

Longitudinal Study of Learning Communities in Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering

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Abstract

In 1998, our department turned to the pedagogical innovation termed “learning communities” in an effort to enhance student retention and to bring coherence and meaning to our first-year student curriculum. We have found that our learning community has provided an opportunity for agricultural engineering students to become involved in the Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering (ABE) department from the moment they arrive on campus. Not only has the learning community helped us to increase our retention from 41.9% in 1998 to 95% in 2001, it has helped us to address many of our program objectives including students’ abilities to function on multi-disciplinary teams, communicate effectively, and have knowledge of important contemporary issues. Results of our assessment efforts, which encompass both quantitative and qualitative strategies, suggest that students are overwhelmingly satisfied with the program, are involved in our department, and are successful in their academic progress toward their engineering or technology degree.

A brief look at the literature

With a history that can be traced to an experimental educational program in the 1920s (the Meiklejohn Experimental College at the University of Washington), learning communities can now be found at four to five hundred colleges and universities across the nation.¹ According to Smith, “Learning communities are a broad structural innovation that can address a variety of issues from student retention to curriculum coherence, from faculty vitality to building a greater sense of community within our colleges.” Learning communities usually involve purposive groupings of students and coordinated scheduling. In addition, they may involve coordinated approaches to learning and an emphasis on connecting material across disciplinary boundaries.²

As Tinto³ points out, the learning community courses for which students co-register are not random; rather, “they are typically connected by an organizing theme, which gives meaning to their linkage. The point of the theme is to engender coherent interdisciplinary...learning that is not easily attainable through enrollment in unrelated, stand-alone courses” (p. 2). Despite the age of many learning community programs, Tinto reports that current perceptions of learning communities have been based largely on anecdotal evidence and institutional reports or assessments described at conferences or national meetings. Recently, however, a study was conducted for the National Center of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment that suggests learning communities impact student learning in several ways:

1. Learning community students formed study groups that extended beyond the classroom.
2. Learning community students became more actively involved in their learning than did other students.
3. Learning community students perceived their learning experience was enriched by the other learning community participants.
4. Learning community students “persisted at a substantially higher rate” (than comparable students in a traditional curriculum).
5. Learning community students perceived themselves as more engaged academically and socially.
6. Learning community students reported an increased sense of responsibility for their own learning as well as the learning of their peers (p. 12).

The study reported by Tinto is important and offers a look at students’ experiences and perceptions in two types of institutions where learning communities have been especially nurtured: community colleges and large, urban commuter campuses; however, many other types of higher educational settings were not included in the study. For our purposes, we are most interested in large, research oriented land-grant universities, like Iowa State University, places where students often have difficulty becoming engaged in the university.⁴ To that end, we have been conducting an on-going assessment of our learning community, the results of which we will report in this paper.

The ABE LC at Iowa State University

In our department, the umbrella term Agricultural & Biosystems Engineering Learning Community (ABE LC) has evolved to now encompass two complementary undergraduate programs available to our first- and second-year students who are majoring in agricultural engineering or agricultural systems technology: the ABE *learning* community, which is created by having students co-enroll for specially selected linked courses, and the ABE *living learning* community, a reserved portion of a specific residence hall. Other features of the ABE learning community include peer mentors and tutors, faculty-student dinners, and student service learning opportunities. The ABE LC has been described in detail in previously published papers.^{5,6,7} A brief overview will be given here to provide the necessary background for this paper.

Overview of the ABE Learning Community Initiative

The Department of Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering (ABE) at Iowa State University administers two separate curricula, the Agricultural Engineering (AE) curriculum in the College of Engineering, and the Agricultural Systems Technology (AST) curriculum in the College of Agriculture. The learning community was designed to enhance our students’ academic and social lives, in addition to providing an opportunity for several of our students from our two majors to have at least one class together (first-year composition). Comprehensive objectives, as well as specific ABE LC objectives were designed to guide our program development and on-going assessment.

