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# The Effect of Learning Communities on Freshman Student Retention Rates and GPA at a Public 4-Year Institution of Higher Education

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THE EFFECT OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES ON FRESHMAN STUDENT  
RETENTION RATES AND GPA AT A PUBLIC 4-YEAR INSTITUTION OF HIGHER  
EDUCATION

By

Ashley Matthews Sweat

Dissertation Approved:



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Dr. Charles Hausman, Chair



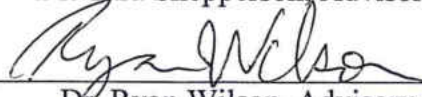
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Date November 18, 2016

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RETENTION RATES AND GPA AT A PUBLIC 4-YEAR INSTITUTION OF HIGHER  
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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to the two people who I wish had the opportunity to meet: my daughter, Bailey Isabella, and my late granddaddy, William Lucian Matthews, Sr. Bailey, let this be proof that you can grow up to do anything you put your mind to. Granddaddy, I love and miss you and pray that you are proud of me.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I must give honor and thanks to God. Without Him, none of this would be possible. Thank you to my family for the continued love and encouragement. To my husband Burl, thank you for the moral support and for “picking up the slack” so I could follow the road to my dreams. To my daughter Bailey, thank you for being Bailey. Your smile and energy kept me going when I wanted to give up. To my mom Patti, my grandma Marcella, and my late granddaddy Lucian, thank you for instilling in me a great work ethic. I truly couldn’t have gone through this process without all of you.

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Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my dissertation committee. To my Chair, Dr. Charles Hausman, and my committee members Dr. Tara Shepperson, Dr. Ryan Wilson, and Dr. James Bliss, thank you for the encouragement and guidance that you have given me throughout this entire process.

*In memory of our cohort member, Dr. Kimberly Diane Merritt. – “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” ~ Jeremiah 29:11*

## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the effect of GSD 101 Learning Communities (a cohort program for freshmen at Eastern Kentucky University) on the retention and first-year grade point average of first-time, full-time freshmen at the university. The study specifically examined students enrolled in GSD 101Z and ENG 101Z (the learning communities sections) in the Fall 2014 semester versus the students enrolled in the regular GSD 101 and ENG 101 classes during the same semester. A large institutional database was used to identify the students in the study and their demographic differences. Results showed that participation in learning communities did not make a significant difference in the fall-to-fall retention or the cumulative GPA after the first year. It did show, however, that students who have higher high school grade point averages are more likely to be retained and that high school GPA was a higher indicator of retention than ACT scores.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview .....	1
Mission Statement.....	2
Retention .....	2
Freshman Retention at EKU .....	3
Learning Communities/Cohorts .....	3
EKU Learning Communities .....	4
Purpose of the Study .....	6
Rationale for the Study.....	6
Rationale for the Program.....	6
Definitions.....	7
Research Questions.....	8

### CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview .....	9
Retention .....	9
Reasons Students are Not Retained .....	10
Students Most Vulnerable of Not Being Retained.....	10
Gender .....	11
High School GPA and Test Scores .....	11
Race.....	12
First-Generation.....	12
Socioeconomic Status.....	13
Financial Implications for Institution .....	13
Grade Point Average as a Predictor for Retention.....	14
First-Year Retention as Predictor for Graduation.....	15
Reasons for Delayed Graduation .....	15
Costs of Delayed Graduation.....	15

State of Kentucky.....	16
15 to Finish Campaign.....	16
Financial Aid Regulations.....	17
Eastern Kentucky University.....	18
EKU Learning Communities.....	18
Textbooks.....	19
First Year Leaders.....	20
Team Building Sessions.....	21
Major and Career Series.....	21
Learning Communities.....	22
History of Learning Communities Implementation: Dewey and Meiklejohn.....	23
1960s through 1980s.....	24
Current Trends.....	25
Types of Learning Communities.....	25
Federated Learning Communities.....	25
Paired, Linked, and Clustered Courses.....	26
Residential Learning Communities.....	26
Team-Taught Learning Communities.....	27
Learning Communities in Large Courses.....	27
Elements of a Learning Community.....	28
Social Presence.....	28
Cognitive Presence.....	29
Teaching Presence.....	29
Theoretical Perspective.....	29
Schlossberg’s Transition Theory.....	30
Type, Context, and Impact of a Transition.....	30
Transition Process.....	31
Situation.....	31
Self.....	32

Support .....	32
Strategies .....	32
Transition Theory in Relation to Retention .....	32
Tinto’s Dimensions of Individual Departure.....	33
Separation from Communities of the Past .....	33
Transition between Communities .....	34
Incorporation into College Communities.....	34
Social Integration .....	35
External Events.....	35

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study .....	36
Context of the Study: Eastern Kentucky University .....	36
EKU Learning Communities: Program Description .....	37
Sample .....	37
Gender by Learning Community Participation .....	39
Racial Minority by Learning Community Participation .....	40
First-Generation by Learning Community Participation .....	40
ACT Composite Scores of Learning Community and Non-LC Students.....	41
High School GPA by Learning Community.....	42
Research Design and Analysis .....	43
Variables.....	43
Limitations of the Study.....	44

### CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Overview .....	45
Differences in Retention between Learning Community and Control Group Students.....	45
Differences in GPA between Learning Community and Control Group Students	48

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Overview .....	52
Summary of the Study .....	52
Interpretation of Results.....	53
Research Question 1 .....	53
Research Question 2 .....	54
Inconsistency with Previous Research.....	54
Why are Learning Communities Not Making a Difference? .....	55
Implications for Policy and Practice.....	56
Admissions Requirements .....	56
Performance-Based Funding.....	57
Future Research .....	58
Conclusion .....	61
References.....	62
Appendix A: Fall 2014 GSD 101 Learning Communities Syllabus.....	70
Appendix B: Institutional Review Board Approval.....	77
Appendix C: Vita .....	79

## LIST OF TABLES

1.1: Learning Communities Student Placement Chart .....	5
3.1: Learning Community Students .....	38
3.2: Gender - Learning Community Crosstabulation .....	39
3.3: Racial Minority - Learning Community Crosstabulation .....	40
3.4: First Generation - Learning Community Crosstabulation.....	41
3.5: Mean ACT Score by Learning Community .....	42
3.6: Mean High School GPA by Learning Community .....	43
4.1: Between-Subjects Factors: Retention .....	45
4.2: Group Statistics: Fall-to-Fall Retention.....	46
4.3: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects: Dependent Variable: Retention .....	47
4.4: Estimated Marginal Means: Groups Dependent Variable: Retention .....	48
4.5: Descriptive Statistics: ECU GPA.....	49
4.6: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects: Dependent Variable: ECU GPA.....	50
4.7: Estimated Marginal Means: Groups Dependent Variable: ECU GPA.....	51

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Eastern Kentucky University (EKU), located in Richmond, KY, is a public, regional institution of higher education that serves over 16,000 students (Eastern Kentucky University, 2014). The university offers associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in more than 100 majors within five colleges: the College of Arts and Sciences, the College of Business and Technology, the College of Education, the College of Health Sciences, and the College of Justice and Safety.

In 1906, the Kentucky General Assembly established the Eastern Kentucky State Normal School to train teachers (Eastern Kentucky University, 2014). The institution became a four-year institution known as the Eastern Kentucky State Normal School and Teachers College in 1922, with the first degrees being awarded in 1925. The institution became accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in 1928. In 1930, Eastern Kentucky State Normal School and Teachers College was renamed the Eastern Kentucky State Teachers College.

More changes came for the future Eastern Kentucky University in 1935 when the Master of Arts degree in Education was approved (Eastern Kentucky University, 2014). In 1948, the institution removed "teachers" from the title and was permitted to award nonprofessional degrees. In 1966, legislation was enacted to rename the school Eastern Kentucky University. At this time, the institution achieved status to award many new degrees. Eastern Kentucky University is now the host of various degree programs and added its first doctoral program in 2008.

## **Mission Statement**

The mission of Eastern Kentucky University is written as follows:

“As a comprehensive public institution, Eastern Kentucky University prepares students to lead productive, responsible, and enriched lives. To accomplish this mission, the University emphasizes:

- 1.) Student Success,
- 2.) Regional Stewardship, and
- 3.) Critical and Creative Thinking and Effective Communication” (Eastern Kentucky University, 2014, p. 6).

## **Retention**

Retention refers to the percentage of the entering fall cohort that re-enrolls in the following fall semester (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Seidman, 2012; Tampke & Durodoye, 2013; Tinto, 1999; Williford, Chapman, & Kahrig, 2001). College retention has gradually become an important issue in higher education over the last decade (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013). According to Alarcon and Edwards (2013), 28% - 35% of students drop out of college during their first year.

There are several reasons why students may leave an institution, such as lack of integration, financial reasons, lack of preparedness, or dissatisfaction with a class or institution (Tampke & Durodoye, 2013). The retention rate of students from their freshman-to-sophomore year is important because if an institution can recognize the vulnerability of a student early enough, they can create an intervention to retain them (Seidman, 2013).

## **Freshman Retention at ECU**

ECU's specific retention goal, as established by Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE), is 75%. ECU has never exceeded 70% (E. Palka, personal communication, April 15, 2015). This rate is slightly higher than other public four-year institutions of higher education in Kentucky. Currently, 30% - 35% of ECU freshmen leave the university after the first year. According to Kentucky's CPE, the retention rates of first-time freshmen students in the Fall 2009 cohort at ECU's state benchmark institutions is as follows:

- Morehead State University - 67.1%;
- Murray State University - 68.8%;
- Northern Kentucky University - 66.6%; and
- Western Kentucky University - 68.5% (Enrollment, 2015).

## **Learning Communities/Cohorts**

In an effort to increase student retention, institutions of higher education are implementing learning communities (Love, 2012; Rohli & Rogge 2012; Tinto 2003). Typically occurring within a student's first semester or year, learning communities are defined as a group of about 10-25 students who begin a program together, go through the different experiences and projects within the program, and end the program together (Maher, 2005). The cohort typically takes two courses linked together: most commonly a student success seminar and another course (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Seidman, 2013). At ECU, the students in learning communities take the GSD 101 student success seminar and a course that is a general education requirement.



## **EKU Learning Communities**

In Fall 2012, the First Year Courses department at ECU implemented its learning communities for exploratory freshmen students in their first semester of college (First Year Courses, 2014). The learning communities linked students in a student success seminar and either an English or a communications class. An introductory psychology class was later added to allow first semester psychology majors to partake in the cohort. All of these courses are either general education requirements or ECU university requirements needed for graduation.

