Adventure Education and Learning Communities: Linking Classroom Learning with Everyday Life

Presenters:

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The State of Higher Education

"A disturbing and dangerous mismatch exists between what American Society needs of higher education and what it is receiving. Nowhere is the mismatch more dangerous than in the quality of undergraduate preparation…What does higher education need? It needs stronger, more vital forms of community. It needs an informed and involved citizenry. It needs graduates to assume leadership roles in American life…"

Wingspread Group, 1993, pp. 1-4

Undergraduate Education

"If undergraduate education is to be enhanced, faculty members, joined by academic and student affairs administrators, must devise ways to deliver undergraduate education that are as comprehensive and integrated as the ways that students actually learn. A whole new mindset is needed to capitalize on the interrelatedness of the in- and out-of-class influences on student learning…"

Terenzini and Pascarella, 1994, p. 32

Learning Community Characteristics

- Organizing students and faculty into smaller groups
- Encouraging integration of the curriculum
- Helping students establish academic and social support networks
- Providing a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of college
- Bringing faculty together in more meaningful ways
- Focusing faculty and students on learning outcomes
- Providing a setting for community-based delivery of academic support programs
- Offering a critical lens for examining the first-year experience

Shapiro and Levine, 1999

The Initiative at MSU

Academic Affairs

Student Affairs

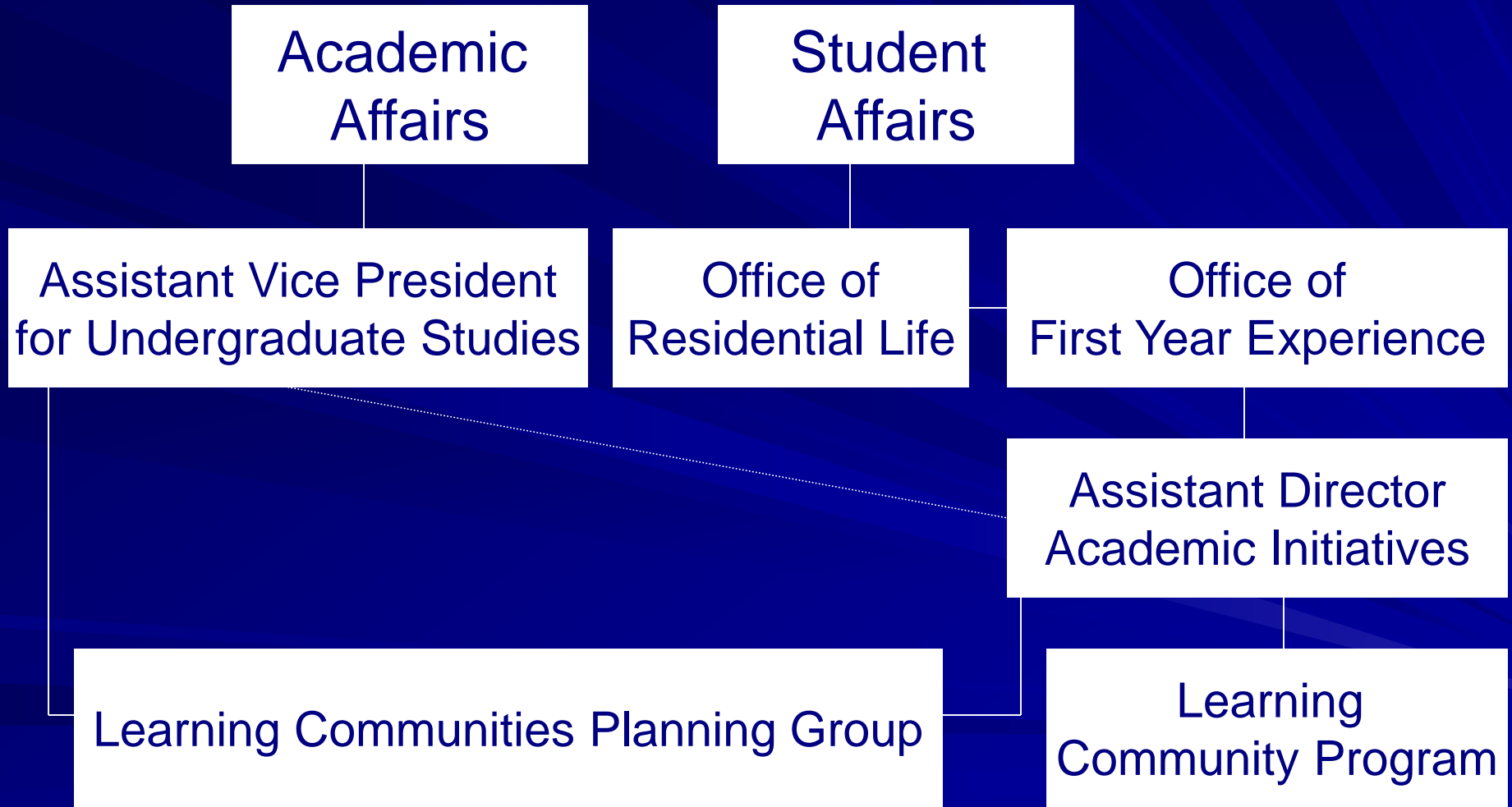Assistant Vice President for Undergraduate Studies

