

## **Student Success in Themed-Learning Communities**

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### Introduction:

In a Themed-Learning Community students enroll with a cohort group of peers in a series of courses designed for their major area of study. Typically, these are freshmen students in their first semester of post-secondary education. They are new to their university, their campus, and their field of study. By enrolling with other students who are also beginning their college careers they can benefit from camaraderie, a shared set of experiences in multiple classes, and a team of faculty members who work together to facilitate the themed-learning experience. The hypothesis is that at the end of the freshman year higher student retention will be realized by the cohort of Themed-Learning Community students as compared to other freshman-year students in the same program of study.

Themed-Learning Communities at Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) all share the same five tenets including (1) integration of the curricular and co-curricular to encourage integrative thinking, (2) out-of-class activities to support integrative thinking, academic coursework, and community building, (3) active learning strategies, (4) experiences that foster community building and belonging, and (5) faculty and staff collaboration to foster all of these components<sup>1</sup>. This model is one of three learning community models at IUPUI designed to engage all freshmen in high-impact practices that are developed to address equity and access to programs defining their first-year experience<sup>2</sup>.

The Themed-Learning Community at IUPUI that is the subject of this study is a combination of three freshman-level, related courses required of the Interior Design Technology program titled "Designers in the Making". It is part of the University's First-Year Experience program and links related courses together for a group of up to twenty-five freshmen to take as a cohort. Students are able to connect with their faculty and fellow students during the course of the semester. Activities are designed to bridge Interior Design and Art courses, enabling students to connect ideas across these courses and through organized activities outside of class. Newly enrolling students to the University may elect to register for the Themed-Learning Community and its set of related courses or for other sections of the same courses not attached to the Learning Community cohort.

### Purpose:

The Themed-Learning Community program studied in this paper seeks to realize the benefits and minimize potential disadvantages of participation by its freshmen students. The authors analyzed results of numbers of students who continue in the field of study based on their participation in a Themed-Learning Community compared to students in traditional course enrollment who completed the same series of courses outside of the Themed-Learning Community framework.

Both objective assessment instruments as well as student and faculty perception were analyzed in addition to final retention results. After an initial offering of three successive years with freshmen classes in Themed-Learning Communities, the program's faculty members sought to identify improvements to the program as well as to determine its level of success in student learning and improved student retention after the freshman year.

In addition, this paper presents a review of the literature that discusses related research and observations of similar first-year experience programs. It also examines other themed-learning communities in design programs. It provides a basis for this particular paper by means of reflection and evidence while seeking to draw out strategies for other faculty and program administrators who implement similar programs.

It is the authors' intent to discuss this topic within the framework of the initial offering of this particular freshman learning community that may offer suggestions and strategies for programs implementing new learning community programs. The paper begins with a discussion of the literature and context that informs the authors' implementation strategy.

#### Literature Foundation:

Numerous studies have been conducted to determine impact of themed-learning communities. As a method of implementing a "high-impact practice", themed-learning communities satisfy primary outcomes defined as student satisfaction, engagement in purposeful learning activities, and persistence. Finley and Kuh in 2016, discuss formats of learning community structures and outline how they can also be a high-impact practice<sup>3</sup>.

A primary objective of higher-education administration is to improve retention rates of returning students, particularly following the freshman year. Reasons that are found to impact improved retention vary, however a common motivator finds that combining social integration with the academic experience not only improves academic achievement but contributes to students returning to further their education. In 2008, Zientek found significant improvement in not only academic achievement but on student retention following the freshman-year themed learning community experience<sup>4</sup>. Her research identified a variety of reasons that students drop out of college after the first semester or year and the predictability of such behavior based on high-school achievement and personal circumstances. She found that a primary motivator of students' likelihood to return was based on their feeling of connectedness to their institution<sup>4</sup>.

Underlying the success of a learning community is the engagement of its students, both inside and outside of the classroom. Recently, Kidd studied the impact of students' interest in what they study along with their interactions with peers, faculty, and their institutions<sup>5</sup>. The level of engagement that students had during their entry to college was a direct predictor of their retention after the freshman year. She found this necessary component of higher education as one of the primary components of the learning community model<sup>5</sup>.

