This interactive session will describe course activities, teaching methodologies, and assessment tools that were used with learning communities between Freshman Seminars (for Computing majors and Business majors) and English Composition from 2006 through 2009. Participants will learn how to implement and assess similar experiences at their institutions. Assessments included writing performance, sense of belonging, course value, and retention rates. We will discuss assessment results, improvements made each year, and outline future plans including service-learning.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA

The University of South Alabama (USA), which enrolls almost 15,000 students, has awarded more than 65,000 undergraduate, graduate, medical, and professional degrees since 1964. Located on the Gulf Coast of Alabama, USA awards degrees in Allied Health Professions, Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, Engineering, Nursing, Computing, Continuing Education, and Medicine.

THE PRESENTERS

Dawn McKinney and Karen Peterson are the Co-Founders and Co-Directors of the University of South Alabama’s Center for Academic Service-Learning and Civic Engagement (2007) and are leaders in the First Year Experience, Learning Communities, and Service-Learning at South Alabama. Peterson has been teaching English Composition and Literature since 2004 and McKinney has been teaching for the School of Computer and Information Sciences since 1997. McKinney is also Coordinator of the Freshman Seminar and Senior Instructor for the School of Computer and Information Sciences and has been conducting research on student belonging and other affective factors related to student success and retention for the past ten years with Leo Denton, Assistant Professor of Computer Information Systems at the University of Mobile. McKinney and Denton’s papers have focused on affective objectives, team skills, the first year experience, learning communities, and service-learning. Leo Denton has been leading the statistical analysis for McKinney and Peterson’s assessment since 2006. McKinney and Peterson have been conducting learning communities with English and Computing since 2006 and presented their preliminary work at the International Conference on the First Year Experience in Kona, Hawaii in 2007.

SUMMARY

National trends as well as our institution's experience indicate that retention rates in computing disciplines are low. To address this issue beginning in Fall 2006 the School of Computer and Information Sciences at the University of South Alabama formed a partnership with the English department. Freshmen computing majors were invited to enroll in a learning community consisting of an English composition class and a Freshman Seminar class for computing majors. In the learning community composition class, the students were given technology-based writing assignments. Our assessment indicated that the students benefited from this experience with higher writing scores despite lower ACT scores and lower pretest scores than students in the control group. Surveys indicated, however, that the students did not like the specific computing-related writing assignments. We reported on this first year at the 2007 FYE international conference. This effort has continued with modifications in each subsequent fall term.

In Fall 2007, students listed the most challenging issues facing them in their first semester. In teams the students then wrote, directed, and performed skits on these issues. Their performances were scheduled near the end of the semester and all freshmen students at the university were invited to attend. Using the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory, we measured value, interest, and perceived competence specific to these issues in pretests and posttests.

In Fall 2008, we introduced a major university-wide service-learning and civic engagement experience which was led by one of the Freshman Seminar classes and contributed to by another. Students fulfilled course objectives like collaboration, organization, critical thinking, and time management to plan the Martin Luther King Day of Service for the university and Mobile community. Also that Fall, two more learning communities
with Business and English were assessed for quality of writing and belonging. All learning communities continued in the Fall of 2009 and are part of our assessment.

In Fall 2010, pending the awarding of a grant proposal, we are planning a major multidisciplinary service-learning project which will be assessed, and the results will be presented at the National Service-Learning Conference.

In this interactive session, participants will be provided with the details of our experience and will be guided in a process to plan their own version of our experience to take back to their institutions. We will share the results of the assessment, and what we have learned in our four years including a discussion of challenges to be overcome.

**IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH**

Retention rates in the computing disciplines are low. Improving retention and recruitment in computing and other fields is a national priority of organizations like the National Science Foundation. At the University of South Alabama, a learning community with English was introduced as an option for one of the computer Freshman Seminar classes. This strategy was based on (a) enhancing belonging as a component of retention (Tinto’s model), (b) the need for writing skills to foster career advancement (Paula Jacobs), and (c) increased performance due to course relevance (Keller’s ARCS model). Our assessment indicated that the students did benefit from this learning community experience.

This effort and assessment of the interdisciplinary learning community has continued in each subsequent fall term. In Fall 2007, service-learning was added as a component of the learning community. Using the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI), we measured the students' value, interest, and perceived competence. Improvements from pretests to posttests were observed. Specific ideas from student surveys were also used to enhance the following learning community experience in Fall 2008.

In Fall 2008, we introduced a major university-wide service-learning and civic engagement experience. Students fulfilled course objectives like collaboration, organization, critical thinking, and time management to plan a service day for the university and Mobile metropolitan community. Also that Fall, two more learning communities with Business and English were added for assessment.