Students who are enrolled in learning communities take the paired courses with the same cohort (First Year Courses, 2014). Administrators hope that participation in the learning communities will help first-year students build connections to the university and gain confidence in their academic abilities. Other goals that administrators have for the learning communities are:













- Increasing student engagement, motivation, and persistence;
- Having an identifiable peer-support network from the beginning of the college career;
- Gaining a sense of community through the development of positive relationships with campus resources, peers, and professors; and
- Promoting skills such as effective communication, problem solving, and critical thinking.

Students eligible to participate in learning communities are pre-enrolled in them (J. Hearn, personal communication, May 20, 2015). To be eligible to participate, students have to follow specific guidelines. They are not allowed to have been admitted as a

Success First student, and they cannot have declared majors. Students also may not have more than one college readiness/developmental requirement in order to be eligible to enroll in learning communities. Table 1.1 shows the criteria for student enrollment in learning communities.

Table 1.1

*Learning Communities Student Placement Chart*

Criteria	ENG 101Z	PSY 200Z	CMS 100Z
Earned credit for ENG 101	X		
Earned credit for PSY 200		X	
Earned credit for CMS 100			X
Dev. reading requirement	X	X	
Dev. writing requirement	X	X	
Dev. math requirement			
Psychology Major ( <i>PSY Dept. will Enroll</i> )	X		X
2 or more dev. requirements	X	X	X
NOVA	X	X	X
S1/S2 Admit	X	X	X
Honors	X	X	X
Declared	X	X	X

Source: J. Hearn, personal communication, May 20, 2015

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine if first-time freshmen students at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) who are placed in the First Year Courses learning communities are being retained at a higher level than comparable first-time freshmen students at EKU who are not placed in learning communities. More efforts are being made to increase fall-to-fall retention of freshmen in institutions of higher education. When freshmen feel like they are a part of the campus community, they are more likely to stay at the institution. Because of this, cohorts, also known as learning communities, are becoming more prominent on university and college campuses, especially within the freshmen class (Love, 2012).

### **Rationale for the Study**

This study focuses on one program that is geared toward making students feel like they are a part of the campus community. The mission, strategic plan, and institutional goals of EKU all emphasize maximizing student success. As stated in the Eastern Kentucky University 2014 – 2015 undergraduate catalog, the 2011 – 2015 EKU strategic plan states that one of the ways it plans on maximizing student success is to “improve student recruitment, retention, graduation, and career transitions” (p. 7). Research on learning communities is in its infancy at EKU, and more empirical data is needed to further implement these programs and aid in retaining students.

### **Rationale for the Program**

Retaining students is important to institutions of higher education because lack of retention means a loss of revenue (Seidman, 2013). Institutions of higher education rely heavily on student tuition and fees for financing. When student retention rates drop,

institutions can experience a significant loss in revenue. This can affect upkeep of facilities as well as faculty and staff salaries.

### **Definitions**

*Exploratory Student* – Students who have not declared a major. Formerly known as undeclared students.

*First-Time Freshman/Freshmen* – Students enrolled at the university the semester immediately following their senior year of high school.

*Full-time* – Enrollment that includes 12 credit hours or more in a semester.

*Learning Community(ies)* – The freshmen cohort that links a student success seminar with either ENG 101, Introductory Psychology, or Public Speaking/Introduction to Human Communication.

*Retention* – Refers to the fall-to-fall rate at which students are retained by the university.

*Student Success* – Success of the students in the classroom, in the workforce, and in other endeavors where they will represent the collaborative efforts of the ECU community (Eastern Kentucky University, 2014).

*Student Success Seminar* – The GSD 101 class required of freshman to take their first seminar at ECU. It teaches the students skills necessary to be successful at the university.

*Success First Student* – First-time freshmen who do not reach benchmark ACT scores or high school grade point averages and need to strengthen college-readiness skills.

## **Research Questions**

1. Are there differences in the fall-to-fall retention rates between first-time full-time freshman students enrolled in learning communities compared to first-time full-time freshman students not enrolled in learning communities?
2. Are there differences in the fall-to-fall grade point average of first-time full-time freshman students enrolled in learning communities compared to first-time full-time freshman students not enrolled in learning communities?

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

As of 2009, most recent records show that in the United States, only 58% of freshmen entering college will graduate from the same institution within six years (Veenstra, 2009). The majority of undergraduate students that complete their first year of college earn a bachelor's degree (Persistence, 1999). Research from the 1989 – 1990 school year showed that students who left during their first year failed to re-enroll the following year. About two-thirds of those students that left during that first year returned to college by 1994. Because the amount of students dropping out of college during the first year has increased, student support services at an institution, including learning communities, mentoring, and mentoring, are created to improve freshman retention.

### **Retention**

College retention has gradually become an important issue in higher education over the last decade (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013). Retention is defined as the percentage of students entering in the fall to re-enroll at the same institution the following fall semester (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Seidman, 2012; Tampke & Durodoye, 201; Tinto, 1999; Williford, Chapman, & Kahrig, 2001). Studies show that 28% - 35% of students drop out of college during their first year.

Historically, the largest attrition rates occur between the freshman and sophomore years of college (Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999). A study collected by ACT showed that institutional freshman-to-sophomore retention rates have increased from 1983 to 2010. The same study showed that institutions that practice selective admissions practices

are more likely to have higher freshman-to-sophomore retention rates than institutions that have less selective admission.

### **Reasons Students are Not Retained**

Students, especially in their first year, decide to leave an institution of higher education for several different reasons. Students may decide to leave an institution of higher education after their first year for various reasons, such as lack of integration, financial reasons, lack of preparedness, low grade point average (GPA), or dissatisfaction with a class or institution (Lopez-Wagner, Carollo, & Shindledecker,; Tampke & Durodoye, 2013). The persistence rate of the freshman-to-sophomore year is important because if an institution recognizes a student's vulnerability early enough, they can create an intervention to retain them (Seidman, 2013). While poor academic preparation is a factor in students' attrition, the majority of first-year students are not retained at an institution because of financial problems, the inability to become acclimated to the campus environment, boredom, lack of academic challenge, and general dissatisfaction with the institution (Barefoot, 2004).

### **Students Most Vulnerable of Not Being Retained**

There are several strong predictors of early departure of students from an institution of higher education. The main predictors are being female, having (or not having) family that have attended college, socioeconomic status, and academic preparation (Barefoot, 2014).

## **Gender**

Since the early 1980s, most of the students being awarded bachelor's degrees have been female (Ewert, 2012). Currently, women are more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree than men are. It is suggested that the shift in graduation rates is due to the changing norms among family dynamics, which allows for more females to go back to school after taking time off.

Studies show that female students are retained at higher rates than male students (Seidman, 2013). Other studies suggest that the relationship between gender and student retention can vary by institution because gender is not traditionally related to academic achievement and retention (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004).

## **High School GPA and Test Scores**

With the exception of students of Puerto Rican origin, high school GPA and test scores are the highest predictor of student retention (Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Westrick, Le, Robbins, Radunzel, & Schmidt, 2015). The higher a student's GPA and test scores, the more likely they are to be retained and obtain college degrees.

A study of undergraduate students from a private west coast college showed that a low high school GPA was statistically significant to retention rates (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004). A low high school GPA can be an indicator of low freshman-year academic achievement. Low academic achievement is directly related to retention. Another study conducted over the course of 13 years concluded that standardized test scores and high school GPAs are consistent indicators of retention and degree completion



for white students but are inconsistent with predicting the retention of non-white students (Seidman, 2013).

## **Race**

There is a big difference in the number of ethnic minority students obtaining college degrees and the number of non-minority students obtaining college degrees (Carter, 2006). A 2003 report by The Pathways of College states that of individuals in their late twenties, while more than one-third of white people have bachelor's degrees, around 18 percent of blacks and 10 percent of Hispanics have bachelor's degrees. In general, minority students leave college at higher rates than students of the ethnic majority. This is directly linked to high school graduation rates.

The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) gathered retention data from 407 colleges and universities in the United States (Grayson & Grayson, 2003). The 1999 first-year cohort data showed that 20 percent of students did not return to the same institution for their second year of school. The attrition rates were highest for ethnic minorities, with the exception of students of Asian origin.

## **First-Generation**

A first-generation student is defined as a student whose parents have no college experience (Cho, Lee, Hudley, Barry, & Kelly, 2008; Striplin, 1999; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Thayer, 2000; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). They are also more likely to come from a low socioeconomic status, be a minority, and live in a non-English speaking household (Cho et Al, 2008). The number of first-generation students attending institutions of higher education is increasing (Soria & Stebleton, 2012;

Woosley & Shepler, 2011). First-generation students also have low retention and graduation rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), students whose parents do not have bachelor's degrees are more likely to drop out of college than students whose parents have a bachelor's degree or higher (Cho et Al, 2008; Titus, 2006). First-generation students drop out of college at a rate of 50 percent (Cho et Al, 2008).

### **Socioeconomic Status**

In addition, students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to earn a college degree than students not from a low socioeconomic background (Thayer, 2000; Titus, 2006; Walpole, 2003). Students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds are also less likely to attend an institution of higher education (Walpole, 2003). When the student from a low socioeconomic background chooses to attend an institution of higher education, they are more likely to enroll in a less prestigious institution. Once in the institution of higher education, these students often have to work an additional job, thus having a lower involvement in student clubs and groups, in addition to less time for study. These are all indicators of students who have poor grades and drop out of college.

### **Financial Implications for Institution**

When an institution of higher education does not retain students after their first year, there are many financial implications for the institution. From 1995 to 2005, the average cost of attending a public institution of higher education rose by 30% (Raikes, Berling, & Davis, 2012). Higher education institutions rely heavily on student tuition and

fees (Seidman, 2013). During the 2006-2007 academic year, 16.67% of public institution income came from tuition and fees. When students are not retained, institutions (particularly those that do not conduct significant research) can experience a significant revenue loss. Immediate and indirect institutional costs include faculty and staff salaries, along with the upkeep of facilities.

### **Grade Point Average as a Predictor for Retention**

A student's GPA is an essential predictor of retention, regardless of race (Leppel, 2002; Reason, 2003). Specifically, the GPA of the first year of school is the biggest predictor of students being retained and eventually graduating from the institution (Reason, 2003). Around 15 to 25 percent of students leaving after the first year leave because they are not doing well academically (Leppel, 2002). The higher the first year GPA, the more likely that a student will come back for the second year of school (Reason, 2003). Students with a first year GPA lower than a 2.0 on a 4.0 scale have the likelihood of 57% of being retained. Students with higher first year GPAs (3.3. to 4.0) have a 91% chance of being retained.