Kidd's research also reports on the benefits to faculty in a learning community<sup>5</sup>. Particularly when institutions or faculty positions afford minimal opportunity for professional development, faculty in a learning community report the benefit of collaborating with other

faculty, especially those outside of their field. The opportunity to work with faculty in a regular, ongoing basis for the duration of a course term affords instructors connections that engage them further in their teaching assignments. It also enhances their knowledge perspective by working with other faculty to bridge content areas<sup>5</sup>.

Kidd's study also addresses potential difficulties in recruiting faculty to teach in a learning community<sup>5</sup>. The factor of time required to plan and collaborate across disciplines is of significance to faculty who may already be heavily scheduled. Success of student achievement and retention may also be dependent on the enthusiasm of faculty and their ability to effectively collaborate with faculty of other subject areas<sup>5</sup>. The authors of the paper presented herewith explore faculty perception of their teaching experience within the learning community to aid in future planning of the learning community and in faculty recruitment.

Since an additional incentive of implementing a learning community is the prospect of increased student achievement, it is important to consider the methods of measuring student achievement. Pike, Hansen, and Lin studied the impact on grades of students who by the nature of the learning community model, self-select into it<sup>6</sup>. They caution that because learning community participation is not a random sample of all students, the causal effect of such a program on student grades cannot be predicted. From data in their specific study, they found the causal effect of learning community participation negligible. They surmised that students would have had higher grades whether or not they participated in a learning community<sup>6</sup>.

Self-selection appears to be a significant consideration in evaluating goals and outcomes of a learning community. As students are presented with many choices regarding their education, from the institution itself to programs and particular courses it offers, there are many reasons that could influence each student's decision. The study in this paper examines those reasons as reported by students to understand their motivation and expectations.

Process:

In the fall of 2018, the Design Technology program at IUPUI implemented the first themed-learning community for its degree program. A significant amount of planning and preparation were undertaken in the preceding year with the support of the University's First-Year Experience program faculty and staff. As part of the planning process, all of the relevant faculty were responsible for course planning, activity planning, and implementation.

The first task was to identify two courses that could be interwoven with shared activities and offered alongside a First-Year Seminar (FYS). This cluster model of a themed-learning community with three courses was implemented in a block-schedule for students who enrolled. Entering students enrolled in First-Year Seminars regardless of their participation in a learning community to acclimate to their new campus and enable a successful beginning to their academic experience. FYS was taught by a team of a lead instructor, advisor, and peer mentor who worked together as a network of support for their students. Along with this course, an introductory Interior Design course and a fine arts drawing course were selected from the Interior Design

degree program plan. This Themed-Learning Community was titled “Designers in the Making” to appeal to entering students interested in learning about becoming an Interior Designer.

Over the course of the year preceding its first offering, faculty met and communicated regularly to determine course components that classes would have in common. Joint out-of-class activities were designed to support the learning community’s main theme and course subject matter. In-class activities were designed to bridge content in each course where students would incorporate one course’s learning activities into one or both of the other courses. Timing of content was scheduled so that students would have ample time to complete an activity and receive feedback before it was incorporated into another course. Since course supplies form a large part of materials that students need to purchase for their design courses, coordination among faculty was planned to make use of common supplies used in multiple courses to minimize out-of-pocket expenses.

Planning proceeded smoothly and the course was scheduled for registration. The only challenge became when one of the learning community’s faculty members was removed from teaching this course to teach another course outside of the learning community based on other program needs for that semester. This difficulty was managed by bringing in another faculty member from the program who effectively delivered the course for the learning community’s initial offering.

After the first year of implementing the themed-learning community (TLC), “Designers in the Making,” the initial faculty team reviewed course content and reflected on goals and outcomes. All concurred that the format would remain as originally developed to be used again for fall of 2019 and 2020. For the second offering, again one of the learning community faculty members needed to be removed due to program course load and a new adjunct faculty member was mentored and effectively delivered the course for fall of 2019. The initial faculty member from the learning community team was able to deliver the third offering for fall 2020.