Office of Residential Life

Office of First Year Experience

Assistant Director Academic Initiatives

Learning Communities Planning Group

Learning Community Program

Planning for Learning Communities

Learning Community Planning Group Members:

- Academic Deans
- Director, First Year Experience
- Director, Residential Life
- Student Relations Coordinator
- First Year Seminar Faculty
- Undergraduate Student
- Associate Director, Residential Life
- Assistant Director, Academic Initiatives
- Housing Complex Director

Learning Communities Program Outcomes

- Higher Levels of Student Retention
- Increased Faculty-Student Interaction
- Stronger Student Academic Achievement
- Greater Student-to-Student Interaction and Social Support Networks
- Established Academic Support Networks
- Eased Transition to College
- Higher Levels of Satisfaction with College Experience

Learning Communities Model

- **Course Co-Enrollment**
  - Three Courses
    - Theme Course
    - English/Speech/Misc.
    - First Year Seminar/Misc.
  - General Education Courses
- **Clustered Housing**
 - Community Members Live on Same Floor
- **Peer Mentorship**
  - Learning Community Coordinator

Peer Mentorship

Learning Community Coordinator (LCC)

- Community Development
- Individual Resident Interactions
- Faculty Connection
- Activities
  - Welcome Events
  - Course Connection & Study Groups
  - Study Incentive Programs
  - Bookmark/Bulletin Board
  - Theme Related/Team Building Activities
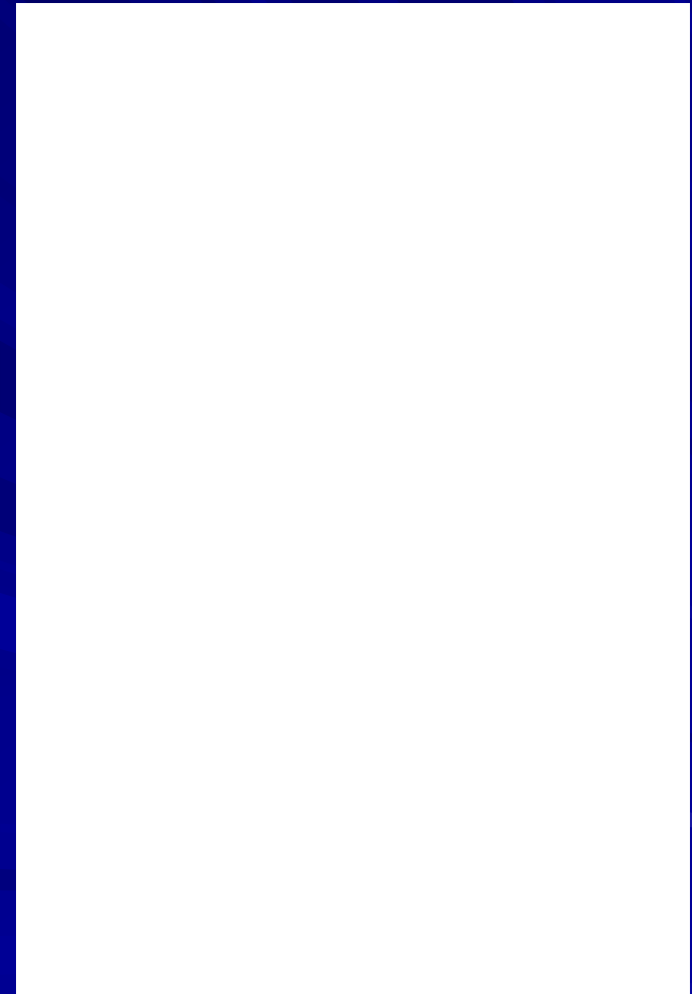
Assessment Model-Tools

- Entering Characteristics
  - ACT, HS GPA, HS Rank

- College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ)
  - Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning

Assessment Model-Tools

- College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ)
  - Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning
- Institutional Data
  - GPA and Retention

- Qualitative Data – Focus Groups

Assessment Model

Utilized Comparison Groups
- Learning Community Students
- First Year Seminar Students
- Control Group Students

Entering Characteristics	CSXQ

Pre-Post Test Relationship

CSEQ	Institutional Data	Qualitative Data Focus Groups

Purpose of Study

- Assess the impact of the out-of-class experiential components in a residential Learning Community Program.

