

Middle Georgia State University

Academic Affairs

Dr. Chris Cairney, Provost Fellow

2018-2019

Student Retention/Living Learning Communities, Cochran

The Task

This white paper addresses student recruitment and retention. What kinds of things attract students to our campus and might contribute to “keep students happy” once they are here? We will survey the national landscape with an eye to capturing possibilities, best practices and recommendations for learning communities (LC’s) at MGA. What makes a college or university a special place for the student, one they don't want to leave before their four years are up? I want to suggest that part of the answer to that question involves learning communities, but learning communities “plugged in” with other services on campus such as residence halls, advising, mentoring, career planning and placement, externships and internships, and others. The idea or working assumption is that the happy student is an engaged student, and that happy students do not transfer—they are invested, they have “buy in.” What keeps an athlete from transferring to another school? Trust, investment, buy in, whatever it can be called, it involves a complex set of relationships that are authentic, not simply institutional. Institutional arrangements look good on paper, and provide an invaluable framework for allowing faculty and staff to successfully engage with students, but the nature of the personal bonds are the “special sauce” that make it all work. It is complex, and may not be immediately predictable, but we know it when we see it, the result, a function of our loving and caring faculty and staff as they invest in multiple simultaneous ways in the wellbeing and future of our students.

So, happy students do not transfer, but also, students who *think* they will be happy in a certain institutional environment (college or university) can be *recruited*. For the student it is probably, at least initially, Maslow's hierarchy of needs: Is there food? Is there internet? Is there “life” on campus I find attractive? Can I major in something from a range of legitimate choices? Other

issues typically on the orientation docket: academic facilities, housing, student organizations, where to go to eat, placement record for employment. To systematically address and manage such current or prospective students' perceptions, we need to establish a framework document covering services impacting student engagement and we need a working list of best practices with an eye to what can work at MGA in terms of our current staff and faculty resources and in terms of our limited budget.

The first thing I want to do toward this goal is to establish two narratives: a narrative of these "best practices," things that other institutions of higher education do to engage students, things that fit into certain categories, and then a second narrative of best practices for MGA, one that mirrors the first by judiciously matching the larger list with a list for us based upon our current or future capabilities. We may not be able to replicate or otherwise address all items in the larger list, but we can find ways to accomplish a well-designed plan or roadmap of best practices that creates a coherent and attractive identity for MGA in these important areas.

By establishing a framework, what we accomplish here is to make an easy way at a conceptual level and at the level of best practices to see how these services and the processes related to them "fit together" to create an overall package of coordinated services for the students at MGA.

Thanks to such a framework, these processes are thereby interrelated at an institutional level, interacting in a structured way to connect certain students, and potentially all students, with the specified services and with the overarching practical aim of retention and progression.

All of this should be done with intentionality, thanks to the framework and the list of best practices, mindful always that, in terms of student development, a better-educated student will be better able to face the challenges of school, employment and citizenship (both the products—specific skills—and the processes—how to learn, how to adapt—they have learned will enable them to compete successfully and survive in the competitive employment environment envisioned at the state, national and even global level. But whatever we do, it should probably be there as part of the identity, potentially, coherently and identifiably, of all students on campus so that participation in any of its manifestations will not be stigmatized or categorized but rather embraced as part of what "makes a Knight a Knight."

Another caveat: given our newly embraced identity as “Schools” (Such as SOAL, the School of Arts and Letters), LC’s and many of the services that “plug into” them (such as advising and active after-hours mentoring) will probably best be left to be designed and implemented from within the schools themselves, while following in a general way a framework and list of best practices that leaves plenty of room for school-specific needs, inspiration and creativity.

The MGA Context

Middle Georgia State University in 2019 is an access unit of the University system of Georgia with a mixture of students: we have access students who need remediation and arguably specific support outside the classroom. These may include previously lower-performing students, some from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or from less-than-ideal family environments. They may also be first-generation college students or may need support to help them “come up to speed” academically and in terms of “life” and communication skills.