ABE Learning Community Objectives

The following comprehensive objectives guide the ABE LC initiative:

- To build community for entering first-year students within the Agricultural Engineering (AE) and Agricultural Systems Technology (AST) curricula
- To increase the retention of the first-year students in the AE and AST programs
- To increase recruitment of students into the ABE curricula, especially underrepresented students (women and minorities)
- To enhance learning and team skills using collaborative, learning-based educational methodology in the learning community courses
- To improve written communication skills by creating a writing link between the first-year composition courses and other technical courses in the AE and AST curricula

Additionally, we created the following specific objectives, which have served as tangible guides for program planning:

- To build excitement for the fields of engineering and technology
- To increase student involvement within the department of ABE
- To increase student interaction with the ABE faculty
- To increase student interaction with ABE upper-level students
- To have students learn about the differences between the options within the AE and AST curricula
- To develop team skills through the use of collaborative, learning-based assignments
- To introduce students to various problems (areas of interest) within the agricultural engineering and technology field
- To experience hands-on laboratories related to the AE and AST options
- To increase involvement in professional societies and student branches
- To introduce technical writing skills during the first year of study
- To make first-year composition courses more meaningful to students
- To establish career development/job preparation
- To receive academic guidance related to curriculum issues

These general and specific ABE LC objectives were designed to help our department meet the following college and departmental objectives:

College of Engineering Undergraduate and Learning Objectives:

- In order to transition from a teaching- to a learning-based educational system, at least 75 percent of engineering faculty members will use collaborative, learning-based educational methodology in their courses.
- Total bachelor's degrees awarded will be 900 per year with approximately 35 percent to women and 8 percent to underrepresented minorities.

This paper will focus on the outcomes and objectives associated with the agricultural engineering (AE) curriculum. We have had an additional two years of experience with integrating AE students into a learning community relative to AST students. Future papers will discuss results from the AST portion of the learning community.

Departmental Undergraduate and Learning Objectives:

The objective of the academic program in agricultural engineering is to produce graduates who should have:

- An ability to apply knowledge of mathematics, science, and engineering in solving engineering problems
- An ability to design and conduct experiments, and to analyze and interpret experimental data
- An ability to function on multi-disciplinary teams
- An ability to identify, formulate, and solve engineering problems related to production, processing, storage, handling, distribution, and use of food and other biological products worldwide, and the responsible management of the environment and natural resources
- An understanding of professional and ethical responsibility
- An ability to use the techniques, skills, and engineering tools needed for engineering practice
- A recognition of the need for, and an ability to engage in, life-long learning
- An ability to communicate effectively
- The knowledge to understand impacts of engineering solutions locally, nationally, and globally
- A knowledge of important contemporary issues
- A demonstrated knowledge of agricultural and/or biological sciences, and natural resource topics appropriate for a chosen option area

Learning Community Course Links

The primary support for our LC are course links. By having students take a common set of linked courses, we hope to create community and meaning for our incoming first-year students. Students must enroll for two of the three classes in the learning community core in order to participate. Listed below are the course links for the first-year students in agricultural engineering (AE).

AE First-Year Learning Community Core

Fall 1999, 2000 & 2001

- Engr 101 (R cr.)[†] Engineering Orientation for AE Students
- Engr 170 (3 cr.) Engineering Graphics and Design
- Engl 104 (3 cr.) First-Year Composition I (course link with Engr 170)

Spring 2000, 2001 & 2002

- A E 110 (1 cr.) Experiencing Agricultural & Biosystems Engineering
- Engr 160 (3 cr.) Engineering Problem Solving with Computational Laboratory
- Engl 105 (3 cr.) First-Year Composition II (course link with AE 110 & Engr 160)

[†] R cr. is an abbreviation for *required credit*. Engineering 101 is a course that all engineering students must take, but it is a course for which students receive no formal course credit.

Importantly, due to university placement policies, not all students are required to take English 104 and English 105. At Iowa State University (ISU), students are placed into first-year composition based on their ACT scores; therefore, many of our students majoring in engineering test out of English 104 due to their high ACT scores. In addition, some students bring college credit for English when they matriculate from high school; therefore, not all ABE students take English 104 or even English 105 at ISU. Because the numbers of students who take first-year composition varies and is usually slightly (or some semesters more than slightly) different than the group of students enrolled in the linked engineering courses, AST and AE students are frequently placed in the same first-year composition sections, a strategy needed to fill one section of English (26 students). We had originally hoped that combining AE and AST students into one section of English 104 would help to create community between these two groups of students and have continued the practice because the students do appear to enjoy and thrive in the environment. Engineering 101, 160, and 170 are multi-section courses at ISU; however, we offer ABE specific sections for our students that are primarily taught by ABE faculty. This strategy not only enables us to cluster our students into one course, it also allows us to adjust the curricula to include topics and projects of particular interest to ABE students. Agricultural Engineering 110 is a experiential introductory course that is unique to our department and was described previously⁸. Tutoring for math and physics courses is also provided for AE LC participants.