A study by a college in Pennsylvania was conducted to determine predictors for student retention after the first year (O'Neill, 2000). A sample size of 1,197 students showed that higher GPAs and improvements in GPAs from the first semester to the second semester of the first year of college is an indicator that the student will be retained. With this specific group of students, 92% of the students were retained through the first year and 88% of the students were retained through the sophomore year at the institution.

### **First-Year Retention as Predictor for Graduation**

As previously stated, undergraduate students who complete their first year of college are more likely to complete a bachelor's degree (Persistence, 1999). Currently, in order to be competitive in the job market, a college degree is required (Leppel, 2002; Jamelske, 2008). Not being retained in the first year of college has long-term effects on students.

While getting a bachelor's degree is seen as attainable in four years, it actually takes many students six years to graduate from college (Luckerson, 2013). Studies show that in public institutions of higher education, less than 40% of students graduate within four years and almost 60% of students graduate with a bachelor's degree within six years.

### **Reasons for Delayed Graduation**

There are different reasons why a student's graduation may be delayed (Luckerson, 2013). Some students take the opportunity to participate in co-ops and/or internships rather than take required classes. Other students may be unsure of the direction they want to take and change their major several times. Because some required courses are only offered certain semesters and may end up overcrowded, students may have to delay graduation.

### **Costs of Delayed Graduation**

When students do not graduate on time, there are costs to both the institution and to society (Grayson & Grayson, 2003). For the university, there is a loss of revenue. One study showed that because of the amount of money it costs to recruit students, each student who leaves the institution before graduating costs the institution over \$4,000.

Another study showed that it takes four students who leave an institution after their first year to produce as much tuition revenue as a student who decides to stay and graduate with a four-year degree (Leppel, 2002).

For the student, there is a loss in productivity (Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Jamelske, 2008). It is essential to have a college degree in order to be competitive in the job market (Jamelske, 2008). Students that delay graduation are not able to get a job and earn money as quickly as students that graduate within four years (Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Kokemuller, 2015; Luckerson, 2013). A bachelor's degree is required of many jobs, so access to employment can be limited for students who leave college early. The 2012 US Bureau of Statistics data showed that students who drop out of college earned about 32 percent less annually than someone who has a bachelor's degree.

### **State of Kentucky**

The Commonwealth of Kentucky is located in the east south-central part of the United States in the Appalachian region (Kentucky, 2015). Kentucky is home to eight public four-year institutions of higher education, including Eastern Kentucky University. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education College Completion (2015), 24.2 percent of all 16,013 students accounted for graduated from college in four years in 2013. The six-year graduation rate was 48.9 percent. These rates illustrate a positive 5.2 percent change from 2002 to 2013.

### **15 to Finish Campaign**

The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education implemented the “15 to Finish” campaign on January 8, 2014 to promote on-time graduation for undergraduate

students (Nimocks & Patrick, 2013). The purpose of the “15 to Finish” campaign is to urge undergraduate students to take 15 credit hours each semester so that they can graduate within a four-year period.

Taking 15 credit hours a semester can be beneficial for the students. Research shows that students that take 15 credit hours a semester have better grades, are more likely to graduate within a four-year time period, and have more of an opportunity to earn income sooner than students that take less than 15 credit hours a semester (15 to Finish Kentucky; Nimocks & Patrick, 2013). When a student takes 15 credit hours a semester, the cost for students, the state, and taxpayers is lowered. For students that attend a 4-year institution, money is saved because the cost of taking 15 credit hours and 12 credit hours in the same semester is the same.

### **Financial Aid Regulations**

The US Department of Education created federal regulations to push students to stay on track to graduate within a timely period. At the beginning of each academic year, a student’s satisfactory academic progress (SAP) is evaluated (K. Young, personal communication, March 26, 2015). If students want to continue to receive federal financial aid, they have to abide by SAP regulations. Students must maintain a C average to receive financial aid. They also have to successfully complete 67 percent of the classes that they attempt. Lastly, students must complete their degree program within 150 percent of the time allotted. For example, if a student is working towards a four-year degree, the degree must be completed within 6 years.

## **Eastern Kentucky University**

Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) is a public, regional institution of higher education that serves over 16,000 students (Eastern Kentucky University, 2014). Associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in more than 100 majors are offered. There are five colleges within the university: the College of Arts and Sciences, the College of Business and Technology, the College of Education, the College of Health Sciences, and the College of Justice and Safety.

### **EKU Learning Communities**

In Fall 2012, the First Year Courses department at EKU implemented its learning communities for exploratory freshmen students in their first semester of college (First Year Courses, 2014). The learning communities linked students in a student success seminar and either an English or a communications class. An introductory psychology class was later added to allow first semester psychology majors to partake in the cohort. All of these courses are either general education requirements or EKU university requirements needed for graduation.

Students who are enrolled in learning communities take the paired courses with the same cohort (First Year Courses, 2014). Administrators hope that participation in the learning communities will help first-year students build connections to the university and gain confidence in their academic abilities. Other goals that administrators have for the learning communities are:

- Increasing student engagement, motivation, and persistence;
- Having an identifiable peer-support network from the beginning of the college career;

- Gaining a sense of community through the development of positive relationships with campus resources, peers, and professors; and
- Promoting skills such as effective communication, problem solving, and critical thinking.

Students eligible to participate in learning communities are pre-enrolled in them (J. Hearn, personal communication, May 20, 2015). To be eligible to participate, students have to follow specific guidelines. They are not allowed to have been admitted as a Success First student, and they cannot have declared majors. Students also may not have more than one college readiness/developmental requirement in order to be eligible to enroll in learning communities. Table 1.1 shows the criteria for student enrollment in learning communities.

### **Textbooks**

In past years, student success seminar instructors did not have a common textbook to teach from (R. Conneely, personal communication, June 2, 2016). The textbooks that were considered costed students about fifty to sixty dollars, which was not cost effective. After attending a session on textbooks at a conference on the First-Year Experience, the former director decided that ECU should create its own textbook for its first year students. A committee of various representatives on campus was put together to create a new textbook that contained ECU-specific information. The new book, published in 2014, only costs students twenty dollars.



## **First Year Leaders**

GSD 101 First Year Leaders are peer leaders/mentors assigned to specific courses during the fall semester (First Year Leader, 2016). They work with instructors to help students foster positive relationships on campus and gain a sense of community.

The peer leader program began with the student success seminars in 2010 (R. Conneely, personal communication, June 2, 2016). There were then eight students that were brought in to help the QEP Critical Thinking Initiative. After some evaluation, it was determined that First Year Leaders were not effective in the classroom and that the program needed to be re-evaluated. In Fall 2013, First Year Leaders were reintegrated into the GSD 101 Learning Communities. The students have to complete an online application and complete successful interview to be considered (First Year Leader, 2016). Students under consideration to be a First Year Leader also have to have taken GSD 101 as a freshman, maintain a minimum GPA of a 2.0, and possess a desire for assisting new students with the transition process.

First Year Leaders have responsibilities both inside and outside of the classroom (First Year Leader, 2016). In the classroom setting, First Year Leaders are expected to lead icebreaker activities with students, attend his/her assigned GSD 101 class at least once a week, and be an available resource to the students. Outside of the classroom, First Year Leaders attend a required GST 300 class that teaches leadership skills, maintain out-of-class experiences with students, and serve as someone offering guidance and support to students.

### **Team Building Session**

To reach the goal of creating a sense of community through the development of positive relationships with campus resources, peers, and professors, the students in learning communities are involved in a team-building session during the second week of the semester (R. Conneely, personal communication, June 2, 2016). The team building exercise is a collaboration with the ECU Campus Recreation department.

### **Major and Career Series**

The Major and Career (MaC) Series is a collaboration between the First Year Courses and Learning Communities department and the Center for Career and Cooperative Education at ECU that began in Fall 2013 as the “GSD Career Series” (P. Capretti, personal communication, August 1, 2016; A. Tudor, personal communication, August 1, 2016). In previous years, career exploration for students was given through the GCS 199 Career Counseling Seminar created by the ECU Counseling Center. The class was not mandatory and only a small number of students took the opportunity.

In Spring 2013, University Programs (the department that the First Year Courses and Learning Communities was under) and the Counseling Center proposed that the opportunity to explore majors and careers be given to all exploratory freshmen and embedded into the required GSD 101 student success seminar (P. Capretti, personal communication, August 1, 2016; A. Tudor, personal communication, August 1, 2016). A committee of staff from the Center for Career and Cooperative Education, First Year Courses, University Advising, GSD 101 instructors, and then-Assistant Dean of University Programs made up the committee to develop the MaC Series.

The MaC Series is a self-assessment for students, which allows them to evaluate their skills, values, priorities, and interests (P. Capretti, personal communication, August 1, 2016). It also allows students to investigate majors and job opportunity outlooks, interview professionals in the field, and complete a final reflection. Each year, the MaC series is revised by the First Year Courses and Learning Communities department and the Center for Career and Cooperative Education based on qualitative and quantitative feedback from students and professors.

### **Learning Communities**

Learning communities are becoming more prominent in institutions of higher education as an effort to increase student retention and student engagement (Rohli & Rogge, 2012; Love, 2012; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Tinto, 2003). A learning community is defined as a group of about 10-25 students who begin a program together, go through the different experiences and projects within the program, and end the program together (Maher, 2005).

Generally, learning communities consist of two courses linked together, most commonly a student success seminar and another course (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Seidman, 2013). These classes, typically linked during the students' first semester or year, emphasize forming peer groups, small class sizes, and collaborative teaching (Talbert & Boyles, 2005; Tinto, 2003; Rocconi, 2011; Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006; Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood, & Wright-Porter, 2011).

Learning communities show to have a positive impact for students at colleges and universities, with large numbers of part-time students and residential institutions (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011). Institutions of higher education implement learning

communities for different reason but share the common goal of making it easier for students to make friends, succeed academically, and form study groups (Goldman, 2012; Rohli & Rogge, 2012; Seidman, 2013). By making these connections on campus, students have a better chance of being retained. Students in learning communities have identified themselves as having improved skills in oral presentations, decision-making, reading, and writing, as well as a better sense of community and on-campus safety (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, & Adkinson, 2011).

