

Estimating the Effects of Living-Learning Community Participation on Black Students' Sense of Belonging at Predominantly White and Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Terrell Strayhorn*

Department of Educational Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA

Research Article

Received: 23-Apr-2020, Manuscript No. JES-23-9673; **Editor assigned:** 28-Apr-2020, PreQC No. JES-23-9673 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 12-May-2020, QC No. JES-23-9673; **Revised:** 19-July-2023, Manuscript No. JES-23-9673 (R); **Published:** 16-Aug-2023, DOI: 10.4172/2347-226X.12.2.001

***For Correspondence:**

Terrell Strayhorn, Department of Educational Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA

E-mail:

terrell.strayhorn@mail.waldenu.edu

Citation: Estimating the Effects of Living-Learning Community Participation on Black Students' Sense of Belonging at Predominantly White and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. RRJ Educ Stud. 2023;9:001.

Copyright: © 2023 Strayhorn T. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

ABSTRACT

Using data from a national administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), this study explored differences in living-learning community participation on black students' sense of belonging at historically black and predominantly white institutions. Ancova results showed statistically significant differences in black students' sense of belonging based on LLC participation controlling for gender, although affects varied by campus racial composition. Implications of educational policy and practice are delineated, along with recommendations for future research.

In terms of structure and organisation, LLCs today range widely. According to Matthews et al., LLCs are being used more frequently to deepen and enhance students' college experiences. As an illustration, Jessup-Anger et al. examined qualitative interview data from 8 sophomore students at a private Catholic PWI (5 women, 3 men). They discovered that students ascribed their LLC participation to their growing grasp of social justice problems and improved capacity for civic engagement. Additionally, students said that their LLC experiences had aided in the development of their social skills and sense of community.

Keywords: Community, Students, Black colleges, Campus racial composition

INTRODUCTION

Eliminating educational disparities is a major aim of equity-minded policies and practices in higher education. Racialized achievement differences like the “Black-white achievement gap” in K-12 education and stubbornly persistent gaps in college degree completion rates have garnered the attention of leading foundations, professional associations and state agencies. For instance, Lumina foundation has invested over \$100 million toward having 60% of Americans earn a college degree or certificate by 2025. Despite considerable progress, estimates suggest the need for 16.4 million more graduates in the next 5 years. To produce more graduates, proven strategies to increase postsecondary success for Underrepresented Minorities (URMs) must be implemented on a large scale ^[1].

The weight of empirical evidence suggests a number of effective strategies or interventions, one of which is Living-Learning Communities (LLCs). Prior research on LLCs has burgeoned since their emergence in the 1980s; today, LLCs vary considerably in terms of structure and organizational type ^[2]. LLCs are increasingly utilized to deepen and enrich students’ collegiate experiences. For example, Jessup-Anger, Armstrong, Kerrick and Siddiqui analyzed qualitative interview data from 8 sophomore students (5 women, 3 men) at a private, catholic PWI. They found that students attributed growth in their understanding of social justice issues and increased capacity for civic engagement to their LLC participation. Students also credited their LLC experiences with helping them to develop stronger community values and skills in making social connections ^[3].

Social connections and supportive relationships with others on campus have been consistently linked with college students’ satisfaction and sense of belonging. Sense of belonging refers to the “psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community”. And though a basic human need, it takes on heightened importance in college settings especially for racial/ethnic minorities in majority institutions such as blacks at PWIs. With notable exceptions, very few investigations have focused on the link between LLC participation and students’ sense of belonging. Hoffman et al. analyzed data from an east coast PWI and found that LLC students scored higher than non-LLC peers on sense of belonging. Similar results were found for LLC students at public, research-intensive institutions, but no studies exist comparing the influences of LLC participation on black students’ sense of belonging at HBCUs and PWIs ^[4].

