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The Living-Learning Community Pyramid

Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas
University of Virginia

Jody E. Jessup-Anger
Marquette University, jody.jessup-anger@marquette.edu

Mimi Benjamin
Indiana University

Matthew R. Wawrzynski
Michigan State University

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The Living-Learning Community Pyramid



WHEN CONSTRUCTING A LIVING-LEARNING COMMUNITY, YOU CAN HAVE ALL THE BUILDING BLOCKS IN PLACE, BUT WITHOUT INTENTIONAL INTEGRATION YOUR PYRAMID IS MISSING ITS POINT.

By Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas, Jody Jessup-Anger,
Mimi Benjamin, and Matthew R. Wawrzynski

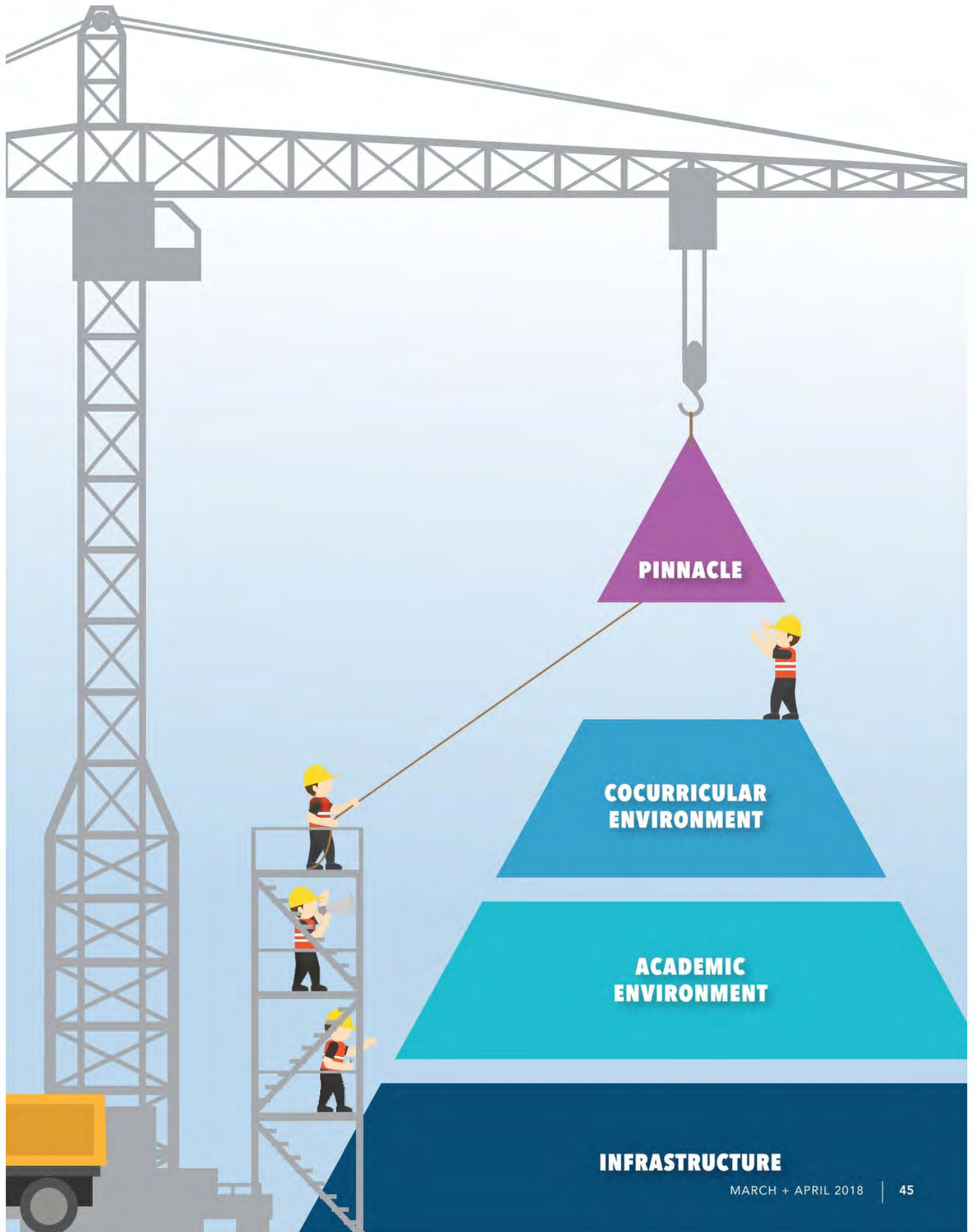
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Editor's Note:

For almost 20 years Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas has been studying living-learning communities, and she led the National Study of Living-Learning Programs which included data from more than 50,000 participants and 50 institutions. In the forthcoming book *Living-Learning Communities That Work: A Research-Based Model for Design, Delivery, and Assessment* (Stylus Publishing), Inkelas, along with co-authors Jody Jessup-Anger, Mimi Benjamin, and Matthew R. Wawrzynski, draw from their collective experience to lay out their best practices for creating a living-learning community. As they explain, once the infrastructure is set and the academic and cocurricular environments are nurtured, the final step is utilizing intentional integration to maximize program results. In this excerpt adapted from the book, the authors explain how to cap off a successful program.



those blocks need to be coordinated with one another in meaningful and intentional ways.