### **History of Learning Community Implementation: Dewey and Meiklejohn**

Learning communities are rooted in the 1920s and the work of Dewey and Meiklejohn (Love, 2012; Talburt & Boyles, 2005; Goldman, 2012; Kellogg, 1999). They both founded experimental schools (Dewey's school was an elementary school; Meiklejohn's school was the two-year Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin). The goal of both experimental schools was to improve the overall educational experience of undergraduates (Goldman, 2012).

Meiklejohn's approach was considered to be the practical origin of learning communities (Talburt & Boyles, 2005). During the first year of participating in the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin (which lasted from 1927 to 1932), students and faculty were involved in a two-year curriculum based on reading and discussing classic Greek literature and then comparing it with contemporary American literature in their second year (Talburt & Boyles, 2005; Kellogg, 1999). The students were required to connect the ideas and write a paper during the summer between their first and second year. Students used their hometowns as labs, looking at different political

and social patterns, and applied the theories that they learned in the classroom to the real-life environment around them (Love, 2012). No grades were given until the end of their sophomore year. The students also lived in the same residence hall.

Dewey's approach was considered to be the philosophical origin of learning communities (Talbert & Boyles, 2005). Dewey criticized society—specifically the daily lives of citizens. He believed in a learning-by-doing philosophy and used students' past experiences as beginning points. In his approach, social interaction was necessary because the school projects that students were involved in required integration of ideas to solve problems.

### **1960s through 1980s**

During the 1960s and 1970s, higher education expanded rapidly (Love, 2012). This included the creation of sub-colleges within colleges (such as honors programs), as well as integrated academic programs for first- and second-year students. Faculty, staff, and students on college campuses also created programs that promoted community and retained a balance of education for the good of the community (like Meiklejohn and Dewey believed in) and education for workforce development. In the 1970s, learning communities' growth increased with implementation at institutions such as SUNY Stony Brook in New York and Evergreen State College in Washington. Learning communities became more common in higher education in the mid-1980s (Maher, 2005). The Danforth Foundation Initiative gave grants to more than 20 universities in support of the modification of educational administration programs. Each program created a cohort as a part of the change.

## **Current Trends**

Learning communities can now be found at more than 800 colleges and universities in the United States (Love, 2012). There is a trend in higher education to push for higher student engagement (Rohli & Rogge, 2012). Several studies have been conducted on the implementation of learning communities. One study showed that 30% of first year students at four-year colleges and universities participate (or plan to) in learning communities. Another study showed that 62% of colleges enrolled first-year students in learning communities (Love, 2012).

## **Types of Learning Communities**

There are five main types of learning communities in higher education: federated learning communities, paired or clustered courses, residential learning communities, team-taught learning communities, and learning communities in large programs (Price, 2005; Kellogg, 1999).

### **Federated Learning Communities**

Federated learning communities allow the cohort of students to take part in three theme-based courses in addition to a three credit hour seminar taught by a Master Learner (Kellogg, 1999). The Master Learner is a professor from a different subject area who takes the courses along with the other students. He or she then leads the seminar, assisting students with the integration of ideas from the other classes and gathering the opinions of the other students. During the time spent in federated learning communities, Master Learners are relieved of their other teaching duties.

### **Paired, Linked, and Clustered Courses**

Paired or linked-courses learning communities connect individual courses through the cohort process or block scheduling (Price, 2005; Kellogg, 1999). In this type of learning community, the student experience is a content-based course with support of a skills-based course. It normally enrolls between 20 to 30 students in courses together. The classes that are linked tend to be related through curriculum and/or have another logical connection. The professors in these linked courses may teach independently or coordinate their syllabi, combining class meetings or scheduling off-campus field trips.

Clustered learning communities create a block schedule of four to five courses together (Price, 2005; Kellogg, 1999). Of these courses, only two may be connected across the curriculum. The courses are usually based on a specific theme, issue, or historical period. The level at which the faculty work together depends on institution initiatives and can vary from team teaching to connected assignments. Students in clustered learning communities often have a seminar component and planned social events, such as field trips (Kellogg, 1999).

### **Residential Learning Communities**

Residential learning communities connect the academic portion of a students' life with the student's residential life, carrying the belief that learning happens outside of the classroom in addition to inside of it (Price, 2005). Students are intentionally organized by major or specific courses and live in a designated area. Within the residence halls, there is opportunity for the students to thrive socially through extracurricular activities, such as

group dinners, parties, and movie nights. There are often full-time staff and students working as leaders within the residence halls to further foster a sense of community.

### **Team-Taught Learning Communities**

Team-taught learning communities allow faculty to create curricula and organize two or more courses around a common theme (Price, 2005; Kellogg, 1999). Themes can prepare students for future professions, be broad, or stress skill development. Around 75 students can be enrolled in team-taught learning communities; however, students and faculty may break into smaller groups to discuss texts, attend lectures, and do community service.

### **Learning Communities in Large Courses**

Learning communities in large courses are often used for large introductory and freshman courses in hopes of allowing students the opportunity to create a smaller group that they can study and work with (Price, 2005). They are typically called freshman interest groups (Price, 2005; Kellogg, 1999). This type of learning community is typically found at larger institutions because different types of freshman interest groups can be offered at the same time. These learning communities are often related to the student's major and led by peer mentors/advisors. Faculty that teach within these learning communities play a smaller role in the learning experience and rarely coordinate the curriculum with activities.

A study at the University of North Texas showed a significantly higher number of students in academic good standing and a significantly higher positive retention outcome



for students enrolled in first year courses learning communities (Tampke & Durodoye, 2013).

A study at the University of Missouri-Columbia studied students' academic records to determine if participation in freshman interest groups could predict higher levels of persistence and academic achievement (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The 1995 freshman interest group had a one-year retention rate of 87% compared to 81% of nonparticipants. A longitudinal study of the same cohort showed a 12% higher retention rate of participants as compared to nonparticipants.

### **Elements of a Learning Community**

There are three main elements in a learning community that affect the educational experience: a social presence, a cognitive presence, and a teaching presence. Each of these elements, although separate, must work together in order for student engagement to occur. With student engagement, retention is more prevalent.

#### **Social Presence**

The social presence is the students' need to feel like a part of the campus community (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). The social presence is looked at in terms of social context, interactivity, and privacy. Social context refers to the perception of the experience by the individual. Interactivity is a sense of participation and becoming involved in something. A sense of privacy and trust is also important to the social presence because there are expectations that a person has when becoming involved in social relationships.

### **Cognitive Presence**

The cognitive presence gives students presented with a problem the ability to find a solution (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Cognitive presence is carried out in four phases: the triggering event, exploration, synthesis, and resolution. The triggering event is the recognition of the problem/question. Exploration involves the group expressing opinions, making suggestions, and the initial brainstorming. Synthesis occurs when ideas are summarized and a solution is identified. The resolution comes when there is a group consensus about what the solution should be.

### **Teaching Presence**

The teaching presence involves the facilitation of coursework and the direction given by instructors that assist in allowing students to better themselves (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). It involves providing additional assistance to the student and modeling the behaviors that the instructor expects of them.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The freshman year of college is a stressful transitional year for a student (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Raab & Adam, 2005; Veenstra, 2009). Many students do not effectively make the transition from high school to college (Raab & Adam, 2005). When students are admitted to a college or university, they are admitted because they have met admission requirements. The students' history is not identical. Administrators, faculty, staff, and other students have to provide an environment that is student-friendly and that supports the needs of individual students. The quality of the student support can influence the students' decision to remain at an institution after the first year. Schlossberg's Transition Theory illustrates the impact that learning

communities can have on freshman retention, and Tinto's Dimensions of Institutional Action illustrates principles necessary to retain students.

### **Schlossberg's Transition Theory**

For many freshmen, being at college is their first time away from home and their parents. 'Transitions,' as defined in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2012) are "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p.215). Transitions provide the chance for people to learn and develop.

Schlossberg's transition theory is a theory on developing into an adult.

#### **Type, Context, and Impact of a Transition**

In order to fully understand how a particular transition can affect a particular person, one must think about the type of transition, the context of the particular transition, and the impact the transition has on the person (Evans et al, 2012).

There are three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevents. Anticipated transitions are predictable in occurrence (Evans et al, 2012). Graduating from high school for the incoming freshmen college students is an anticipated transition. Unanticipated transitions cannot be scheduled and are not predictable. Nonevents are transitions that are expected but may not necessarily occur. Nonevents can be personal (related to individual goals), ripple (felt because of a nonevent of someone close), resultant (the result of an event), and delayed (an event has not occurred yet but is still anticipated).

The context of a transition indicates one's relationship to the transition and the setting in which the transition will take place (Evans et al, 2012). The impact of a

transition is determined by the level at which the transition changes the individual's daily life. If many transitions occur at once, stress levels can elevate.

### **Transition Process**

Even though a transition can be caused by a specific event or nonevent, the way that a person deals with a transition can extend over a period of time (Evans et al, 2012). The way that a person appraises a transition is important in how they cope with it. Primary appraisal is how the person views the transition. Secondary appraisal is a self-assessment of a person's resources when dealing with a transition. There are four major sets of factors that influence how a person is able to deal with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies.

### **Situation**

When looking at the situation, there are eight factors to consider:

- Is there a trigger (an event that causes something to happen) of the transition?
- Does the transition occur during a "good" or "bad" time?
- Is there anything that the person feels in within his or her control?
- Is a role change involved?
- Is the transition permanent, temporary, or uncertain?
- Has the person had previous experience with a similar transition? If so, how did he or she cope?
- Are there multiple causes of stress at the same time?
- Who is responsible for the transition (Evans et al, 2012)?

## **Self**

Self is classified into two areas: personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources (Evans et al, 2012). Personal and demographic characteristics affect how someone views life. It includes socioeconomic status, age, gender, sex, ethnicity, and health. Psychological resources, which are aids to coping, include spirituality, outlook, and ego development.

## **Support**

Support refers to social support, including intimate relationships with friends, family, institutions, and communities (Evans et al, 2012). These support systems provide affection, honest feedback, and constructive criticism. Some support systems are stable while others may be likely to change.

## **Strategies**

Strategies for dealing with a transition typically fall into three categories: those that change the situation, those that control the problem, and those that help manage the stress after the transition has occurred (Evans et al, 2012). Managing stress can come in the form of using direct action, seeking information, reserving action, and internalizing psychological behavior.

## **Transition Theory in Relation to Retention**

Learning communities can assist students in seamlessly transitioning to college (Brownell and Swaner, 2009). Studies show that the communities help students build their identities as learners and make them feel like they are a part of the campus community. Transition theory has been used to explain “friendsickness,” caused by

moving away from the established network of friends, educators, and family a student may have had in high school (Evans et al, 2012).