At the end of the second offering of the themed-learning community, data was gathered from both semesters analyzing student and faculty perceptions, academic success, and retention in the interior design technology program. A paper survey was implemented using an original questionnaire directed to gather information of interest to the authors’ research. The survey was administered to students who were currently enrolled in the Interior Design course for fall of 2019 (n=17), and to those students who were enrolled in the themed-learning community fall 2018 Interior Design course and continued study within the interior design curriculum (n=7). The student survey consisted of ten questions, while the faculty survey consisted of eight. Both were based in affective testing using attitude, Likert, and semantic differential. Questions included multiple choice, 5-point Likert, and open-ended. At the end of the third offering, fall 2020 enrollment (n=17) was surveyed using the same questionnaire but was implemented digitally via Qualtrics. All efforts were made to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of participants, ensuring course faculty were not present during the administration or collection of surveys. A student volunteer from the themed-learning community distributed the paper survey to participants during class time in which TLC faculty were not present. The same student collected the surveys, placed and secured in manila envelope, and delivered to a specified faculty member not involved in teaching either semester course offering, who in-turn compiled the questionnaire data. Interior design faculty (n=3) were issued a survey and instructed to deliver directly to the

above mentioned non-TLC faculty member. Fall 2020 TLC students (n=17) were emailed a survey link via Qualtrics, which maintained confidentiality of participants. The student survey questions reproduced in the Appendix consisted of one multiple choice/other, eight 5-point Likert scale, and one open-ended. Similarly, the faculty survey included seven 5-point Likert scale questions and one open-ended. The student response rate was 75.6% and faculty response rate was 100%. Survey respondent baseline demographic data in Figure 1 was obtained regarding gender, race, and whether a first-time, full-time student at the university level.

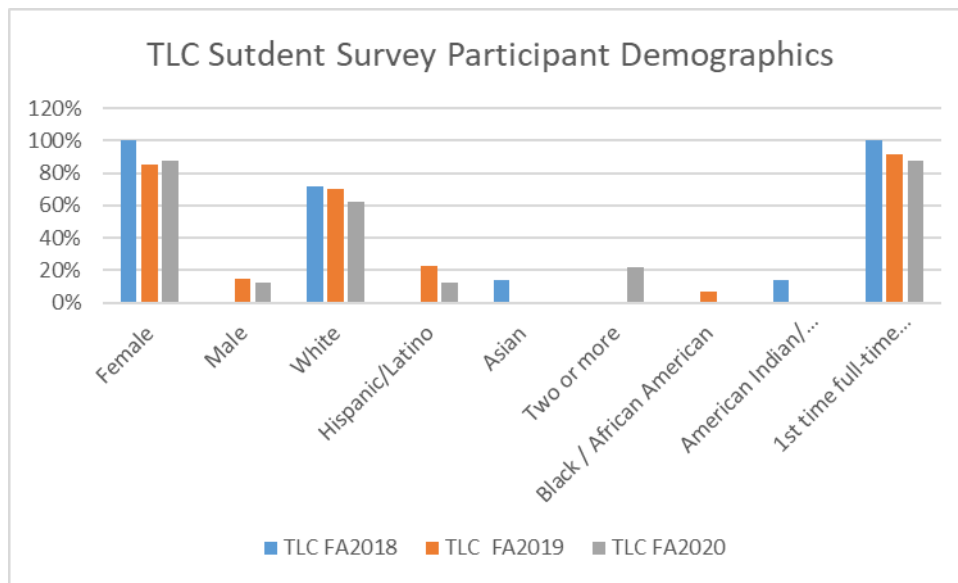


Figure 1 – TLC Student Survey Participant Demographics

To understand student motivation for participating in the themed-learning community, an initial question asked students to select from three statements and “other.” Some respondents selected multiple answers; however, “other” was not selected by any respondent. The highest response indicated, “Parent, academic advisor, and/or mentor encouraged participation” at 38%; with 32% selecting a “Desire to socially connect with other interior design students”, and an additional 30% indicating “desire for a small community of peers and faculty to increase academic success.”

Student response to their level of satisfaction with the themed-learning community and their comfort level interacting with peers and instructors indicated 90.3% satisfied or very satisfied with comfort level interacting with peers, and 93.5% satisfied or very satisfied with comfort interacting with instructors. Student response to perception of academic success indicated 83.8% satisfied or very satisfied with impact of student/peer support and their understanding course material and assignments. Positive impact on their understanding of elements and principles of design, an integrated course objective for the interior design and art course, indicated 97% satisfied or very satisfied. When asked whether they perceived a positive impact on academic success in the interior design course and art course, student response indicated 83.9% agreed or strongly agreed.