At the same time we have GAMES (Georgia Academy) students and dual enrolled students who need to be challenged academically and entertained in other ways and who need us to provide an important “in loco parentis” function. We also have regularly enrolled “true freshman”. In light of these and other points of diversity, each class can be mapped so that the faculty and staff might know “who” makes up each new class, what kinds of students and athletes from what kind of areas, and by extension, with what kind of expectations and what kind of needs.

Finally, we have non-traditional, adult education and Veteran students who all benefit from certain specific kinds of judiciously aimed interventions to help them be happy and do well. So for us right now as always as we push to improve RPG rates, we strive to be successful in our core mission to graduate highly qualified and educated people into the regional workforce and to improve the regional pool of active, engaged and educated citizens and lifelong learners from all of these groups.

Once a student is duly admitted to the university and on campus, RPG then becomes an activity of support with the aim of providing multiple simultaneous scaffolds to help the student grow academically, socially and professionally in terms of appropriate behavior in a global workplace, and grow as well in sophistication, skills and propensities (skills to be employed now and

propensities to make the student capable of negotiating, adapting, creating, navigating, cooperating, contributing and succeeding later in life).

The MGA LC Context

To date at MGA there have been various programs involving learning communities, some including learning support students and some involved with Experiential Learning. It might be profitable to view The LC's we have run in the past as part of a phase where we "tried things out." For example, That is what I did, pairing with another faculty member teaching another section so that I used his reading assignments in an LS English section which was mutually beneficial for both of us as teachers: I "pre-loaded" his reading and his coursework gave a useful rational and central theme for our work in my LS section. Our foundation in LC's to date reflects what many campus leaders have done working diligently and well as part of an effort to find the right mix of services to best understand, engage and retain our unique MGA students. I might tentatively characterize this earlier phase of LC's at MGA as necessarily "try it and fly it," a metaphor meant to capture the kind of exciting experimentation that paves the way forward. Having just employed this "try it and fly it" metaphor, I would like to suggest a new metaphor to describe what we do on the way forward: "plug-and-play."

I would like to survey some of the best, most compelling, most authentic (in terms of educational engagement) and most intentional ideas that impact LC implementation and design, and see where we might be able to fit such ideas with respect to what we have done heretofore. Of interest are ideas which might fit authentically with our students or perhaps or some subset of our students and that we can be intentional with. And that we can set something up as a best practice: such ideas become items that populate a good list of best practices for flexible student support processes or student engagement modules that can be flexible and sustainable and inserted or un-inserted into particular semester iterations of LC's, Plug & Play: take certain support processes such as advising, mentors, clubs, EL, career services, class sequences—these can be "plugged into" or "unplugged from" a basic LC model or a particular iteration of LC for a particular student cohort during a particular semester.

That means that you can plug something in but you can also “unplug” it and yet you still have the program and you still have something that serves the students: If a group of students seems like they would be served by some student support process or student engagement activity that might be well integrated into a learning community on a Plug-and-Play basis, then we “plug it in” and when we judge that the students get tired of it we “unplug” it. But the learning community remains as a signature engagement by a school, such as the School of Arts and Letters.

Bringing it Forward

In terms of LC’s and related services, it is time to Establish some traditions and stick with them; it is time, at least in a nominal way, and in a way that is coherent to students reading our website or being shown a brochure, It is time to name categories which will make history because they will become part of our identity in terms of student life, it is time to name categories that match word-of-mouth buzz about our campus going forward as part of a conceptual framework for student support processes and student engagement tools at MGA.

We must be consistent with the categories (for example, a SOAL LC), but flexible in the iteration of the category (for example, a particular *semester’s* SOAL LC). An LC with plugged-in student support processes must makes sense somehow in a way that “everything fits together” in a kaleidoscope of services that have a rationale behind them and that can be a tradition that that will make sense to the students and that the students can count on and come to rely on and expect and appreciate as we move forward. Such coherence and consistency in LC and related student support processes (“plug-and-play”) is and will be an important part of the answer to questions about why students want to come to this campus, why they implicitly feel trust for us with their 4-year transformative experience and come this is why students stay this is why students Inspire others to follow in their footsteps...authenticity!