With the wealth of data accumulated in this study, we will indicate the effect of learning communities on freshmen retention, writing, and institutional integration. We also will show the results of introducing service-learning to entering freshmen. We will show the effectiveness of these practices. Innovative approaches like early introduction of service-learning and the use of learning communities to bolster freshmen retention have been the subject of a new trend in research and subsequent publication.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

Learning communities between Freshman Seminar classes (for Computing majors and Business majors) with English Composition were assessed over a four year period. Data was collected to measure student belonging, the development of writing skills, the value of the experience, and retention rates. This strategy was based on (a) enhancing belonging as a component of retention (Tinto’s model), (b) the need for writing skills to foster career advancement (Paula Jacobs), and (c) increased performance due to relevance (Keller’s ARCS model).
Instruments to measure belonging included Terenzini’s and Pascarella’s Institutional Integration Scale and a survey developed by the presenters which measures the quantity and quality of student relationships. Writing skills were measured by funded assessments made by multiple professional graders. A common scoring rubric was used with all student papers for each term. ACT scores and GPA were also factored into the evaluations as well as gender and race. Qualitative data from instructor observations was used to evaluate each experience and to make improvements each year. The Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) was used to measure value, interest, and perceived competence in Fall 2007 when we introduced service-learning to the learning community. We plan to further enhance the service-learning component of the learning community by introducing a multidisciplinary service-learning project in Fall 2010 and continue our assessment efforts which will add reflection papers as an additional assessment.

**ASSESSMENT TOOLS**

**WRITING RUBRIC**

- Focus: Paper has a clear central point.
- Development and Support: Major ideas logically developed.
- Organization: Essay’s parts - clearly interrelated.
- Style: Manner of expression is clear, concise, formal.
- Mechanics: Grammar, spelling, punctuation is good.

- Overall Quality: Essay is reasonable, clear, and credible.

**INTRINSIC MOTIVATION INVENTORY**

The Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) is a multidimensional instrument which assesses participants’ interest/enjoyment, perceived competence, effort, value/usefulness, felt pressure and tension, and perceived choice while performing a given activity, thus yielding six subscale scores. The IMI items can be modified slightly to fit specific activities. For example, an item such as "I tried very hard to do well at this activity" can be changed to "I tried very hard to manage my time" without effecting its reliability or validity. Below is a sample of how this instrument was used to measure these factors as they related to Freshman Seminar issues.

**Sample of Intrinsic Motivation Inventory**

| I think I will be pretty good at keeping a schedule while in college. |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| not at all true | somewhat true | very true |

| I expect that after staying focused and motivated for a while, I will feel pretty competent. |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| not at all true | somewhat true | very true |

| I think I will be pretty good at having a good attitude toward other students. |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| not at all true | somewhat true | very true |

INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATION SCALE

Pascarella and Terenzini’s Institutional Integration Scale is based on Tinto’s Model of Retention below.

TINTO’S MODEL OF RETENTION

Pascarella and Terenzini’s Institutional Integration Scale is based on this model

Sample items from the Institutional Integration Scale

I am satisfied with the opportunities to meet and interact informally with faculty members.
[ ] Strongly disagree [ ] Disagree [ ] Don’t know [ ] Agree [ ] Strongly agree

The student friendships I have developed at this university have been personally satisfying.
[ ] Strongly disagree [ ] Disagree [ ] Don’t know [ ] Agree [ ] Strongly agree

It has been difficult for me to meet and make friends with other students.
[ ] Strongly disagree [ ] Disagree [ ] Don’t know [ ] Agree [ ] Strongly agree
Count of university friends
Levels of university friendships
1 = I know the person’s first name
2 = We communicate while at the university
3 = We communicate outside of the university
4 = We are good acquaintances
5 = We are good friends

Sample of instrument

Friendship Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persons in this class who I knew BEFORE this class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paula Jones</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Level of Relationship THEN</th>
<th>Level of Relationship NOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paula Jones</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan Smith</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sammy Cohen</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kareem</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Institutional Data
In addition to data from our instruments, we also used data provided by the institution in order to measure and control for GPA, ACT, gender, grades, persistence, and ethnicity.

DESCRIPTIONS OF COURSES IN THE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Freshman Seminar for the School of Computer and Information Sciences
A course for first-time freshmen that assists with maximizing the student’s potential to achieve academic success and adjust responsibly to the individual and interpersonal challenges presented by college life. An introduction to the nature of higher education and a general orientation to the functions and resources of South Alabama is provided. This discipline-specific version of the Freshman Seminar integrates an introduction to the three degree programs, Computer Science (CS), Information Systems (IS), and Information Technology (IT), in the School of Computer and Information Sciences (CIS). In-class participation, attendance to university functions and participation outside of class, reading and short writing assignments, group activities and projects, and a written final exam are required. (2 credit hours, meets twice a week for 50 minutes)
English Composition I
Prepares students for diverse types of college writing. Covers the writing process, general criteria used to evaluate writing, collaborative writing, and rhetoric, especially audience analysis.
(3 credit hours, meets three times a week for 50 minutes)

