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**Analysis of the first year Learning Community approach at JWU:
Enhancing the first-year experience.**

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teaching:

ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST YEAR LEARNING COMMUNITY APPROACH AT JWU: ENHANCING THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

DESCRIPTION OF SCHOLARLY INQUIRY

This study examines the efficacy of JWU's Collaborative Learning Program (CLP), a first-year learning community, in improving academic performance and engagement for first-year undergraduates. In light of recent events that have created substantial hardship in higher education, universities should implement evidence-based approaches to improving student performance and experience.

Because the CLP classes are smaller, major-specific, and sequenced with the same cohort of students across the first year, it seems likely that students enrolled in the CLP may have an enhanced academic experience that promotes engagement in their major and in the University.

The guiding question was: Does participation in a first-year learning community lead to superior outcomes in GPA, student engagement, self-efficacy, and academic performance, compared to first-year students who do not participate in the CLP?

The methods involved assessing student engagement, belongingness, and self-efficacy at three time periods during the first year (the study is ongoing, so data is only available for the first two assessments). Scores for students in the CLP were compared to a control group of non-CLP first year students who were enrolled in standard first-year classes in the same majors. The study also involved analysis of existing GPA and retention data for the study participants.

OUTCOME

GPA data was compared at the end of Fall semester 2021, and showed a significant difference between the CLP and controls, with the CLP students achieving a GPA nearly .5 points higher (CLP = 3.05 vs Control 2.59) at the end of Fall 2021, even after controlling for SARS scores (a retention metric used to predict risk of dropout). However, data on engagement, belongingness, and self-efficacy from the first two time periods (around Week 2 of Fall and Week 13 of Fall) showed no significant differences between the CLP and non-CLP groups.

Table 1.				
T-test comparison of GPA between CLP student group and non-CLP control group.				
Group	GPA	SD	t-statistic	p-value
CLP	3.06	1.03	3.07	.003
Control	2.59	1.26		

Note. Cumulative GPA after Fall Semester 2021.

This study examined the relative effectiveness of a first year learning community program at JWU, the Collaborative Learning Program (CLP), compared to the typical student first-year experience. We collected data from students enrolled in the CLP (n = 109) and non-CLP control students (n = 116), and we compared end-of-semester GPAs, as well as scores on an assessment of student engagement, belongingness, and self-efficacy. Results indicated a significant difference in GPA, with the CLP students achieving a higher GPA at the end of Fall 2021 relative to controls, but there were no significant differences on the other variables.

SIGNIFICANCE OF OUTCOME

The results suggest that the CLP program may be useful in promoting higher academic performance for those who participate in it, compared to the traditional non-CLP approach. Though the data on engagement, belongingness, and self-efficacy were not significantly different, an additional round of data collection is planned for Spring 2022, so we will assess for any evidence for a longer-term trend in those variables.

Those the sample size is relatively small, and only from one semester, it seems plausible that the smaller class sizes, major-specific cohort, and increased faculty/student interaction that is unique to the CLP program, may contribute to improved academic outcomes. In addition, we will be examining for any differences in relative retention rates between CLP and non-CLP students at the end of AY 2021-2022. In any case, these data provide evidence that the CLP program may provide an enhancement to students' first-year experiences. Of course, further study and data collection are warranted before broader recommendations can be made.

Psychology major cohort of the JWU Collaborative Learning Program, Spring 2022