- Gain students' perceptions of the impact that participation in an adventure-education program (high or low-ropes course) had on their in-class learning and overall experience at the university.

Participants

- Criterion Sampling
  - Member of MSU Learning Community program during the 2000-2001 academic year who had participated in an adventure-education experience with their Learning Community
- 35 Eligible Participants
  - 14 participated
    - 7 with low ropes experience
    - 7 with high ropes experience
- Timeline
  - Study conducted in April of spring semester following participation in previous fall semester

Data Collection

- Focus Group Interviews and Limited Observation
  - Types of questions:
    - "Why did you join a Learning Community?"
    - "What was your favorite part about being a member of a Learning Community?"
    - "How do you think that your participation on the high ropes course impacted your experiences in the classroom or your overall experiences here at MSU?"
    - "When you remember the high ropes course experience, what stands out in your mind?"

Data Analysis

- Data-Unit-Constant-Comparative-Method
  - Identification of "big ideas"
  - Unitizing data units
  - Categorizing data units
  - Negotiating categories
  - Identification of themes

Establishing Trustworthiness

- Triangulation of Data

- Peer Debriefing

- Member Checks

Lincoln and Guba (1994)

Results

Connections to Students, Faculty and the University	Self Learning and Transferable Skills	Support for Academic and In-Class Learning
Awareness and development of peer support	Development of critical thinking skills	Peer academic support relationships
Social integration	Personal sense of competence	Personal relationships with faculty
Development of community through trust, communication, and respect	Teamwork within a community	Personal sense of competence
Personal relationships with faculty		Development of critical thinking skills
Common bond through a shared experience		Alternative environment for learning
Alternative environment for socialization		

Development of
Critical Thinking Skills

- The ropes course facilitates the development of critical thinking skills.
  - "Communication that's on a level that's physically and mentally . . . There was one point that we couldn't talk to each other so you had to do physical movements or you had to use signs or signals."

Personal Sense of Competence

- The ropes course facilitates a personal sense of competence.
  - Overcoming fear, self-trust, achieving higher level of self-confidence
  - "I guess [the ropes course] made me trust myself more in a way. Like when I come to my studies I trust myself I can do this . . . I just look back and realize . . . I trust myself that I can do it and give an extra push to it."

Awareness and Development of Peer Support

- The ropes course facilitates the awareness and development of peer support.
  - "I think for me, [what stands out from the ropes course experience] was how we helped each other, and how we used it to motivate each other."

Peer Academic Support Relationships

- The ropes course facilitates the development of peer support for academic success.
  - "when I don't understand something [the ropes course] made me realize that I do have other people that can help me."

Development of Community

- The ropes course facilitates community development based upon components of trust, communication and respect.
  - "We came in not knowing each other and at the end we had a better feeling for who was more trustworthy, who would communicate, who would work as a team."

Relationships with Faculty

- The ropes course helps students develop relationships with faculty.
  - "We had two of our teachers go out there [on the ropes course] with us and it was really neat to see him out of the classroom and actually, like, talk to us and interact with us as people instead of students. And so I thought that did make an impact because it gave them a humane side as teachers, not like a scary monster."

Alternative Environment

- The ropes course provides an alternative environment for learning and socialization.
  - "I think getting out there [at the ropes course] gave us a different place to express who we really were."
  - "We weren't like a school group anymore, we were outside having fun."

Social Integration

- The ropes course facilitates social integration.
  - "[the ropes course] took [the students in the Learning Community] from just being your peers to our actual friends."

Common Bond

- The ropes course provides students a bond which is developed through a shared experience.
  - "[the ropes course] was really helpful just to meet people and know that these people have something in common with you."

Teamwork Within Community

- The ropes course facilitates the development of teamwork within a community.
  - "I liked the low ropes course because it was more of a teamwork thing whereas climbing the wall [in the high ropes] was individual."

Implications

Similar out-of-class initiatives may promote a positive experience for first-year students by supporting their:

- Connection to Other Students, Faculty, and the University
- Self Learning and Transferable Skills
- Support for Academic and In-Class Learning

Recommendations

- Intentionally connect out-of-class experiences to complement in-class learning and students' overall college experience.

- Provide a collaborative learning environment with shared faculty and student learning outcomes.

Discussion

- Share programs currently utilized on your campus or at other institutions that are targeted at first-year student success.

Open Question and Sharing

Contact Information

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