Creating learning communities during the first year of students' academic career is crucial in retaining them (Racchini, 2005). Underserved student populations have indicated that learning communities have helped with the transition to campus because they aid in building student identities as learners and giving them a sense of belonging on campus (Brownell & Swaner, 2009).

### **Tinto's Dimensions of Individual Departure**

Based on the works of Durkheim and Van Gennep, Tinto's theory states that students leave college due to several student attributes, skills, intentions, commitments, and interactions with people of the campus community (Seidman, 2012). The most important factor in student retention is the student experience on campus, known as integration. Tinto believed that the more a student is integrated into the campus community, the more likely they are to be retained.

Tinto hypothesized that students go through three stages in order to become integrated in the campus community: separation from communities of the past, transition between communities, and incorporation into the communities of the college (Seidman, 2012).

#### **Separation from Communities of the Past**

The first stage of Tinto's theory requires students to withdraw, in differing degrees, from membership in the communities that are associated with their family, high school, and hometown hangouts (Seidman, 2012). For the students who reside on

campus, this is more of a mental separation than a physical one. Students who are unable to successfully withdraw from their family or past peers that may devalue higher education will have difficulty integrating into the campus community and therefore be less likely to persist.

### **Transition between Communities**

When a student comes from a community that is similar to the college community, they have a shorter transition period than students that do not come from a community similar to the college campus (Seidman, 2012). Tinto states that students whose parents went to college are more likely to be retained because their parents are able to guide them through the academic and social bureaucracy of college. The stress level of the student is reduced because he/she can anticipate the types of events that occur within the transition.

### **Incorporation into College Communities**

In this final stage of integration, students are able to integrate into the college community (Seidman, 2012). Tinto states that students need to integrate into both the social and academic sectors of the college. Academic integration can either be formal or informal. Formal academic integration refers to how the student's ability and skills coincide with the academic demands of the college. For example, underprepared students are more likely to leave college. Informal academic integration refers to the similarities of the values held by the campus community and by the student.

### **Social Integration**

Social integration refers to the interactions of students within the social system on campus (Siedman, 2012). Formal social integration can be measured by participation in student organizations. Informal social integration can be measured by peer-group interaction. Tinto suggested that an absence of social integration might reinforce the feeling of separation between the student and the campus community, which can cause the student to leave the institution.

### **External Events**

There are external events that have an impact on the student's choice to depart from an institution (Siedman, 2012). The level of student integration can vary depending on if the institution is a two-year or a four-year institution. Therefore, the theory is more applicable to four-year institutions.



## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine if first-time freshmen that are enrolled into learning communities are retained at a higher rate and earn higher grade point averages than first-time freshmen not enrolled into learning communities. Retention is measured by fall-to-fall enrollment.

The following questions were explored:

- 1.) Are there differences in the fall-to-fall retention rates between first-time full-time freshman students enrolled in learning communities compared to first-time full-time freshman students not enrolled in learning communities?
- 2.) Are there differences in the fall-to-fall grade point average of first-time full-time freshman students enrolled in learning communities compared to first-time full-time freshman students not enrolled in learning communities?

### **Context of the Study: Eastern Kentucky University**

The study took place at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU). EKU is located in Richmond, Kentucky, a town that is in the heart of the Bluegrass (Eastern Kentucky University, 2014). According to the EKU Office of Institutional Research (2015), the number of first-time freshmen in Fall 2014 was 2,537. The diverse population of full-time students included 81% White, 9.6% Black, 3.9% identifying as two or more races, 2.7% Hispanic or Latino, .8% nonresidential, 3.5% Asian, 2.7% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 1.9% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. The population of first-time freshmen in 2014 also was primarily female and Kentucky residents from outside of the EKU service region.

## **EKU Learning Communities: Program Description**

In the Fall of 2012, the First Year Courses department at ECU implemented its learning communities for exploratory freshmen students in their first semester of college. The learning communities linked students in a student success seminar and either an English or a communications class (First Year Courses, 2014). An introductory psychology class was later added.

Participants in the learning communities must be undeclared majors. They also may not have any college readiness/developmental needs with the exception of math. Learning community participants also must be enrolled as full-time students with a minimum of 12 credit hours at the ECU Main Campus in Richmond, KY (J. Hearn, personal communication, May 20, 2015).

### **Sample**

This study included first-time, full-time freshmen that were enrolled in Fall 2014. Random samples, as displayed in Table 3.1, of 184 students enrolled in the GSD 101Z and ENG 101Z learning community and 186 students enrolled in GSD 101 and ENG 101 but did not participating in the learning communities were gathered. The lists were generated from a large institutional database with permission from university personnel. The random sample of the GSD 101 and ENG 101 group was created by the online random number generator Stat Trek.

Table 3.1

*Learning Community Students*

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	No	186	50.3
	Yes	184	49.7
	Total	370	100.0

To determine the number of students enrolled in a Learning Community in Fall 2014, the researcher imported the students with a “Z” course indicator. Learning Community courses have a “Z” indicator. Once that list was available, the researcher filtered the students specifically enrolled in ENG 101Z and GSD 101Z. To ensure that the groups were mutually exclusive, the researcher also put notations beside those students so they did not show up on the list of students enrolled in ENG 101 and GSD 101. The total number of students who were not enrolled in Learning Communities in Fall 2014 was 726. The total number of students who were enrolled in ENG 101Z and GSD 101Z was 185.

To determine the number of students enrolled in ENG 101 and GSD 101 but not participating in a Learning Community, the researcher exported the students enrolled in both GSD 101 and ENG 101 during the Fall 2014 semester. These students did not have

the “Z” indicator. The total number of students who were enrolled in ENG 101 and GSD 101 was 726. A random sample of these students was selected to match the sample size of the students in the learning community sample.

### **Gender by Learning Community Participation**

To examine the gender of the students enrolled in the learning communities and the control group, a crosstabulation was created. The crosstabulation in Table 3.2 shows that the number of females in both the learning communities group (55.4%) and the control group (55.4%) are slightly higher than the number of males in the learning communities group (44.6%) and the control group (44.6%).

Table 3.2

#### *Gender – Learning Community Crosstabulation*

			Learning Community		Total
			No	Yes	
Gender	Female	Count	103	102	205
		% within Learning Community	55.4%	55.4%	55.4%
	Male	Count	83	82	165
		% within Learning Community	44.6%	44.6%	44.6%
Total	Count		186	184	370
	% within Learning Community		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

### Racial Minority by Learning Community Participation

A crosstabulation was created to disaggregate the race (white and non-white) of the learning community group and the control group. The crosstabulation in Table 3.3 shows that the majority of the students in both the learning communities (90%) and in the control group (79.2%) were white. This is significantly higher than the non-white students enrolled in learning communities (10%) and in the control group (20.8%).

Table 3.3

#### *Racial Minority – Learning Community Crosstabulation*

			Learning Community		Total
			No	Yes	
Racial Minority	No	Count	141	162	303
		% within Learning Community	79.2%	90.0%	84.6%
	Yes	Count	37	18	55
		% within Learning Community	20.8%	10.0%	15.4%
Total	Count	178	180	358	
	% within Learning Community	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

### First-Generation by Learning Community Participation

To display the proportion of learning community and control by first-generation, the crosstabulation shown in Table 3.4 was created. The number of first-generation

students who were in learning communities (10.9%) and in the control group (8.6%) was significantly lower than students whose parents had attended some college in the learning communities group (89.1%) and the control group (91.4%).

Table 3.4

*First Generation – Learning Community Crosstabulation*

			Learning Community		Total
			No	Yes	
First Generation	No	Count	170	164	334
		% within Learning Community	91.4%	89.1%	90.3%
	Yes	Count	16	20	36
		% within Learning Community	8.6%	10.9%	9.7%
Total	Count		186	184	370
	% within Learning Community		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**ACT Composites Scores of Learning Community and Non-LC Students**

A comparison of ACT composite scores of students enrolled in learning communities and students not enrolled in learning communities was calculated to determine if there were differences in the ACT scores of the students in the study. The mean composite scores of students enrolled in learning communities (M = 21.72, SD = 3.094) were slightly higher than the control group (M = 20.61, SD = 3.201), as seen in

Table 3.5. These scores are important because of their use in determining college readiness.

Table 3.5

*Mean ACT Score by Learning Community*

ACT Composite

Learning Community	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
No	20.61	179	3.201
Yes	21.72	179	3.094
Total	21.17	358	3.192

**High School GPA by Learning Community**

A comparison of the high school GPA of students enrolled in learning communities and students not enrolled in learning communities was made to determine if there were differences in the academic performance of the students in this study prior to college. The mean high school GPA of students enrolled in learning communities ( $M = 3.2256$ ,  $SD = .48298$ ) was slightly higher than the mean high school GPA of the control group ( $M = 3.0187$ ,  $SD = .52917$ ), as shown in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6

*Mean High School GPA by Learning Community*

Learning Community	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
No	3.0187	183	.52917
Yes	3.2256	181	.48298
Total	3.1216	364	.51653

**Research Design and Analysis**

For both research questions, the analyses were performed using SPSS. This study conducted two Analysis of Covariances (ANCOVAs). An analysis of covariance is used in causal-comparative studies (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). To interpret the statistical significance of the ANCOVAa, the alpha was set at .05.

**Variables**

The dependent variables were Fall 2014 to Fall 2015 retention rates of first-time, full-time freshmen and cumulative grade point average (GPA) after the freshman year. The independent variable was enrollment in learning communities. Covariates included the following variables: Gender (0 = male, 1 = female), Race (0 = White, 1 = Non-white), first-generation (0 = yes, 1 = no), high school grade point average, and composite ACT score.



### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations to this study that need to be recognized. The study evaluated one cohort program at one public institution of higher education. This limits the generalizability of the findings to the other types of institutions and other forms of learning communities.

Students that participate in learning communities are handpicked by the staff in the First Year Courses department and the Registrar's Office at ECU. They are picked based on past performance indicators such as high school GPA and ACT score, and have no more than one college readiness need (typically in math). The students not enrolled in learning communities have more varying high school GPAs, ACT scores, and college readiness remedial needs.

Finally, the sample size is relatively small. This may limit the statistical power to find differences that may actually exist.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to report the findings of this study. Specifically, the purpose is to report if first-time freshmen that were enrolled in the learning communities during the Fall 2014 semester were retained at higher rates and had higher grade-point averages than first-time freshmen who were not enrolled in learning communities. Descriptive statistics and ANCOVAs are included in the findings. The first section of the chapter discusses the differences in retention between students enrolled in learning communities and the control group. The second section of the chapter discusses the differences in first-year college GPA between students enrolled in learning communities (N=173) and the control group (N=170).