Respondents indicated a positive impact due to the amount of time spent together in the learning community with 90% agree or strongly agree; and 84% agreed or strongly agreed that the

learning community assisted in helping them integrate into the interior design program and university campus. Similarly, 87% agreed or strongly agreed the learning community assisted in their decision to continue pursuing an interior design degree. Open-ended student comments pointed to a positive impact on assisting in making friends, being comfortable and integrating as a freshman into the interior design program, and “would highly recommend the learning community to incoming freshman.” Suggestions included more integration between the three classes and more involvement with upper level interior design students.

Three different interior design faculty taught the themed-learning community course over the three semesters provided. Fall 2018 and 2019 faculty taught the course in an in-person format, while the third faculty course format was online due to COVID-19 restrictions. This established a low N of 3, however, the survey will enable the authors to establish a data base as future data is gathered and evaluated. Faculty response indicated 100% agreement with perceived high student comfort level interacting with peers and instructors. However, faculty response differed 33% disagreeing and 67% agreeing, that the amount of time students are together each week had a positive impact on student behavior and interaction. Response to positive impact on student comprehension of course content and academic success also indicated a difference of perception, 67% neutral and 33% agree. There was also a split response as to positive impact on communication between instructors with student issues and integration, with 67% neutral and 33% strongly agree. Open-ended faculty comments suggested evidence of strong student friendships and interaction, while indicating concern that the high level of student comfort with each other empowered students to act and communicate unprofessionally with the instructors and not use studio time wisely. Other comments indicated, on average a perceived lower level of student maturity within the learning community, raising the concern this limits their exposure to more mature freshman, with higher level academic and project implementation skills. The fall 2020 course format was fully online, with students taking the same three courses together for the duration of the term. The instructor perceived this to be a source of constancy and support that benefitted them during the time of pandemic.

Program retention data in Figure 2 was obtained for all three learning community sessions. Data indicated fall 2018 TLC student retention rate as 44%, fall 2019 at 76%, and fall 2020 at 65%. Non-learning community interior design student retention from the same sessions indicated a 74% retention for fall 2018, 83% for fall 2019, and fall 2020 at 60.5%. Fall 2020 TLC course format was delivered fully online and the non-learning community course format was delivered in a hybrid format of online and in-person due to the pandemic. Final course grade data was analyzed for those students remaining in the program with the goal of tracking student progress for future research. Percentages in Figure 3 for the first two learning community sessions indicated similar outcomes: fall 2018 = A (14% of students); B (72% of students); C (14% of students); fall 2019 = A (7% of students); B (77% of students); C (16% of students); with differing outcomes fall 2020: A (63% of students); B (37% of students); C (0%). Course grade outcomes for non-learning community students remaining in the program were the same for fall 2018 and 2019: A (57% of students); B (36% of students); C (7% of students). Fall 2020 non-learning community course grade outcomes were similar to TLC 2020: A (64% of students); B (27% of students); C (9% of students).