Optimally, all the blocks in the best practices model should be integrated. This means that the academic affairs and the residence life and housing professional staffs must be knowledgeable about each other's roles in the LLC, as integration is impossible without regular and effective communication. Fortunately, there are a variety of examples of how LLCs can integrate their program offerings to provide more impactful environments.

One option is to offer LLC students courses for credit as well as cocurricular activities. In offering a course open to members only, an LLC has several opportunities to take advantage of various cocurricular activities for that course. At the very least, the course could organize its students into study groups so dialogues and coursework begun in class can be continued into the residence hall. Or if the topic of the class is conducive to a service-learning project, the instructor can coordinate with the LLC to

of Wisconsin-Whitewater, notes in her article about service learning, "When service is conceived in this way, faculty are implicitly prompted to answer the two questions that should frame any service-learning course: (1) What type of service text should I assign, and (2) How will I meaningfully incorporate the service text with other texts utilized in the class?"

Similarly, if the course topic is related to a career or vocation, the instructor can invite individuals from that industry to the class to share their experiences working and then invite them to stay for dinner or a fireside chat with the LLC participants. Or when the LLC goes on a field trip to an industry site, the course instructor could take a few minutes of class time to discuss what the students will see there, what questions they might ask, or what observations they might make. The more opportunities students have to integrate what they are learning in the classroom into their lives in the residence halls, the more likely they will be able to apply their learning to other new contexts.

The final building block of the living-learning communities (LLCs) best practices model is what we call "the pinnacle." Like Maslow's

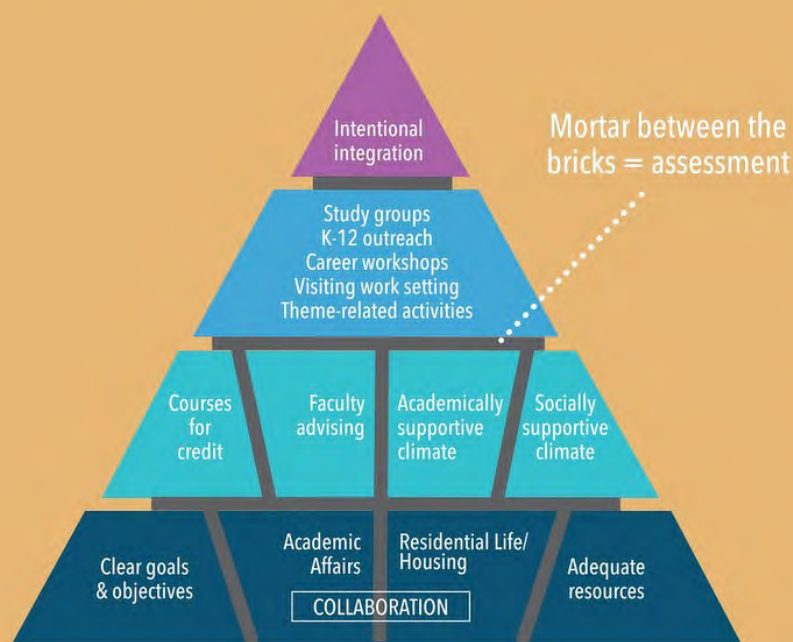
hierarchy of needs, in order for LLCs to reach the highest point on the pyramid, it is essential that all the lower levels of the pyramid are satisfied. Having clear goals and objectives for an LLC is critical in laying the foundation for its programming. Indeed, all other facets of the LLC – the courses, faculty involvement, a supportive residential climate, the cocurricular activities – should emanate from the LLC's goals and objectives. The pinnacle represents the extent to which all other blocks on the pyramid are aligned with the LLC's goals and objectives and integrated with one another. In essence, it is simply not good enough for an LLC to have all the blocks in the infrastructure, academic setting, and cocurricular environment;

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incorporate a service component into the class. If service-learning is incorporated, the instructor can take care to ensure that the service dimension is integrated into the course. One way to do this is to conceive of the service as a core anchor of the course, much like a text book. As Lori Varlotta, the dean of student life at the University

Field trips and invited speakers can also provide leadership opportunities for students. In our discussions with LLC coordinators and students, each described the formal and informal roles students played in planning these events, ranging from leading alternative spring break trips to providing logistical support for field trips or serving as a