Table 4.1

*Between-Subjects Factors: Retention*

		Value Label	N
Learning Community	0	No	170
	1	Yes	173

### Differences in Retention between Learning Community and Control Group Students

The first research question was focused on determining if first-time freshmen enrolled in learning communities are retained at higher rates than first-time freshmen not

enrolled in learning communities. An Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) compared the fall-to-fall retention rates of students enrolled in learning communities and students not enrolled in learning communities while controlling for gender, race, first-generation, ACT composite score, and high school GPA. Of the students in the study, 65% not in learning communities were retained and 68% in learning communities were retained, as shown in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

*Group Statistics: Fall-to-Fall Retention*

Learning Community	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
No	.65	.479	170
Yes	.68	.467	173
Total	.66	.473	343

All of the variables account for 14% of the variance in the overall fall-to-fall retention rate. The only significant covariates affecting retention were high school GPA and ACT composite score. High school GPA is more predictive of the retention of first-time freshmen than ACT composite score, as shown in Table 4.3.

The estimated marginal means shown in Table 4.4 reveals that the control group had a higher adjusted mean retention (Adj. M = .692) compared to the adjusted mean retention of the students enrolled in learning communities (Adj. M = .638). However, controlling for student characteristics, the students who were not enrolled in learning

communities were not more likely to be retained than students enrolled in learning communities.

Table 4.3

*Tests Of Between-Subjects Effects: Dependent Variable: Retention*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	12.148 <sup>a</sup>	6	2.025	10.581	.000	.159
Intercept	1.833	1	1.833	9.581	.002	.028
Gender	.150	1	.150	.783	.377	.002
Racial_Minority	.518	1	.518	2.708	.101	.008
First_Generation_Student	.006	1	.006	.030	.863	.000
High_School_GPA	3.593	1	3.593	18.778	.000	.053
ACT_Composite	2.084	1	2.084	10.893	.001	.031
LC	.239	1	.239	1.247	.265	.004
Error	64.295	336	.191			
Total	228.000	343				
Corrected Total	76.443	342				

a. R Squared = .159 (Adjusted R Squared = .144)

Table 4.4

*Estimated Marginal Means: Groups Dependent Variable: Retention*

Learning Community	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
No	.692 <sup>a</sup>	.034	.625	.759
Yes	.638 <sup>a</sup>	.034	.571	.704

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Gender = .44, Racial Minority = .15, First Generation = .10, High School GPA = 3.1470, ACT Composite = 21.26.

### **Differences in GPA between Learning Community and Control Group Students**

The second research question focused on determining if first-time freshmen enrolled in learning communities had higher ECU GPAs at the end of the first year than first-time freshmen not enrolled in learning communities. An Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) compared the fall-to-fall GPAs of students enrolled in learning communities and students not enrolled in learning communities while controlling for gender, race, first-generation, ACT composite score, and high school GPA. The descriptive statistics in Table 3.5 show that the students enrolled in learning communities have a higher non-adjusted mean GPA (M=2.62) compared to the control group (M=2.21).

Table 4.5

*Descriptive Statistics: EKU GPA*

Learning Community	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
No	2.21811	1.136237	170
Yes	2.62098	1.052881	173
Total	2.42131	1.111836	343

In the ANCOVA, collectively the variables account for 37.4% of the variance in the cumulative GPA for the students in the study. Table 3.6 also shows that high school GPA is a greater predictor of the retention of first-time freshmen than ACT composite score. High school GPA is 4.5 times more predictive than ACT composite. The results also show that demographic characteristics are insignificant covariates, unlike the ACT composite and high school GPA.

Table 4.6

*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects: Dependent Variable: EKU GPA*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	162.922 <sup>a</sup>	6	27.154	35.111	.000	.385
Intercept	27.748	1	27.748	35.879	.000	.096
Gender	.851	1	.851	1.100	.295	.003
Racial_Minority	2.478	1	2.478	3.204	.074	.009
First_Generation_Student	.637	1	.637	.823	.365	.002
High_School_GPA	91.561	1	91.561	118.392	.000	.030
ACT_Composite	7.953	1	7.953	10.283	.001	.007
LC	1.852	1	1.852	2.394	.123	
Error	259.852	336	.773			
Total	2433.688	343				
Corrected Total	422.774	342				

a. R Squared = .385 (Adjusted R Squared = .374)

The estimated marginal means in Table 3.7 shows that students enrolled in learning communities have a higher adjusted mean cumulative GPA (Adj. M=2.496) compared to the adjusted mean of the control group (Adj. M=2.345), however the difference is statistically insignificant.

Table 4.7

*Estimated Marginal Means: Groups Dependent Variable: ECU GPA*

Learning Community	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
No	2.345 <sup>a</sup>	.069	2.210	2.480
Yes	2.496 <sup>a</sup>	.068	2.363	2.630

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Gender = .44, Racial Minority = .15, First Generation = .10, High School GPA = 3.1470, ACT Composite = 21.26.



## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

### **Overview**

This chapter discusses the findings of the research questions presented in the study. In this chapter, there will be a summary of the study, a discussion of the results of the retention and college GPA of the students, future implications for ECU, and suggestions for future research. Finally, this chapter concludes with the key points of the study.

### **Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine if first-time freshmen who were enrolled in the GSD learning communities during the fall 2014 semester were retained at a higher rate and had higher college GPAs than first-time freshmen who were not enrolled in the learning communities. First-year students drop out of college at a rate of 28% to 35%, and learning communities are being implemented across the country in an effort to increase retention (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Love, 2012; Rohli & Rogge 2012; Tinto 2003). ECU historically has never been able to reach the 75% retention rate goal set upon them by Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education.

Learning communities were implemented at ECU in the fall of 2012. The students enrolled in the learning communities are registered for a GSD 101 student success seminar and an introductory class in psychology, English, or communications. There are several goals for the learning communities. The ECU specific textbook helps increase student engagement, motivation, and persistence. The First-Year Leader and Team Building Session collaboration with Campus Recreation gives students the opportunity to gain a sense of community; develop positive relations; and identify a positive relation

with peers, professors, and the campus. The Major and Career Series activities help promote effective communication, problem solving, and critical thinking skills.

### **Interpretation of Results**

Two ANCOVAs were conducted to determine the effect of learning community participation on fall-to-fall retention and the ECU GPA of first-time full-time freshmen. The independent variables was enrollment in learning communities. The dependent variables were the Fall 2014 to Fall 2015 retention rates of first-time, full-time freshmen and cumulative freshman year GPA. The covariates in the ANCOVA were high school grade point average, composite ACT score, gender, race, and first-generation status. In both analyses, student demographics did not affect retention or ECU GPA and there were no significant differences in GPA or retention between learning community participants and the control group. Outcomes such as ACT composite score and high school GPA were the only variables that were significant.

### **Research Question 1**

After controlling for gender, race, first-generation, high school GPA, and ACT composite score, it was determined that learning community participation had no effect on fall-to-fall retention. Overall, 65% of students not in learning communities and 68% of students who were enrolled in learning communities were retained. When analyzing the retention of the students in the study using an ANCOVA, the estimated marginal means of the control group showed that the control group had a greater adjusted mean retention (Adj. M=.692) compared to the adjusted mean retention of students who were in the learning communities (Adj. M=.638), but not statistically different.

## **Research Question 2**

After controlling for the same variables as in the retention analysis, it was determined that learning community participation also had no effect on ECU freshman cumulative GPA. When analyzing ECU GPA, the students who were enrolled in learning communities had a higher adjusted GPA (Adj. M=2.496) compared to the adjusted mean cumulative GPA of the control group (Adj. M=2.345), but the difference was not statistically significant.

### **Inconsistency with Previous Research**

The findings in this study were not consistent with the existing literature. The literature showed that learning communities have a positive impact on first-year students' educational outcomes. This study revealed no significant difference in the retention rate and first-year GPA of students who are enrolled in the learning communities and the students who are not enrolled in the learning communities.

Learning communities allow students to make connections on campus, and when students make early connections they have a better chance of being retained and having higher GPAs (Rohli & Rogge, 2012; Goldman, 2012; Seidman, 2013). The students who take part in learning communities have said that the participation has helped them improve their skills in oral presentation, reading, and writing, along with allowing them to gain a better sense of community and safety on campus. This inconsistency with previous studies raises the question of why positive outcomes are not associated with the learning communities in this study.

### **Why Are Learning Communities Not Making a Difference?**

There are several potential reasons why participation in learning communities has no effect on student retention or GPA after the first academic year. The ECU Learning Communities program may not be effective. Different professors with different personalities teach the course, and the professor/student relationship could determine the success of the students. The data-tracking system also may be poor.

Another contributor to the results deals with the ECU student population. All students enrolled at ECU have the same access to support services like tutoring. There also are several student groups that a student, regardless of learning community involvement, can be involved in; these include the NOVA program and the Eastern Bridge Program, among others. The NOVA program at ECU is a support program for students who are either first-generation or show to have a financial need (NOVA, 2016). The NOVA program provides peer mentoring, service learning opportunities, financial counseling training, advising and registration assistance, and the chance to live in a living-learning community. The Eastern Bridge program, which is part of ECU Developmental Education, allows students with a high school GPA of 2.0 – 2.49 and an ACT composite of 15-19 to be admitted (Developmental, 2016). The program helps incoming students transition from high school to college and connects them with the resources necessary to be successful. Tutoring is a mandatory component of the program. Both NOVA and Eastern Bridge have staff members who keep in touch with them on a regular basis. Collectively, students in the control group may be accessing these services which are similar to those provided in learning communities, thereby diluting any positive differences in outcomes.