Link with the English Department

The link between the engineering and English curricula allows ABE students to address their communication competency at an early stage in their programs. Originally, we worked with the Department of English to link special sections of first-year composition courses (English 104 and English 105) with the ABE curricula. What has resulted are composition courses that have an agricultural and biosystems engineering and technology theme underlying the composition curriculum. These specialized composition courses allow ABE students to read and write about subjects related to agriculture, engineering, and technology, instead of the more general topics common in first-year composition courses. Importantly, we have also adjusted the curricula for the engineering courses to incorporate an increased emphasis on writing. In this rich environment, writing is introduced as an important life skill.

Five objectives related to the ABE LC guide the first-year composition curricula:

- To begin to understand the integrated nature of communication within the agricultural engineering and technology profession
- To learn academic writing processes, techniques, and skills
- To learn basic technical writing skills
- To begin to understand the concept of audience analysis
- To learn social skills related to team building and team success

Additionally, the following more traditional first-year composition objectives are also addressed: to develop strategies for reading critically, to increase analytical skills applied to professional disciplinary discourses, to develop strategies to revise your [the student's]

own writing, to adapt your [the student's] writing to specific purposes and readers, to use a variety of informational sources, to use a variety of organizational strategies, and to avoid errors that distract or confuse readers.

Program Evolution

The ABE LC has evolved in many ways over the last three academic years. During the first year (1999), the modifications made by the English instructor in the first year composition courses were significantly more than those made by the engineering faculty in the engineering linked courses. However, after observing several English class periods, the engineering instructor gradually learned more about how the English material could be integrated into his engineering course. An example of this is the use of in-class student peer review. The peer review process and materials were originally used in English104 as tools for students to provide meaningful feedback to each other prior to an assignment's due date. This activity and the associated materials were adapted and implemented in Engineering 170 at the end of the first semester (Fall 1999) with a written assignment accompanying an open-ended team design project. During the second (2000) and third (2001) years, the engineering faculty member in the LC links took on more of a leadership role in developing more meaningful connections between the linked courses. This became necessary due to the turnover from semester to semester in the English instructors.[‡]

An additional key development after year one was the establishment of a sophomore learning community. We had not intended to develop a learning community for non-first-year students; however, we accommodated the students' requests to create an advanced ABE LC. Presently, the sophomore LC involves a clustering of courses for which the students can elect to co-register; however, there are not the strong between-course linkages as is the case in the first-year LC. As more ABE faculty are becoming involved with the ABE LC program, we are encouraging the development of such interdisciplinary links.

Assessment of the program has also evolved over the last three years with the development of more focused pre- and post- surveys, focus groups, and the use of new competency based software for assessing student outcomes related to ABET.

Assessment of the ABE LC

Since the beginning of the ABE LC, we have used a number of assessment tools to evaluate the successes and the opportunities for improvement in our learning community. Importantly, we have hired a doctoral student for each of the past two years who is dedicated to coordinating and implementing our assessment program. This position has been funded through a competitive university grant that funds much of our learning community initiative. Notably, our assessment program is approved through our

[‡] First-year composition courses are frequently taught by graduate students or by adjunct staff, which has made it difficult to establish a long-term relationship with any one instructor. We have had four different composition instructors since the learning community was implemented.

university human subjects committee. Following the discussion of our assessment methods, we will present the findings from our research regarding the student participants.

Assessment Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative assessment methods have been used for data collection. Specifically, we have gathered information through student records (retention, grade point, academic progress), student and peer mentor surveys, student and peer mentor focus groups, and student writing samples.

Student Records. Student records are an example of assessment data that is readily available, but that is often left untapped. Presently, we have used student records to track retention rate. In the future, we intend to use this data to track students' academic achievement and progress. Importantly, our students have given us their permission (via a consent form) to review this information for the purpose of assessing our learning community initiative.

Surveys. We have found surveys to be an easy, efficient, and effective way to gather information from our learning community participants. A combination of forced answer Likert-type questions combined with open-ended questions provides us an opportunity to assess our target objectives and to gather meaningful reflective comments from the students. The data is useful for program planning on a semester-by-semester basis. In addition, we have maintained continuity in the survey tools, which has allowed us to compare data from year to year.

Focus Groups. We began using focus groups in the Fall 2000 semester as a method to augment our survey data. Focus groups are a qualitative research method which have high face validity and which are relatively inexpensive and time efficient.⁹ For each focus group session, we recruit 5-9 students, a size we have found manageable yet large enough to foster between participant dialogue. If the size of a focus group is too large, the group is likely to fragment and participants may begin to have more than one conversation. Importantly, peer mentors involved with the learning community and faculty members are not placed in focus groups with students due to the hierarchical imbalance between the groups. According to Morgan,¹⁰ participants in a homogeneous group are more likely to speak freely about a topic. The focus groups are conducted by our doctoral student researcher, an individual with whom the students are comfortable yet who is not responsible for students' academic progress. This individual also processes the focus group transcripts so the anonymity of the students is protected.