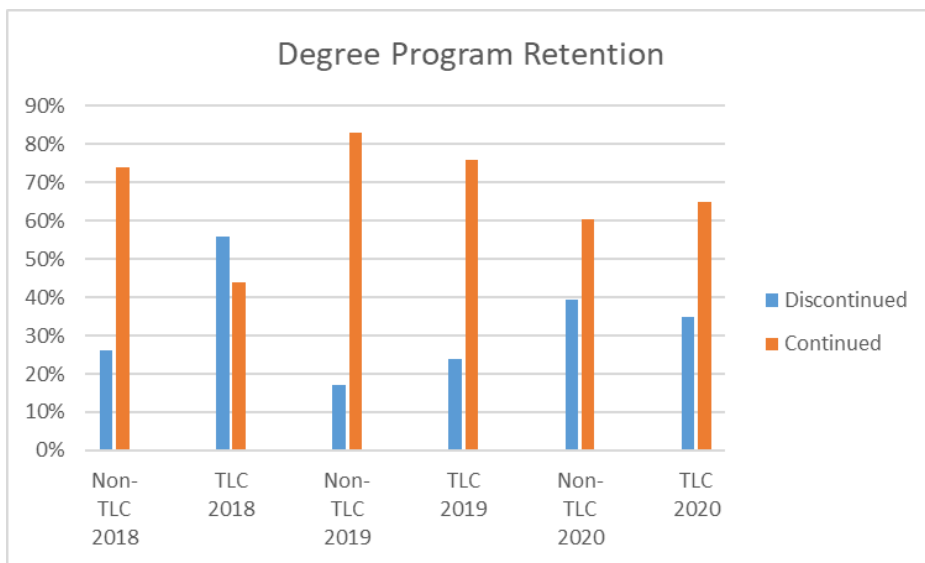


Figure 2 – Degree Program Retention

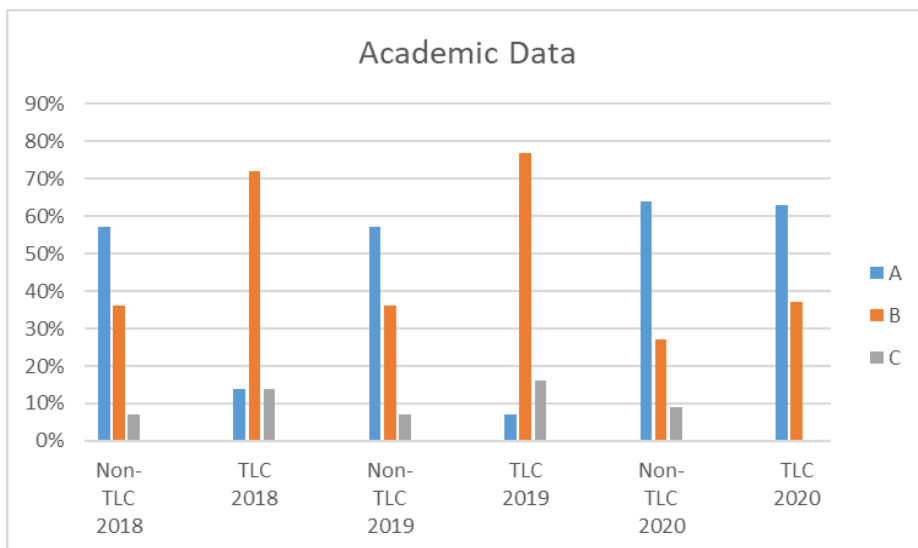


Figure 3 – Academic Data

Evaluation and Implications:

This study serves as a useful analysis highlighting the implementation process of one academic unit to improve student success and retention at the freshman level. According to IUPUI’s First-Year Experience program, being in classes with the same people is what students who participate in learning communities love most about the program<sup>7</sup>.

The Themed-Learning Community “Designers in the Making” has been offered for three semesters yielding a low population and the inability to generalize findings. However, survey results indicate a positive impact on student participants, providing an environment of camaraderie where they made strong friendships, and established a high comfort level interacting in the classroom. Students continuing in the Interior Design program are able to



build upon relationships formed during the freshman experience as they enroll in successive courses in their degree plan.

Participant responses also indicated a desire for more integration of activities between TLC courses, with inconclusive results as to the impact on student grades and success. It is suggested that faculty within the learning community further evaluate and collaborate on strategies to integrate course subject matter and activities, with the goal of increasing student learning outcomes and academic achievement. Retention from the first session was low at only 44%, with the second session pointing to a higher retention level of 76%, closer to the 2018-2019 non-learning community interior design classes of 74% and 83% respectively. However, fall 2020 retention for both the learning community (65%) and non-learning community (60.5%) was lower than 2019. The impact of online and hybrid course formats for fall 2020 during the pandemic should be further evaluated. Therefore, a causal effect cannot be established between student participation in the learning community and increase in retention at this time.

Due to the inconclusive findings, further data needs to be gathered on both the learning community and non-learning community courses to establish the impact on student performance and retention. Recommendations for further study include more comprehensive surveys, student and faculty focus groups, and historical retention data; including the tracking of students as they progress in the program with regards to course grades and graduation rates. This study would serve as a useful tool for establishing an understanding of student perceptions and the impact of themed-learning communities on student academic achievement and retention.

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Appendix:

Student Survey

Student Success in Themed-Learning Communities

Subject: Interior Design Technology Themed-Learning Community

As a faculty member who currently teaches or previously taught in the Interior Design Themed-Learning Community, we are interested in your impressions about delivering this program through teaching in INTR 10300, HER-E 109, or TECH 10200.

You can help us help you by completing the anonymous survey, which will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary. Efforts have been made to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Efforts have been made to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, however there is a risk of loss of confidentiality and a risk that you may be uncomfortable answering the survey questions. We don't expect you to receive any benefit from taking part in this study, but we hope to identify successes and areas for improvement in offering this program in the future.