This is the gap addressed by the present study. The purpose of this study was to estimate differences in the relationship between LC participation and sense of belonging in college for black students at HBCUs and PWIs. Because prior studies have shown differences across gender and race, we controlled for these variables or adjusted for them in the sampling strategy. Prior research has shown that a variety of factors, including elements of one’s campus environment, including students’ housing arrangements and learning environments, impact college students’ sense of belonging. In order to accomplish this, numerous colleges and universities created cultural centres, first-year seminars within year-long experiences and Living-Learning Communities (LLCs)¹ as high-impact practises (*i.e.*, time-intensive academic experiences that provide structured opportunities capable of catalysing growth) that link the academic and social aspects of college life, emphasise particular learning foci and provide supportive social networks for students. Such programmes are becoming more prevalent at HBCUs as well. Numerous academic, cognitive and socioemotional benefits accrue to LLC students over their non-LLC peers, according to existing studies ^[5].

Research and Reviews: Journal of Educational Studies

The on-campus, residential component of LLCs is crucial, according to causal studies, even though the majority of empirical evidence points to learning communities as effective and cutting-edge tools for reviving undergraduate education and fostering student success. Since LLCs first appeared in the 1980s, existing research has exploded in this area.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on analysis of large-scale data from the 2017 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), sponsored by the center for post-secondary research at Indiana university. The larger study surveyed 44,000 students enrolled at 650 U.S. universities across the nation, but this analysis is based on black respondents at HBCUs and PWIs only. Constraining the investigation in this way eliminated several mediating factors that threaten internal validity. A total of 17,326 black students were included in the sample, of which 71% were women and 29% were men, reflecting their representation nationally. Additional sample characteristics are summarized in Table 1 [6].

Table 1. Description of the analytic sample.

Characteristic	HBCU		PWI	
	N	%	N	%
Gender				
Women	2171	76	10137	70
Men	689	24	4320	30
Age				
19 or younger	1317	46	5124	36
20-23 years	969	34	3919	27
24 and older	547	19	5225	37
FG				
Yes	827	29	4707	33
No	2013	70	9641	67
Note: FG=First-generation status defined as neither parent attended college. Numbers may not equal 100 due to rounding				

Sense of belonging was assessed using five items. Individual responses to each item were averaged to create a composite scale ($\alpha=0.82$). For more information about the survey, items and psychometric properties. The appendix (available on the journal site) provides supplemental methodological information and analyses [7].

Differences in black students' SOB at PWIs by LLC participation

A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to compare black students' sense of belonging at PWIs by LLC participation, controlling for gender. Results indicate that black LLC students reported a higher sense of belonging ($M=44.35$, $SD=11.57$, $N=2,497$) than black non-LLC peers ($M=41.55$, $SD=12.43$, $N=9,209$) at PWIs, $F(1,11703)=103.14$, $p<0.01$, partial $\eta^2=0.01$ [8].

Differences in black students' SOB at HBCUs by LLC participation

A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to compare black students' sense of belonging at HBCUs by LLC participation, controlling for gender. Results indicate that black LLC students reported a higher sense of belonging ($M=42.16$, $SD=12.32$, $N=681$) than black non-LLC peers ($M=37.28$, $SD=12.44$, $N=1,893$) at HBCUs, $F(1,2571)=78.50$, $p<0.01$, partial $\eta^2=0.03$ [9].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to test for differences in black students' sense of belonging at HBCUs and PWIs by LLC participation [10]. Results yield a number of important conclusions. First, black LLC participants reported greater sense of belonging ratings than their same-race non-LLC peers, regardless of gender—in other words, LLCs work and these findings hold for both black men and women [11]. LLCs could serve as a within college source of support for black students, just as they do for white students. It may be that LLCs structure opportunities for black students to connect meaningfully with others (e.g., peers, faculty) on campus; those positive, supportive relations provide the social bonds that foster sense of belonging. And this seems true for both black men and women, which is good news in light of recent scholarship documenting the “Black male crisis” in higher education and racialized sexism faced by black women [12].