Writing Samples. A rather unique aspect of our assessment program has been the collection of student writing samples. Because writing is such an important feature of our learning community, we saw the students' writing activities and assignments as potential sources for gathering important assessment data. Particularly, we have found several of the students' first-year composition assignments as rich sources of information regarding the students' perceptions of their learning community experience. Again, the students have given us permission to use these documents in our LC assessment activities.

Findings regarding student participants

Our assessment program has yielded large amounts of data, a result that has both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, we have a wealth of information from which to draw; however, that volume of data has been a bit unwieldy to process. At this time we have been most interested in discovering if the LC has in fact helped us to achieve the five comprehensive objectives guiding our LC initiative. We have strong evidence addressing four of the five objectives:

1. The ABE LC fosters an increased sense of community students majoring in the ABE department. (Objective 1: To build community for entering first-year students within the AE and AST curricula.)
2. ABE students persist at a substantially higher rate than ABE students did prior to the LC initiative. (Objective 2: To increase the retention of the first-year students in the AE and AST programs.)
3. Students who have participated in the ABE LC report that the LC has enhanced their academic experience and success; however, some students report being tired of spending too much time with the student cohort. (Objective 4: To enhance learning and team skills using collaborative, learning-based educational methodology in the learning community courses.)
4. Students report that the Fall 2000 first-year linked learning community courses (English 104/Engineering 170) helped them to perceive the importance of first-year composition and that this linked course experience has helped them in a future technical course (Engineering 160). (Objective 5: To improve written communication skills by creating a writing link between the first-year composition courses and other technical courses in the AE and AST curricula.)

Increased sense of community.

Evidence of community building in the department is a comprehensive objective linked to several of the specific LC objectives. Specifically, we believe excitement for the AE and AST fields, increased departmental involvement, increased student/faculty interaction, increased lower level/upper level student interaction, and increased involvement in professional societies and student branches all suggest students have an increased sense of community with the department.

Results from surveys conducted at the end of the fiscal year for 1999 and 2000 provide the evidence of the community building taking place from the student perspective. Students were asked to respond to statements related to the AE LC objectives. For all five statements shown in Figure 1, on the average, the students agreed to strongly agreed.