English Composition II
Prepares students for college writing by focusing on argumentation, research, and the critical thinking required to argue effectively. Students must earn a C or higher in EH 102 to fulfill the University requirement for composition.
(3 credit hours, meets three times a week for 50 minutes)

Introduction to Business and Management
A survey of the field of business, including profit-seeking firms, not-for-profit organizations, and new businesses created by entrepreneurs. Emphasis on the business environment, organization and management, current economic and international issues, and career opportunities. Societal and ethical issues are also examined. The course is required of all incoming freshmen and any entering transfer student with less than 15 hours.
(3 credit hours, meets twice a week for 50 minutes)

Freshman Seminar for the College of Arts and Sciences
A course for first-year students majoring in the College of Arts and Sciences that assists with maximizing the student's potential to achieve academic success and to adjust responsibility to the individual and interpersonal challenges presented by college life. Taught in small groups, the course provides an introduction to the nature of higher education and a general orientation to the functions and resources of the University. (2 credit hours, meets 110 minutes once a week)

THE SERVICE-LEARNING COMPONENT
For the 9-11 National Day of Service and Remembrance the English 101 class does a paper on misconceptions. We pre-write and discuss beliefs about groups that we do not know much about while focusing on our upcoming service-learning projects. The learning community decided to do service-learning on September 11th by tutoring patrons at the Public Library on computer skills. Their preconceived idea was that only the elderly would need help, so they were surprised to discover that all ages needed tutoring. They wrote about their experience and misconceptions in a major reflective essay.

Other Freshmen Seminar classes participated as part of their service-learning objective by helping an Eagle Scout build an outdoor classroom on campus, planting a garden with local elementary students, and participating in a service project with kids from a school for autism.

For the Martin Luther King Day of Service, the learning community planned a service-learning project around their computer skills. They designed a computer workshop for residents of a women's transitional shelter. These women were previously homeless and were learning skills to make them ready for the job market.
EXAMPLE OF A SKIT PROGRAM CREATED BY THE STUDENTS

Produced by
Dawn McKinney and Karen Peterson
with special thanks to the
University of South Alabama Library

To be or not to be a procrastinator

Cody Boyd and Anthony Johnson, Directors
Jesse Banning and Jason Williams, Actors
Adam Anzalone and Alvin Chatman, Writers
Daniel Thames and Darrel Wright, Designers

Library Auditorium, University of South Alabama
Mobile, Alabama

SUMMARY OF OUR ASSESSMENT

Assessment using the Institutional Integration Scale, the Friendship Scale, and the Writing Rubric, for our first year, Fall 2006, showed increases in the sense of belonging, improved writing, and higher grades for the learning communities. With the elimination of the discipline-based writing assignments and the addition of the skits for a university-wide service-learning component, in 2007, we found much higher writing scores for the learning community group. In 2008, when we added a community-wide service-learning component (MLK Day of Service) and a common book, we found increased retention rates until the students were finished with their sophomore year. In Fall 2009, we added a computing discipline-specific team project and the 911 Day of Service and Remembrance service-learning component and found a significant positive difference in student success in the learning community group.

PLANS FOR FALL 2010

Our plans for our learning communities in the Fall 2010 will include what we have discovered to be the most beneficial components based on our assessments these past four years. The skits, a team project, a common book, service-learning, and a coordinated curriculum between the courses in the learning community. We will also have a very specific assessment plan and will investigate a methodology for continued student support beyond the first year.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


20) McKinney, Dawn, Peterson, Karen and Leo Denton, “‘We Go Together’: Discipline-Based Learning Community Leads to Positive Developments for Students,” Presentation at the 20th International Conference on The First-Year Experience, Kona, Hawaii, July 9 - 12, 2007


**Learning Communities Collaboration Planning Exercise**

*Instructions*: Two to three instructors teaching different courses (one should be a Freshman Seminar) identify common objectives, ideas for activities or assignments which would promote the common objectives, and ideas for how the students could be evaluated for a grade. Service-learning could also be incorporated into the ideas for activities. The first row is our example. Your group fills in the next row with your learning community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses</th>
<th>Common Objectives</th>
<th>Ideas for promoting the common objectives</th>
<th>Evaluation Methods for student grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computing Freshman Seminar and English Composition</td>
<td>Writing, critical thinking, connecting to the university and its resources, time management, organization, collaboration through team work and peer review groups, study skills</td>
<td>Instructor collaboration on assignments that will result in essay writing. Common service-learning project that can be computer skill based with reflection writing to meet an English prompt.</td>
<td>Done by both instructors as both will grade participation in service-learning project. English instructor grades quality of reflective writing while Computing instructor evaluates quality of experience through verbal reflection and assessment survey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>