A second contribution of this study is what it suggests about the “conditional effects” of LLCs on black students' collegiate experiences. In this study, sense of belonging scores were higher, on average, for blacks at HBCUs compared to PWIs, with highest average scores for black LLC participants at HBCUs [13]. So it's not just that LLC participation is associated with stronger sense of belonging for blacks at both campus types, but LLCs may produce slightly stronger gains for blacks at HBCUs versus PWIs. That outcomes vary between blacks at HBCUs and PWIs is consistent with past research on smaller and locally-constructed survey samples. But, the fact that these differences emerged for black students' belonging across a large, multi-institutional sample underscores the importance of further understanding the structure, form and scalability of LLCs at diverse colleges [14].

Results provide additional evidence affirming the importance of supportive learning environments like LLCs for black students at both HBCUs and PWIs. Findings have a number of implications for practice. Housing professionals might consider LLCs an effective strategy for nurturing URM students' academic and social involvement, as a way of promoting college success. Provosts might consider these results when leading strategic planning efforts aimed at raising student retention rates. Because black students in LLCs felt a higher sense of belonging in college, especially those at HBCUs, a remedy for low retention may be promoting students' participation in LLCs that provide controlled environments for academic and social engagement [15].

Of course, prior research has shown that well-structured LLCs require considerable costs and logistics. Private foundations and government agencies might consult these findings when identifying funding priorities; launching campaigns to provide much-needed resources to minority-serving institutions like HBCUs to develop new or expand existing LLCs is one way to promote black students' sense of belonging, which, in turn, is associated with greater retention and persistence rates. It might also be a fruitful, albeit indirect, way to drive achievement of national college completion goals.

CONCLUSION

Like all studies, this project has limitations. One limitation of this study is that it lacked a randomized controlled design. Students do not necessarily opt to participate in LLCs at random. Future researchers might consider addressing this issue in terms of design. Randomization is necessary to control for variations in participants choices. Another limitation is that the database does not permit comparison by LC type (e.g., discipline, service-focused). Future researchers should develop indicators that allow disaggregation by program type. In sum, the findings of this study suggest that LLCs may serve as an important complement to black students' experiences in college regardless of gender, although the influence varies by campus racial composition.

REFERENCES

1. Inkelas KK, et al. Living-learning programs and first-generation college students' academic and social transition to college. *Res High Edu*. 2007;48:403-34.
2. Inkelas KK, et al. Undergraduate living-learning programs and student outcomes. *High Edu Hand Theory Res*. 2011;26:1-55.
3. Jessup-Anger J, et al. Exploring students' perceptions of their experiences in a social justice living-learning community. *J Student Affair Res Prac*. 2019;56:194-206.
4. Reeder MC, et al. Motivational and judgment predictors of African American academic achievement at PWIs and HBCUs. *J College Stud Develop*. 2013;54:29-42.
5. Spanierman LB, et al. Living learning communities and students' sense of community and belonging. *J Stud Affair Res Pract*. 2013;50:308-325.
6. Feldman, et al. What matters in college? Four critical years revisited. *J High Edu*. 1994:615-622.
7. Astin AW. Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *J Col Stud Pers*. 1984;25:297-308.
8. Astin AW, et al. Undergraduate science education: The impact of different college environments on the educational pipeline in the sciences. Final report.
9. Browne MN, et al. The unnecessary tension between learning communities and intellectual growth. *Col Stud J*. 2005;39:775-84.
10. Cabrera AF, et al. College persistence: Structural equations modeling test of an integrated model of student retention. *J High Edu*. 1993;64:123-39.
11. Damminger JK. Transformative learning and leading through a comprehensive learning community experience for undeclared freshmen. Rowan Univ. 2004.
12. Flynn MA, et al. The impact of a living learning community on first-year engineering students. *Euro J Eng Edu*. 2016;41:331-41.
13. Everett JW, et al. Promoting student connections and retention through an on-campus residential learning community for first-year underrepresented and low-income students. *Ann Confer Expos*. 2012;25-1088.
14. Inkelas KK, et al. Measuring outcomes of living-learning programs: Examining college environments and student learning and development. *J Gener Edu*. 2006;55:40-76.
15. Inkelas KK, et al. Different by design: An examination of student outcomes among participants in three types of living-learning programs. *J Col Stud Develop*. 2003;44:335-68.