Not only must they exist as student engagement categories in our brochures but they must work, they must engage students in a way that makes students “happy”—It must be “the lighter side of work,” related to but different and separate from the rigors of coursework. It must be fun. Rigorous coursework is the center of the transformation of the student but can also burn the

student out. LC's should be the active antidote to student "burn out" and so they should be fun leaning not made up of busy work that looks rigorous on its own on paper, forms to be filed. The students will create the meaningfulness of their experience within the elegant and flexible LC framework we put in place. It must be "owned" by happy students. This is the "life" we want in LC's.

And we need to keep it simple so that it can be flexible and therefore sustainable, flexible and sustainable because based upon best practices and authentic engagement with a subset of our students and intentionality on the part of the facilitators: so those are some of the variables that can guide us in learning communities are there many, many things that can be done now based on the data that we have from that from our school and looking at what other schools are doing and these best practices and guidelines we can come up with something that is as I say flexible and sustainable going forward thank you very much thank you very much thank you very much here is a graph which shows one model which is also plug-and-play and flexible but gives a good guideline of the thing or the kind of thing that can be done.

LC's and Retention: Our Central Solution?

One primary method for facilitating and supporting happy students (and delivering student support processes and student engagement activities or experiences to students) is, as I have said, "plug-and-play." This is where student engagement experiences and student support processes are fit to or matched with flexible but sustainable learning communities, LC's developed by each school for their students and with *primary* administrative support from within the school (such as SOAL).

So, again, it should be a consistent, authentic, intentional, planned scheme overall, not a one-semester implementation and never seen again: one-semester implementations, if they become a pattern, might seem erratic to the students: they want to feel—not desperation and distrust of them as students but rather, we must realize that the programs work because we (the faculty) expect them to work and because it seems (to the student) that they (must) have worked before! Confidence creates success and reflects our confidence in our own programs and our confidence in our students ability to benefit from the things we typically and consistently and coherently ask

them to do: MGA LC's. And any of our new schools can, in theory as well as in practice, adjust these LC's for their own inspired implementation by being flexible but conceptually consistent. Take this Conceptual Framework and list of "best practices" and ask this question: "how can we adjust these for our new school?" How indeed will those of us in SOAL, for example, uniquely and yet consistently prepare LC's For example, for SOAL?

But before we go into our game plan, generally at MGA and particularly from within a school (such as, for example, the new School of Arts and Letters (in terms of LC's connected to other campus services as an overall Student Engagement Strategy [SES] for a particular school), let's engage in some "cross-pollination" by listing for consideration some student engagement strategies that can be found right now at some ostensibly very successful (in terms of RPG) universities and colleges in the Eastern United States.

This is a kind of summary of what other institutions are doing but with the idea also that "there are many things that can be done" and that we don't need to do all things, but we want to follow the spirit as well as replicate a version of the successful SES's of other schools. We are also interested here, perhaps inspired by these listings, in establishing our own list of best practices or some general guidelines that might actually fit our Institution while also picking from what other institutions of higher education: what fits us? What helps our institution?

Samplings from the National Context

What drives student perceptions of happiness in 2019? Here is a list that goes beyond food and internet access to examine what drives a student's happiness in their home away from home: today, what do students want? It may be similar to what they wanted "last year," or it may be different. Here, in short, are what successful colleges and universities are saying and promising in order to secure new students (and by presumably "doing" and promising consistently), here is what they are doing, also, to retain students and encourage the cycle again: recruit, retain, graduate. This list is worth a sober perusal and is attached as an appendix.

Best Practices and Guiding Principles

Herein can be found suggested possible best practices and guiding principles. Among those is that LC's can be designed and facilitated within each of our new schools in creative and designer ways as long as they fit a general (but flexible) framework and follow, again generally, a list of best practices for MGA.