Assessment Holds It Together



Although the pinnacle represents the highest level of the pyramid, there is a final aspect to the living-learning community best practices model. Described as the “mortar between the bricks,” assessment is a vital component to creating and maintaining vibrant LLCs. Effective assessments evaluate discrete parts of the LLC programming (e.g., courses, staff, and cocurricular activities) and the extent to which all facets of the program align with its goals and objectives and integrate with other elements of their programs. Despite acknowledged efforts by the LLCs studied in the National Study of Living-Learning Programs to strengthen their assessment efforts, most were only in the beginning phases of designing and executing their assessment plans. Accordingly, as LLCs contemplate the

types of assessments they might pursue, a strong assessment plan should include the extent to which the LLC’s various building blocks are aligned with the program’s goals and objectives, the effectiveness of the discrete building blocks in achieving those goals and objectives, and the level of integration of the various building blocks to form a cohesive program.

In assessing the extent to which programming and resources in the LLC model are integrated with one another, it is important for researchers to study how both the LLC student participants and faculty, staff, and community partners experience these integrative components. As a summative assessment, LLCs should measure how the integration of different activities (e.g., courses for credit and

cocurricular activities, faculty advising, and supportive residence hall climates) facilitates student outcomes, which should align with program goals and objectives. For example, did the coordination of an architectural tour field trip sponsored by the LLC enhance students’ learning outcomes in the architectural history course, over and above the course’s regular curriculum?

In addition, through formative assessment, LLCs should document *how* they make explicit connections between the various elements of the best practices model as well as which connections were more or less successful in augmenting students’ outcomes. Using the same example, did the instructor of the course meet with the LLC staff in charge of developing field trip ideas and brainstorm possibilities for excursions? When did that meeting take place, and what resources needed to be made available for the architectural tour to come to fruition? A good understanding of timing and how processes unfold can aid in LLC planning in future years. Moreover, LLCs should document various interventions attempted in relation to the event (in this case, the architectural tour field trip) and whether those interventions were or were not beneficial. For example, did providing the LLC participants with a short primer on prominent architectural styles in the nearby city prior to the field trip enrich their excursion experience? Did having the course instructor accompany students on the field trip bolster or detract from students’ experiences? Did choice of transportation influence the experience?

Like the assessment of LLC effectiveness in achieving its goals and objectives, there is no one way to study intentional integration and its effects. Once the types of integrative activities are identified for assessment, researchers should follow a standard assessment process, beginning with articulation of the study’s overarching research questions and

ASSESSMENT HOLDS IT TOGETHER

then the choice of methodology, followed by the selection of the study subjects, the modes of data collection, the strategy for data analysis, and the process through which conclusions are reached. Those unfamiliar with or lacking confidence in their social science assessment skills might enlist the assistance of constituents on their campuses who can be of help. Such key people might include staff working in research and/or assessment offices, staff in institutional research offices, faculty and graduate students in education and social science disciplines, and colleagues in other LLCs around the university, region, and national professional organizations. ■

host for a campus visitor. Students reported that these experiences inspired their passion for their area of study, gave them concrete understanding of what it might be like to work in a particular field, and helped to sharpen their leadership skills. One student who led an alternative spring break for an arts-focused LLC shared his observation that students come home from the trip with a new orientation toward community and thus are more apt to make changes in their own communities.

LLCs may also provide several programs and services that can enhance a residence hall's academic and social climates, such as in-hall faculty academic advising, peer tutoring, cultural programming, and social events. However, it may be equally important for the two halves of the LLC, academic affairs and residence life and housing (RLH) professional staff, to be transparent and in regular communication about their roles and responsibilities. For example, if resident assistants

notice an increase in stress regarding an upcoming midterm for a class that many of the LLC participants are taking, academic affairs could step up the peer tutoring or reserve a lounge for a study session. Or vice versa, if faculty notice an LLC student in their classes seeming more withdrawn than usual, or if they meet with the student during advising office hours and learn they are having roommate difficulties, they can notify the hall director or RA for a possible intervention.

Sometimes, a supportive climate in the LLC's residence hall can be facilitated by physical spaces funded by the academic affairs/RLH collaboration. At Pace University in New York City, each first-year interest group (FIG), despite being housed in the same residence hall, has its own lounge space that the LLC faculty partners, RLH staff, and participating students can decorate together, according to the FIG theme. For example, the group focusing on sports and recreation features a television seating area much like a bowling niche, as well as a foosball table. Meanwhile, the group focused on the body and mind uses its lounge as a yoga studio, complete with mats and other equipment. The personalized lounge spaces, mostly situated in central locations with a lot of natural light, also feature large logos designed by the students; the logos provide the group with an established identity that its participants can be proud of, and the lounges assure them that this is a space that supports their needs.