Retention is difficult to improve. There are non-academic factors that affect student retention and GPA. Family issues may occur that keep students from being successful. Also, the cost of higher education is becoming greater. From 2008 to 2016, tuition at four-year institutions rose 48 percent, and tuition at two-year institutions rose 35 percent (Kentucky, 2016). The percentage of loan debt for Kentucky students increased from 52 percent to 64 percent from 2008 to 2016. Students may do well academically but not be able to afford to come back to the university.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

#### **Admissions Requirements**

While this study indicates that involvement in the GSD Learning Communities does not significantly impact the retention rate or ECU GPA of first-time freshmen, the results do show that the biggest predictor of retention is the student's high school GPA. Currently, admissions and college readiness requirements weigh heavily on ACT scores. Standardized test scores are a common measure for higher education institutions, regardless of the high school a student attends (Westrick, Le, Robbins, Radunzel, & Schmidt, 2015). High school curricula vary, with some challenging students to perform at academically high levels and others not adequately preparing students for college. The high school GPA measures cognitive, non-cognitive, and behavioral characteristics. Teachers take into account factors like attendance, class participation, coping skills, and interpersonal capability when determining what grade a student deserves. The researcher plans on sharing the results of this study with the Executive Director of Enrollment Management because institutions of higher education in the state of Kentucky are going to performance-based funding. If the institution knows this, they may consider reviewing

student admissions requirements as a means of admitting students better equipped to be successful.

### **Performance-Based Funding**

Performance-based funding is defined as the linking of state funding directly to public campuses based on individual indicators (McLendon & Hearn, 2013; Nisar, 2014). This holds institutions accountable for performance outcomes in the areas of student retention and graduation, job placement rates, student scores on licensure exams, faculty productivity, campus diversity, and student learning (McLendon & Hearn, 2013).

When performance-based funding policies were introduced to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, policy makers were more focused on measuring “inputs,” like student enrollment (Nisar, 2014). Since 2000, policy makers have been more interested in institutional “outputs” such as graduation rates rather than enrollment. In 1978, Tennessee was the first state to implement the policy. As of July 2013, twenty-two states have implemented, or are in the process of implementing, performance-based funding for institutions of higher education (McLendon & Hearn, 2013).

Kentucky implemented performance-based funding in 1992 (McLendon & Hearn, 2013; Nisar, 2014). The state eventually went away from it, but in 2016, Governor Matthew Bevin re-implemented the policy to meet the fiscal demands of other areas of government (Kentucky, 2016). This study suggests ECU would fair better in such a funding model by weighing high school GPA more than ACT scores in its admissions model.

## **Future Research**

This study indicates that enrollment in the GSD Learning Communities does not significantly impact the retention rate or ECU GPA of first-time freshmen. The previous literature on the topic indicates that enrollment in learning communities positively affects retention and college GPA.

Why are the GSD learning communities not effective in terms of first-year retention and GPA at ECU? According to the research, learning communities have a common goal: for students to succeed academically, make friends, and form study groups. The learning communities at ECU are no different. They have First Year leaders who serve as peer mentors and help students become acclimated to campus. A textbook with ECU-specific information was created to be an affordable resource. Team-building sessions and the MaC Series were created to help students develop peer groups, critically and creatively think about their future, obtain better oral and written communication skills, and find the motivation to persist through college.

The researcher plans on sharing her findings with the new Director of First Year Courses and Learning Communities and the Coordinator of Learning Communities. The researcher will suggest that a qualitative study be conducted with students in the learning communities to see which components of learning communities work and which need improvement. The qualitative research could suggest particular parts of the programs that could be implemented, as well as components that need to be reviewed and taken out. Questions to be included in the qualitative study would be on subjects including out-of-class experiences, the influence of the first-year leader, and the final project.

This study examined one program with the learning community model in one Kentucky comprehensive university. The researcher proposes that future studies look at programs similar to the learning communities at benchmark institutions. The same type of analysis that was conducted in this study to identify the differences in retention and college GPA should be conducted at the benchmark institutions that have programs like EKU's learning communities. The data should be combined across all benchmark institutions. This larger sample size would increase the statistical power to find differences that actually exists. The data could also be collected over more than one year and follow students to graduation. If the program positively affects first-year GPA and retention, qualitative data from a survey of the participants in the specific programs can be used to determine which components of the program are beneficial to the students. If EKU plans to continue implementing learning communities that are increasingly effective, student input will be critical.

In a future study, a variable that should be taken into consideration is whether or not a student lives on or off campus. While there have been mixed findings regarding the positive college experiences provided by on-campus living, the majority of studies show that students who live on campus, especially in residence halls that encourage academic performance, have higher levels of retention (Burke & Barrett, 2009; Lau, Wong, Ng, Hui, Cheung, & Mok, 2013; Soria & Taylor, 2016). Students that live in residence halls have easier access to campus facilities, are more satisfied with their social lives than students living off-campus, and have a better physical and psychological quality of life.



Another variable that could be added to a future study is student engagement. Increased student engagement is one of the goals of the ECU learning communities, and four out-of-class experiences are required of the students in the student success seminar to assist with this. That can be seen as “forced fun.” The researcher would like to see how many students are willingly involved in activities outside of the classroom. Students that willingly participate in campus activities are more likely to be retained (Bonet & Walters, 2016).

One last variable that the researcher would like to consider is financial holds. Socioeconomic statuses was not a covariate in this study, and due to the rising costs of tuition, even students with low socioeconomic status are unable to return to college after their first year (Thayer, 2000; Titus, 2006; Walpole, 2003). This variable also could encourage institutional administrators to look at academic and need-based scholarships to determine if criteria need to be adjusted in order to allow for students to be retained.

Offering regular GSD classes may benefit the Department of First Year Courses and Learning Communities. This would give the department the opportunity to evaluate the learning communities and determine which modifications could make them more effective on the outcomes of retention and first-year GPA. A lot of time and energy goes into planning the curricula of the linked courses, but the energy could be put into determining the best way to serve the student population rather than continuing to do the same activities that have shown to have no positive effect on retention and GPA.

## **Conclusion**

Learning communities have been implemented at institutions of higher education across the country in an effort to raise student retention. Eastern Kentucky University first implemented learning communities in 2012 for exploratory students because research shows that students who come in without a major are harder to retain, and learning communities allowed those students to build a sense of community early on, which gave them a better chance of retention (Beachboard et al, 2011; Goldman, 2012; Rohli & Rogge, 2012; Seidman, 2013).

The reintegration of performance-based funding in Kentucky requires institutions to be held accountable for retention and graduation rates. The demand of a workforce of educated people is rapidly growing (Kentucky, 2016). By 2020, 62 percent of jobs Kentucky jobs will require experience with postsecondary education. Currently, only 42 percent of working-age adults have a postsecondary degree or higher. Rising tuition costs and student loan debt are becoming obstacles that many students cannot overcome. It is the responsibility of higher education institutions to determine effective measures of retention and how to increase it. It is also the responsibility of higher education institutions to make sure that the graduates of these institutions graduate with transferable skills that will be beneficial in their educational, personal, and professional lives.

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APPENDIX A:  
Fall 2014 GSD 101 Learning Communities Syllabus

Eastern Kentucky University  
Department of Academic Affairs/University Programs  
**COURSE SYLLABUS for GSD 101Z FOUNDATIONS OF LEARNING**  
**Learning Community**  
The Gateway to Critical & Creative Thinking and Student Success at ECU

**Three Credit Hours**

**Fall 2014**

**Instructor:**

**Office Location:**

**Office Hours:** (Minimum of 2 hours per week, on-campus)

**Phone:**

**Class Days & Times:**

**Location:**

**Section CRN#:**

**E-mail:**

**Catalog Course Description:**

A course to promote student success and lay the foundation for critical and creative thinking across the curriculum. Open to all first year students with fewer than 30 semester hours earned. Credit will not be awarded to students who have credit for ASO 100, BTO 100, EDO 100, GSO 100, HSO 100, or JSO 100.

**Purpose of GSD 101Z:**

The purpose of *Foundations of Learning* is to serve as an introduction to the college experience where you will build skills, competencies, and values reflective of an educated individual. The course is designed to promote success skills for college and life and to help your adjustment to the college environment. *Foundations of Learning* is intended to develop learners holistically through activities that promote personal, intellectual, emotional, social, physical, and vocational development. In addition this course will develop communication skills and enhance critical and creative thinking skills. Through this course, it is expected that you will become more fully engaged in the learning process and more connected to the ECU campus. Further, the class will open a dialog regarding your future role in the larger community and region.

**Purpose of a Learning Community:** Learning communities at ECU are classes in which students are co-enrolled with the same peer group. By participating in a learning community, you will be made aware of the relationship between the success skills you are developing in GSD 101Z and the application of these skills in a general education course. You will also be provided with opportunities to engage with your peers and the faculty of your learning community outside of class time.

**Student Learning Outcomes:**

As a result of your full participation in the course, you will be able to:

1. Articulate how ECU's General Education Program contributes to being a liberally-educated person.
2. Demonstrate the ability to apply the Elder & Paul Elements of Thought and Intellectual Standards of critical thinking.

3. Identify academic resources and support services important for academic success.
4. Engage in activities that promote connection to the university.
5. Identify short- and long-term goals and objectives, including college major and career path.
6. Develop a better understanding of who you are as it relates to career paths.

### **Course Overview:**

In this course, you will be asked to take an active role in your educational development, such as participating in classroom discussions, attending campus events, online readings, writing projects and presentations as assigned. You will be asked to interact with peers, faculty, staff, campus organizations, and the community.

In this course, it is expected that you will develop your higher-level thinking skills (critical thinking and creative thinking skills) by:

- Exploring and using relevant information in order to gain knowledge and solve problems;
- Evaluating information and ideas using appropriate methods;
- Expanding (developing) and generating your own ideas and;
- Expressing a point of view, developing it with awareness of alternatives.

### **Textbook/Learning Materials:**

- *Explore, Evaluate, Expand, Express: Academic Success and the ECU Experience, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.* (2014).
- Student Planner (available for purchase at Bookstore)
- 2014-15 ECU Undergraduate Catalog
- Online Resources:
  - Blackboard: <http://learn.ecu.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp>
  - ECU Student Handbook <http://studentaffairs.ecu.edu/studenthandbook>
  - ECU Colonel's Compass <http://colonelscompass.ecu.edu/>
  - MyPlan, Occupational Outlook Handbook and O\*Net Online websites

### **Course Requirements & Policies: [these are subject to instructor editing and should be revised to reflect your classroom expectations]**

1. You are responsible for your own learning and education. All work submitted by you must be your own.
2. Attend all class meetings, phoning or e-mailing **in advance** when an absence cannot be avoided.
3. Arrive to class on time. If you are late for class or leave early you may be considered absent.
4. No make-up assignments will be provided. If you are absent from class you are expected to obtain any class information missed.
5. Respect and abide by all mutually agreed upon aspects of classroom decorum.
6. Turn off all cell phones and other electronic devices prior to the start of class.
7. Actively participate in classroom activities and discussions.
8. Activate your ECU e-mail account in order to have access to campus computers, student e-mail and BlackBoard course support software. Check your student email account daily.
9. Complete all assignments, final project, and all exams on time.
10. Assignments are expected to be turned in on time. Late assignments may not be accepted and/or penalties may result.
11. Assignments are due at the beginning of the class.
12. All writing assignments must be double spaced, 12 point with Times New Roman font (or a similar font), and one-inch margins.