Agricultural Engineering LC Student Perceptions

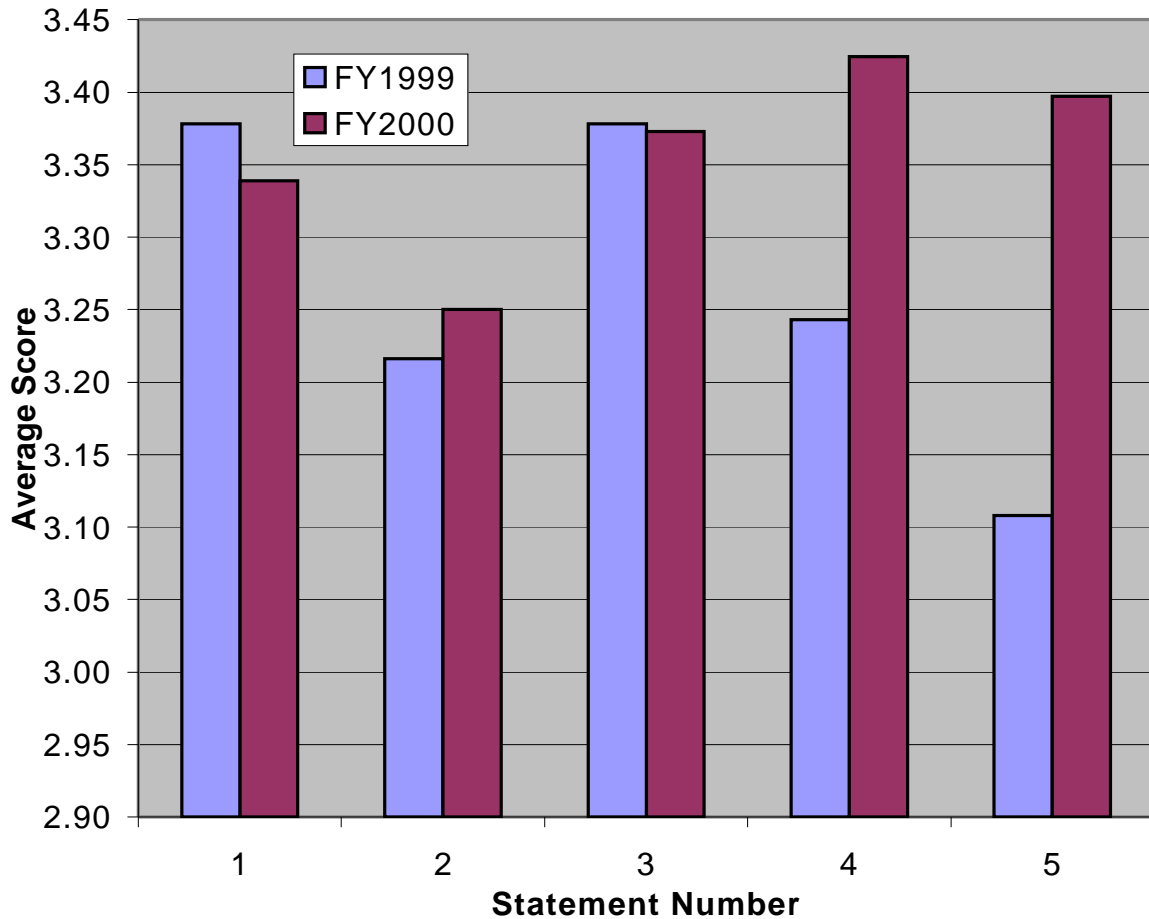


Figure 1. Average response to the following ABE learning community statements (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree):

1. I am excited to be a part of the field of engineering and technology.
2. I have been involved with the ABE Department this year.
3. I have interacted with the ABE faculty this year.
4. I have interacted with upper-class ABE students this year.
5. I have become involved in a professional society or a student organization.

One way we have measured students' levels of comfort in the department is to ask them the following survey question: "About how many faculty members in ABE do you know well enough to engage in a conversation?" As Figure 2 shows below, by the end of their sophomore year, seventy-five percent of the 1999-2000 students felt they knew more than four ABE faculty members well enough to engage in a conversation.

Student familiarity with faculty

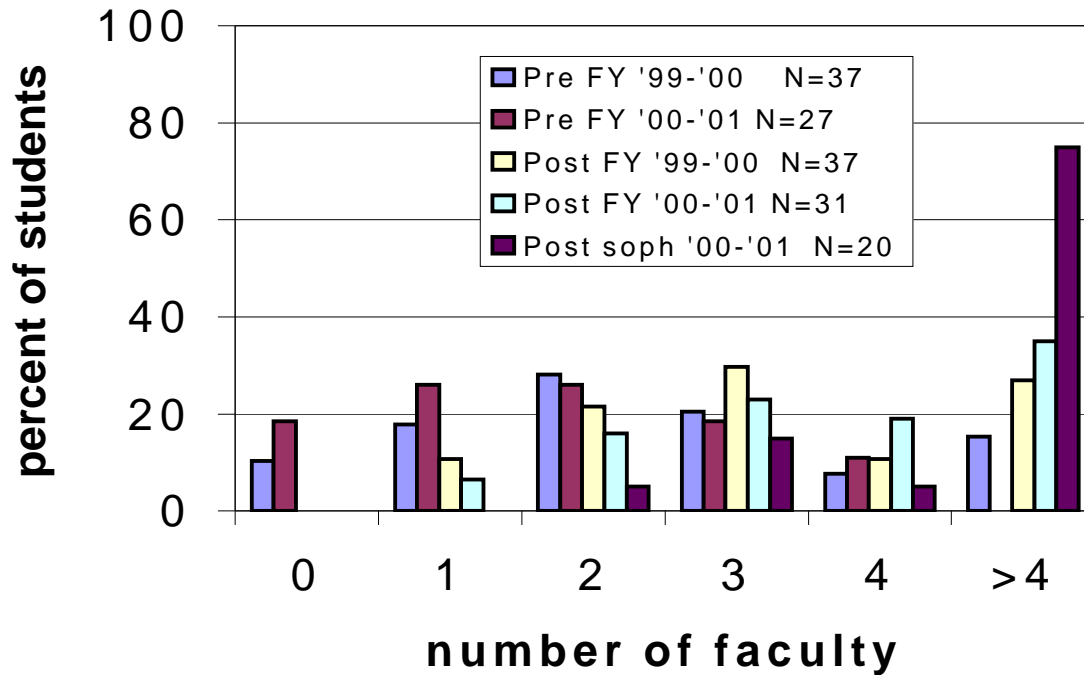


Figure 2. Student familiarity with faculty

Additionally, we have sought reflective comments from the students regarding this issue.

“ABE is the right place for me and all the students and faculty are friendly” (first-year student survey, Spring 2001).