We promise to get back to you with the results! Please complete the survey by the end of the semester so that we can share the results with you next semester.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, feel free to contact the Human Subjects Office at [IRB@iu.edu](mailto:IRB@iu.edu) or Brenda Morrow at [brmorrow@iupui.edu](mailto:brmorrow@iupui.edu) or Mary Ann Frank at [marafan@iupui.edu](mailto:marafan@iupui.edu).

We appreciate your assistance.

Brenda Morrow

Mary Ann Frank

TLC Student Survey Questions:

1. Which statement below best describes why you selected to participate in the Interior Design Themed-Learning Community?
  - a. Desire to socially connect with other interior design students
  - b. Parents, Academic Advisor, and/or mentor encouraged participation
  - c. Desire for a small community of peers and faculty to increase academic success
  - d. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Rate your level of satisfaction with the Interior Design Learning Community:

2. Comfort level interacting with peers in class

Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very satisfied
1	2	3	4	5

3. Comfort level interacting with course instructors  
*Very dissatisfied*      *Dissatisfied*      *Neutral*      *Satisfied*      *Very satisfied*  
 1                              2                              3                              4                              5
4. Student/peer support and interaction for understanding course material and assignments  
*Very dissatisfied*      *Dissatisfied*      *Neutral*      *Satisfied*      *Very satisfied*  
 1                              2                              3                              4                              5
5. Positive impact understanding the integration of elements and principles of design within art and interior design.  
*Very dissatisfied*      *Dissatisfied*      *Neutral*      *Satisfied*      *Very satisfied*  
 1                              2                              3                              4                              5
6. Assisted with decision on whether to continue pursuing an interior design degree.  
*Very dissatisfied*      *Dissatisfied*      *Neutral*      *Satisfied*      *Very satisfied*  
 1                              2                              3                              4                              5

Rate your level of agreement with the following statements:

7. The amount of time spent each week with the same classmates had a positive impact?  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Neutral*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*  
 1                              2                              3                              4                              5
8. Participating in the Learning Community had a positive impact on your academic success in INTR 10300 and HER-E-109  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Neutral*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*  
 1                              2                              3                              4                              5
9. The Learning Community helped you integrate into the Interior Design program and IUPUI campus.  
*Strongly Disagree*      *Disagree*      *Neutral*      *Agree*      *Strongly Agree*  
 1                              2                              3                              4                              5
10. What other comments do you have regarding your Learning Community experience?

*Thank you for participating in this survey!*

Faculty Survey

Student Success in Themed-Learning Communities

Subject: Interior Design Technology Themed-Learning Community

As a faculty member who currently teaches or previously taught in the Interior Design Themed-Learning Community, we are interested in your impressions about delivering this program through teaching in INTR 10300, HER-E 109, or TECH 10200.

You can help us help you by completing the anonymous survey, which will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary. Efforts have been made to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Efforts have been made to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, however there is a risk of loss of confidentiality and a risk that you may be uncomfortable answering the survey questions. We don't expect you to receive any benefit from taking part in this study, but we hope to identify successes and areas for improvement in offering this program in the future.

We promise to get back to you with the results! Please complete the survey by the end of the semester so that we can share the results with you next semester.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, feel free to contact the Human Subjects Office at [IRB@iu.edu](mailto:IRB@iu.edu) or Brenda Morrow at [brmorrow@iupui.edu](mailto:brmorrow@iupui.edu) or Mary Ann Frank at [marafra@iupui.edu](mailto:marafra@iupui.edu).

We appreciate your assistance.

Brenda Morrow  
Mary Ann Frank

TLC Faculty Survey Questions:

Rate your perception regarding student attitudes and behaviors within the Learning Community:

1. Students have a high comfort level interacting with peers in class.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1	2	3	4	5

2. Students have a high comfort level interacting with course instructors.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1	2	3	4	5

3. Positively impacts student/peer support and interaction for understanding course material and assignments.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1	2	3	4	5

4. Positively impacts student understanding of integrating elements and principles of design within art and interior design.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1	2	3	4	5

5. The amount of time spent each week with the same classmates had a positive impact on student behavior and interaction?

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1	2	3	4	5

6. Participating in the Learning Community had a positive impact on their academic success in INTR 10300 and HER-E-109

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1	2	3	4	5

7. The Learning Community helped instructors assist and communicate with student issues and integration into the Interior Design program.

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1	2	3	4	5

8. What other comments do you have regarding your Learning Community experience?

*Thank you for participating in this survey!*