**Attendance and Participation: [Instructors may not edit/revise First Year Courses Attendance Policy as outlined below.]**

Students are expected to attend class and actively participate in all aspects of the learning process. This includes class discussions, written work, and in-class activities. National and local studies have shown a direct correlation between attendance and grade performance. This is particularly important in the *Foundations of Learning* course where learning takes place through classroom activities and group interaction. *Therefore, attendance in GSD 101 is considered mandatory.*

***The Department of First Year Courses Attendance Policy states that students who are absent from more than 10% of the regularly scheduled class meetings are subject to failing the course.***

Students enrolled in TR sections may not exceed 3 absences for the semester.

Students enrolled in a MWF section may not exceed 5 absences for the semester.

*Students who exceed the maximum number of absences are subject to failing the course.*

The 10% absences are provided in case they are needed for emergencies or for participation in university-sponsored activities. Emergencies are defined as circumstances beyond the student's control, such as personal illness, or critical illness or death in the immediate family. The 10% absences are NOT free "skips." Students who use the absences for skips will not have them available to cover emergencies and will not be allowed to go over the 10% limit.

Late arrival or early departure from class will be considered in the tabulation of absences as well.

**[If you take attendance for a grade or tabulate participation for a grade, please reflect your grading policy here.]**

**Evaluation and Grading:**

***Grading:*** [Refer to Blackboard for all required GSD 101 Assessments. Point values for the Major and Career Series and some other common assignments are predetermined for course consistency. Instructors may determine point values for the remaining required assessments and other assignments in the course. Points for the course should total 1000.

<b>Value of</b>	<b>Points Possible:</b>	<b>Points = Grade</b>	<b>Grade Points</b>
<b><u>class requirements:</u></b>			
Major and Career Series	280	900 – 1000 pts. (90-100%)	= A 4.0
2 Tests (100 points each)	200	800 – 899 pts. (80-89%)	= B 3.0
Information Literacy Project	100	700 – 799 pts. (70-79%)	= C 2.0
Out-of-Class Experiences (25 points x 4)	100	600 – 699 pts. (60-69%)	= D 1.0
Completion of Title IX online training module	20	< 600 pts. (<60%)	= F 0.0
	300	Mid-term grades will be available through EKU Direct by <u>October 13, 2014</u> .	
<b>Additional Assignments: (Articulated by Individual Instructors)</b>			
Examples:	XX	<b>[Do not edit/revise Course Total. Points for the course must equal 1,000 points.]</b>	
1) Quizzes	XX		
2) Reflections	XX		
3) Additional out-of-class experiences	XX		
4) In-class assignments	XX		
5) Attendance/Participation (not to exceed 100 pts)			
<b><u>Course Total:</u></b>	<b><u>1000</u></b>		

### **Tests**

There will be two major tests during the semester each worth 100 points, for a grand total of 200 points. The first test will take place prior to midterm.

### **Student Progress**

Your instructor will provide consistent and up-to-date information regarding student progress. Students are always encouraged to meet with their instructor to discuss grading and course evaluation. **[Instructors: You are highly encouraged to utilize and update the gradebook feature in Blackboard to encourage students to develop the habit of monitoring their course grades.]**

### **Quizzes & Reaction Papers**

There will be **XX** quizzes or reaction papers over the text to test your knowledge of the reading material and/or concepts learned throughout the semester.

### **Information Literacy Project**

You will work in groups throughout the semester on a problem based learning project centered on college success strategies. This project will involve library research, critical thinking, problem solving, team work and the presentation of a finished product to your class. Through this project, you will have an opportunity to become familiar with the resources at Crabbe Library and the Noel Studio. **The project is worth 100 points** in GSD 101Z; further, there is the potential for additional graded work related to this assignment in your other learning community course.

### **Out-of-Class Experiences**

You must attend a minimum of **XX [Instructor fills in-minimum of 4]** out-of-class activities or events on campus. These will include two mandatory New Student Days events: Hypnotic Intoxication, on Wed., Aug. 20 at 7 pm, and Funny Money, on Thurs., Aug. 28 at 7 pm. Both events will be held in the ECU Center for the Arts. Students are also encouraged to attend other New Student Days events during the first six weeks of the semester. **[Remainder of expectations are up to individual instructors to articulate.]**

### **Major and Career Series**

All students will complete a series of homework assignments, MyPlan self-assessments, and in-class activities designed to help in the process of determining a major and/or career direction. This is graded work; the accumulated total of this series is **280 points**.

### **Additional Assignments**

**[To be described by individual instructor to include reflections, homework, other projects, etc.]**

### **Official E-mail:**

An official ECU e-mail is established for each registered student, each faculty member, and each staff member. All university communications sent via e-mail will be sent to this ECU e-mail address.

### **Plagiarism and Academic Honesty:**

Students are advised that ECU's Academic Integrity policy will strictly be enforced in this course. Each student is expected to do his or her own work. Cheating will not be tolerated. Doing so could impact your grade for an assignment or your final grade for the course. The Academic Integrity policy is available at [www.academicintegrity.ecu.edu](http://www.academicintegrity.ecu.edu). Questions regarding the policy may be directed to the Office of Academic Integrity.

### **Students With Disabilities:**

A student with a "disability" may be an individual with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities such as learning, seeing or hearing. Additionally, pregnancy or a related medical condition that causes a similar substantial limitation may also be considered a disability under the ADA.

If you are registered with the Office of Services for Individuals with Disabilities, please obtain your accommodation letters from the OSID and present them to the course instructor to discuss any academic accommodations you need. If you believe you need accommodation and are not registered with the OSID, please contact the office in the Whitlock Building Room 361 by email at [disserv@ecu.edu](mailto:disserv@ecu.edu) or by telephone at (859) 622-2933. Upon individual request, this



syllabus can be made available in an alternative format.

**Financial Aid:**

Federal Financial Aid must be earned by attending and successfully completing coursework. Students should be aware that withdrawing from the University or ceasing to attend classes can result in the following:

- A balance owed to ECU for the Federal Financial Aid received for that term that was not earned
- Loss of future financial aid eligibility

**GSD 101 Withdrawal Process**

All first-year students seeking a baccalaureate degree must enroll in a Student Success Seminar during their *first* semester at ECU (Requirement is waived for transfer students with >30 hours). ASO 100, BTO 100, EDO 100, HSO 100, JSO 100, HON100, and **GSD 101** fulfill this requirement. Because Student Success Seminars are vital to academic success at ECU, students may withdraw from this course only under the following circumstances:

1. The student withdraws from the course during **the designated add/drop period AND** enrolls in another section of a Student Success Seminar.
  - a. If a student withdraws from the course during the add/drop period, but does not enroll in another section of a Student Success Seminar, a section will automatically be added to his/her schedule by the University Registrar. The student will then be considered officially enrolled in that course and will be held responsible for academic progress and tuition fees associated with that course.
2. The student **disenrolls entirely from the University** during/after the designated add/drop period.
  - a. After the add/drop period has ended (the first week of the regular semester), a student who is registered in a Student Success Seminar may no longer disenroll from the University via ECU Direct. If a student chooses to disenroll from the University, he/she must visit the Registrar's office or email [registration@ecu.edu](mailto:registration@ecu.edu) to have any developmental or student success seminar enrollments removed and thereby complete the process of withdrawing from the University.
  - b. After the add/drop period a student who withdraws from all non-Student Success Seminar courses via ECU Direct (with intentions of withdrawing completely from the University), but does not contact the Registrar's office to initiate a withdrawal from their Student Success Seminar, will still be considered officially enrolled in the Student Success Seminar and held responsible for academic progress and tuition fees associated with that course.

**In regard to withdrawal from any other courses,**

**Last day to Drop** a full semester course without a "W" is **August 24, 2014.**

**Last date to Withdraw** from a full-semester course is **September 14, 2014.**

APPENDIX B:  
Institutional Review Board Approval



Graduate Education and Research  
Division of Sponsored Programs

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## NOTICE OF IRB EXEMPTION STATUS

**Protocol Number: 16-234**

Institutional Review Board IRB00002836, DHHS FWA00003332

Principal Investigator: **Ashley Sweat** Faculty Advisor: **Dr. Charles Hausman**

Project Title: **The Effectiveness of Learning Communities on Freshman Student Retention Rates at Public 4-Year Institutions of Higher Education**

Exemption Date: **5/26/2016**

Approved by: **Dr. Jonathan Gore, IRB Member**

This document confirms that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has granted exempt status for the above referenced research project as outlined in the application submitted for IRB review with an immediate effective date. Exempt status means that your research is exempt from further review for a period of three years from the original notification date if no changes are made to the original protocol. If you plan to continue the project beyond three years, you are required to reapply for exemption.

**Principal Investigator Responsibilities:** It is the responsibility of the principal investigator to ensure that all investigators and staff associated with this study meet the training requirements for conducting research involving human subjects and follow the approved protocol.

**Adverse Events:** Any adverse or unexpected events that occur in conjunction with this study must be reported to the IRB within ten calendar days of the occurrence.

**Changes to Approved Research Protocol:** If changes to the approved research protocol become necessary, a description of those changes must be submitted for IRB review and approval prior to implementation. If the changes result in a change in your project's exempt status, you will be required to submit an application for expedited or full IRB review. Changes include, but are not limited to, those involving study personnel, subjects, and procedures.

**Other Provisions of Approval, if applicable:** None

Please contact Sponsored Programs at 859-622-3636 or send email to [tiffany.hamblin@eku.edu](mailto:tiffany.hamblin@eku.edu) or [lisa.royalty@eku.edu](mailto:lisa.royalty@eku.edu) with questions.

APPENDIX C:

VITA

## **Vita**

Ashley Matthews Sweat was born in Richmond, KY on February 1, 1984. She graduated from Berea Community High School in May, 2002. She then entered the University of Louisville and received a Bachelor of Science in Sociology with a minor in History in December 2005. She entered Eastern Kentucky University and received a Master of Science in Correctional and Juvenile Justice Studies in December 2008, and a Master of Arts in Student Personnel Services in Higher Education in December 2013.

She is currently employed at Eastern Kentucky University as an Academic Advisor for exploratory students for the University Advising Office.