“I now know most of the people who are also freshman agricultural engineers, and I have also met many of the ABE faculty through the program” (first-year participant, first-year composition assignment, Spring 2000).

Increased retention. Retention rates for the agricultural engineering program are shown in Figure 3 for the school years 1997-2000. The AE LC started in the spring of 1998. The first full year of the AE freshmen LC was in 1999. The sophomore AE LC began in 2000. One-year retention rates have steadily increased from 1997 to 2000. The jump from the non-LC year to the LC year was 13 percent. The next year it grew another 11 percent, and in 2000 leveled off around 91 percent. With the addition of a sophomore LC, we have seen the two-year retention rate grow from 42 percent to 72 percent from 1998 to 2000.

Agricultural Engineering Retention, 1997-2000

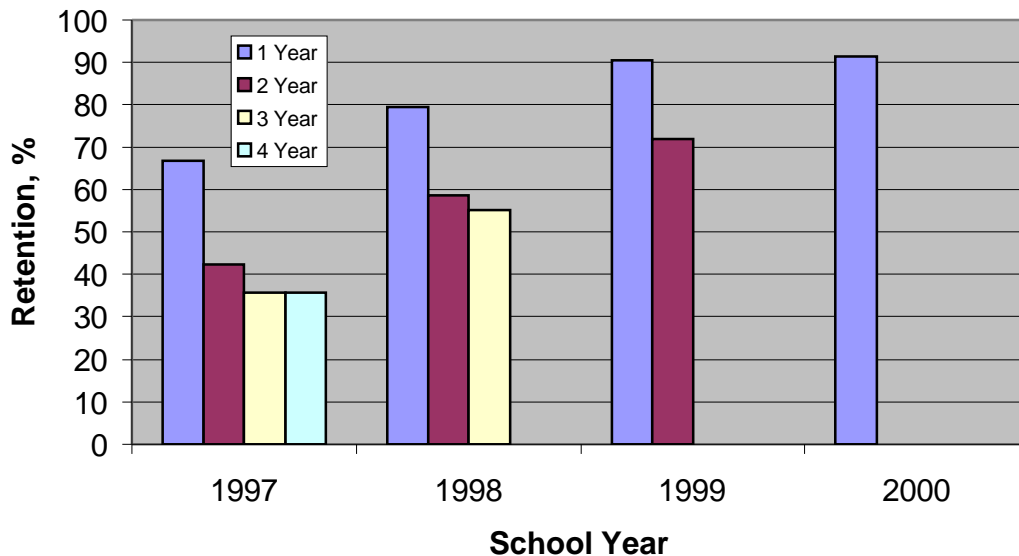


Figure 3. Agricultural engineering retention rates for FY1997-FY2000

Enhanced academic success and experience. At this time, we have looked to the students’ perceptions as a method of assessing students’ academic success and experience. Overwhelmingly, the students’ comments suggest that they believe the learning community has enhanced their academic experience positively. Many of the students have reported that the opportunity to work with other members of the LC has enhanced their academic performance.

“The community allows for us to work together a lot more...I believe my grades are higher because of the community” (sophomore learning community participant, Spring 2001 survey).

“Definitely! The classes have been much easier with others in the same class [who] I know well. It has greatly boosted my GPA” (sophomore learning community participant, Spring 2001 survey).

[The learning community] experience has allowed me to grow as an individual and develop excellent teamwork skills. I believe that the learning community has helped me obtain high academic achievement in my courses” (first-year learning community participant, Spring 2000 first-year composition assignment).

Many learning community students have reported that they frequently form out-of-class study groups with other students in the learning community. Anecdotally, we have also noticed an increase in the number of students who are studying together in our building during out of class time. The increase may be partially due to increased access to study areas; however, the students’ placement into common sections of courses has also

increased the feasibility of peer study groups. Notably, prior to the LC only upper-level students were seen with any frequency in the building studying after hours; presently students representing all levels are seen regularly in our building.

In addition to perceptions of enhanced academic performance and participation in peer study groups, LC participants have also indicated that having introductory courses that were linked and had an ABE theme motivated them to learn and to participate in class. The student comments below reflect how the learning community helped to enhance student engagement in the curriculum.

“The stuff that we were learning [in English 104] applied to Engineering 170 and it was something that we would actually be using in the future. I was able to see how the stuff we were learning not only applied to Engineering 170, but also to what we would be doing in the future. This not only proved valuable, but also gave me...motive, you could say, to make sure I learned as much as I could so in the future I would be able to do the best job I could” (first-year learning community participant, Fall 2000 first-year composition paper).

