to determine if the combination of academic and social activities influenced the student's retention and academic success.

APPENDIX A

CRIMSON COMMON HOUR ACTIVITY FEEDBACK SURVEY

Crimson Common Hour
Feedback Form

College: FA – HH
(circle one)

Activity _____ Date _____

1. My participation at tonight's Crimson Common hour provided me with useful information.

_____ Yes _____ No

Why?

2. This information will be helpful as I make choices in my academic career at IUP.

_____ Yes _____ No

Why?

3. At future Crimson Common Hours I would like to see...

**Please return your completed form to the before leaving tonight.
Thanks for your input. Be sure to let us know how things are going.**

APPENDIX B

END OF SEMESTER SURVEY

We hope that your participation in Crimson Connections has provided you with a variety of opportunities. We'd like to learn more about your impressions of the program. Please provide your responses to the questions below in order to be prepared for our focus group discussions.

1. I feel that my participation in Crimson Connections helped me to become a member of the IUP Community.

Yes No Somewhat Not sure

2. I feel that my participation in Crimson Connections has helped me to define a career path and/or choose of academic major.

Yes No Somewhat Not sure

3. Generally the activities were well prepared and organized.

Yes No Somewhat Not sure

4. I attended events from: (check all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> 6 o'clock Series	<input type="checkbox"/> Lively Arts Series
<input type="checkbox"/> Common Freshman Reader	<input type="checkbox"/> Student Success Workshops
<input type="checkbox"/> Student Organizations	<input type="checkbox"/> Other

_____ (specify)

_____ (specify)

5. Overall, what worked best to meet your needs?

6. Overall, what didn't meet your needs?

7. What would you change?

**Please return your completed form to the Assistant/Associate Dean
Enjoy the semester break! We'll see you in January.**

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