“[Linked classes] made it a lot more interesting. And I was willing to get more in-depth with it because I could see how it was going to be applied. Like giving presentations and that...because we did it in both classes and that helped out a lot. [I] could see how you would use it in the future, so I was willing to learn more from it” (first-year learning community participant, Spring 2001 interview).

Despite most students’ general expression of satisfaction, a few of the students who were involved in both the LC and the LLC have reported they were tired of spending so much time together. The student quoted below represents this sentiment.

“I dunno, when you're starting out it's kinda nice cause you're with the same people your first classes, but now it's like I see [them] everyday...And it's kind of frustrating cause you see the same people every day. Not many new people come in because everybody's always studying. Not many people go out. I don't mean to be mean to it, but it's boring a lot of the time...Right now, maybe since I'm about done with my first year, I'm looking for something different. Something else besides a bunch of farmers...No offense to you guys...it's nice to talk to people with the same interests, but at the same time, it gets old. (first-year participant, focus group, December 2000).

In addition to the theme relating to spending possibly too much time together, an additional theme of constructive criticism we have received relates to the instructors who have been selected or who have volunteered to teach in the learning community. The student comments that follow address this frustration:

“I'm thinking that for English 104, she wants an ungodly amount of work!” (first-year participant, focus group, October 2000).

“It was beneficial, but they seem to find the hardest teachers for the classes that they can” (sophomore participant, Spring 2001 survey).

“The ABE students shouldn’t have to work harder” (first-year participant, Spring 2001 survey).

While we certainly don’t attempt to place instructors based on our perceptions of their rigor in the classroom, we do attempt to place instructors who take teaching seriously and who are recognized as good teachers. Of relevance to this particular theme is the comment from a first-year student who suggested that he worked harder in his linked learning community first-year composition course (English 104) than he did in a non-linked section of first-year composition (English 105) during his second semester because the material and the instructor motivated him:

“I kind of miss the part about it being ag related, major and stuff. I thought that helped out a lot, but on the other hand I kind of like [105] because it's just a lot easier...It's just your regular English class. You just read a paper, write about it and I don't know. I'm maybe learning in it, but it's not quite as intense...I got an A- in 104 compared to a B in 105. I can say I'm a lot less involved in 105. I mean, 104 involved 170 and different classes, and so, I kind to had to spend a little more time on it. I kind of just work to get by in 105, because it seems like that's all she really expected. She didn't get quite as in-depth to it, so I just worked to get by in that class.” (first-year participant, Spring 2001 interview).

Enhanced understanding of communication. A particularly exciting finding in our research is the effect the learning community appears to be having on our students’ communication skills. On average, first-year learning community participants (1999-2000 and 2000-2001) agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned technical writing skills during their first year in college (Figure 4). A ranking of 3 or greater indicates agreement. Prior to the learning community, technical writing was not addressed specifically until the students reached their junior or senior year and they took a technical writing English course.

Technical writing skills

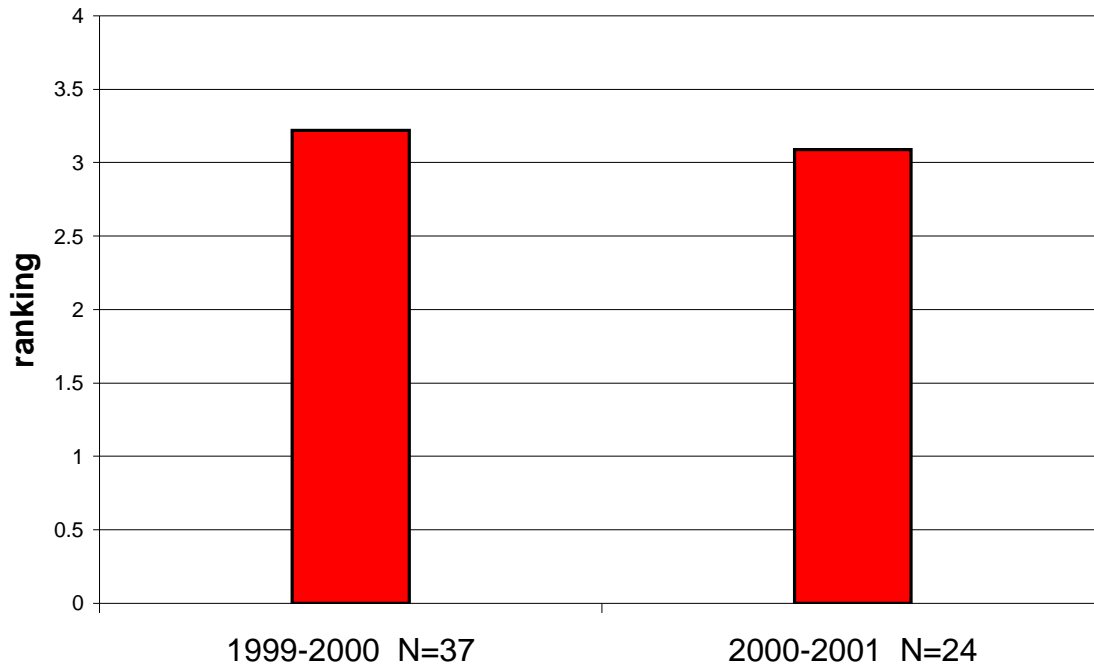


Figure 4: On average, the first year students in the 1999-2000 and the 2000-2001 learning community agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned technical writing skills during their first year in college. A ranking of 3 or greater indicates agreement.

Additionally, students have reported that the writing they have done in their linked English and engineering courses has been beneficial to them. The student quoted below is representative of this theme: *“I mean, but I’m just not an English person. Never have been. In high school, didn’t like it. But...we’re writing a paper for engineering right now you know, and I think it’s really benefited me, ya know when it comes to writing that. It’s really, I think it’s benefited me to have [English 104]”* (first-year participant, focus group, December 2000).

“English 105 in the learning community helped me tremendously in my report writing skills” (sophomore participant, Spring 2001 survey).

During a focus group held during the second semester of their first year (Spring 2001), several students revealed that writing they had done in their first-semester linked courses (Fall 2000—English 104 and Engineering 170) was helping them to also be successful in Engineering 160 (the course they were taking 2001). The student comment below is representative of this theme.

“[W]e did a lot of stuff in 170 that went along with 104 and was useful...I’m still using the stuff I learned last semester in [Engineering 160]” (first-year participant, focus group, February 2001).

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While most comments regarding their communication experience in the learning community were positive, a few students expressed frustration when they perceived that their engineering instructor and their English instructor had different expectations. The following focus group transcript (December 2000) provides evidence of this concern:

Student 1: I think they both want, it seems like they both want different things.

Student 2: They do. They do want different things.

Student 1: The papers are different.

Student 2: I think it's completely [different]. Cause on that presentation, [the English instructor] gave me like a perfect cause I used my hands and [the engineering professor] docked me for using my hands.

Particularly, the students were frustrated to discover that their engineering professor placed more emphasis on correctness than did their English instructor:
(December 2000 focus group transcript continues)

Facilitator: What does [the engineering professor] comment on?

Student 3: Spelling. (laughter) My spelling is always nasty and he's always like (vocal sound indicating disgust)...I expected it to be the other way around.

Student 4: He's a stickler on [commas and punctuation].

Student 3: Yeah, he's more like [strict], and [the English instructor's] more kinda that (vocal sound indicating whatever)

Student 1: Write, just write.

Student 5: Yeah, just write about it. Who cares if it's all correct or what. And she never comments about your spelling or grammar or anything at all. I mean I've never had any problem with that with her. I've noticed that with Dr. M, I've had a few problems there and...yeah it is kind of weird, it's kind of backwards what they do.

Student 3: Different than what I thought it would be.

Student 5: Yeah. yeah.

Importantly, following the semester, this same group of students had a changed perception of their English 104/Engineering 170 experience as they reflected back on the experience in the following transcript (February 2001 focus group):

Student 3: Well, we did a lot of stuff in 170 that went along with 104 and was useful. [T]hey kind of worked hand in hand. This semester it's really not the same I guess. The stuff that I'm learning now doesn't help me as much... I'm still using the stuff I learned last semester in [Engineering 160].

Facilitator: But which class from last semester are you applying to 160?

Student 3: 104 AND 170. Both of those together. Those together really has made the report writing for 160 a lot easier.

Facilitator's note: Other students indicate general consensus through head nods and words (e.g., yes, yeah indicating agreement).

Conclusions

The ABE Learning Community continues to achieve its objectives. We have built a strong sense of community among the students within the department. Student retention rates have soared; longitudinal data shows that first-year students persist into the sophomore and junior years. Students who have participated in the ABE LC report that the LC has enhanced their academic experience and success. There is tangible evidence of improvement in students' writing and communication skills through the link to the first-year composition courses.

We have not achieved the objective of increasing the number of female and minority students. While the number of females in the ABE Department have increased over the last three years, it has not been dramatic. The number of minority students has not changed during the same time period. Focused efforts to address this objective are planned for the future.

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