It is also valuable to intentionally integrate faculty advising to help create socially supportive residence hall climates. Although faculty tend to think of their roles in an LLC as limited to more academic matters, their awareness of program and campus activities and events can benefit the life of the residence hall. For example, visiting scholars or colloquium guests hosted by the faculty member's home department could be invited to visit the LLC, especially if the guest's expertise is

related to its theme. Say the Department of Political Science is holding a colloquium on election strategy and has invited the campaign manager of one of the presidential candidates to speak. If there is room in the speaker's schedule, perhaps they could conduct a fireside chat in the LLC during the evening or have lunch with students in the dining room. Even better, if the LLC has a guest apartment, the department could save on accommodations and use the spare lodging in exchange for an extended visit.

However, it need not be an extravagant event for a faculty member to have an impact. It could simply be a faculty member talking during office hours with students who are looking to make more friends and the faculty member recommending that they join the LLC peer group participating in the cocurricular activity that might be of interest to the students – whether an intramural team, a Friday night dinner and movie group, or a small set of students trying to launch a new entrepreneurial endeavor. For this to happen, however, the faculty member must be aware of the various activities and interests of the LLC students.

As mentioned previously, the academic climate of the LLC residence hall can be enhanced by mere awareness of the rhythms of the students' classes over the course of the semester. Programming led by residence life and housing, such as study skills workshops, test-taking tips, and stress-relief programming, can coincide with the timing of major assignments and examinations the students are undertaking. Cocurricular activities can also build on campus academic events, such as the Common Read (a book the university selects for all students to read) or Martin Luther King Day lectures, by holding smaller book clubs or sign-ups for lecture tickets.

For LLCs focusing on a specific academic discipline, such as engineering, it may be common for stu-

AN EFFECTIVE LLC IS NOT THE SUM OF ITS INDIVIDUAL PARTS; IT IS DEFINED BY THE LEVEL TO WHICH THOSE INDIVIDUAL PARTS WORK IN HARMONY WITH ONE ANOTHER TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' LEARNING CAPACITIES.

dents to form study groups, especially because they often take the same introductory classes (e.g., calculus, chemistry, physics) together in their first and second years. Participants in the engineering LLC get to know one another well as they study together for upcoming tests and exams and may begin, organically, to participate in campus cocurricular activities over time. For example, they may decide

to form their own intramural team, choose to go to the movies together on a Friday night, or even join a student club or organization of mutual interest. Individual students in the engineering LLC may not feel confident enough to strike out on their own and join such a club or form an intramural team, but the camaraderie formed through the academic study groups can serve as a way for students

to gain more confidence by participating in campus-based activities together.

Finally, an LLC should be nimble and integrated enough that it can capitalize upon serendipitous events and transform them into teachable moments. For example, in reaction to a local incident, such as a protest about fair wages on campus, the economics and society LLC could use this unplanned occurrence to study economic protest movements in American history and how they have shaped wage policies in state and federal governments. This LLC could organize a series of activities, such as bringing in professors to give lectures on the topic, watching movies related to protest movements, or forming mealtime discussion groups. However, in order to capitalize on these types of serendipitous phenomena, an LLC must



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have an infrastructure flexible enough to accommodate new programming and activities as well as the physical, human, and financial resources to support them and effective communication among all key stakeholders (students, faculty, staff) so that everyone can participate and benefit.

On one campus that was experiencing a high-profile incident of sexual violence, students in the wellness LLC became interested in learning more about tactics to intervene and defuse a potentially dangerous situation between peers. With the encouragement of the LLC staff, the students contacted the Title IX office on their campus and asked a staff member to visit with the LLC and teach them about bystander interventions. Word spread, the workshop was a success, and other residence halls began to ask the staff member to lead a similar workshop for their students. Soon the workshop became a staple for all different kinds of student groups in venues as diverse as LLCs, fraternities and sororities, and even academic departments. Thus, although the impetus for the intervention was an unfortunate incident involving sexual violence, more and more students, with the encouragement of an LLC, learned about how to intervene in potentially difficult situations and possibly prevent further violent incidents.

The concept of intentional integration sits at the pinnacle of the best practices model because integration serves to augment and enhance the building blocks that comprise the rest of the pyramid. The pinnacle is not a new component or element of LLC programming; instead, it serves to remind LLC leadership and practitioners that the effective strength of the LLC lies not in the individual blocks in the pyramid but in the extent to which they integrate to form a comprehensive and cohesive living and learning environment. After all, students – with or without an LLC – could indepen-

dently choose to live in a residence hall, interact with their professors and peers, take classes, and participate in cocurricular activities. But the purpose of an LLC is to provide its participants with a unified living and learning experience, where the program's theme permeates explicitly and seamlessly through all of its elements – from faculty, staff, and student interactions to the living environment, curriculum, cocurriculum, culture, and climate. When these facets of a student's college experience combine, the opportunities for learning, growth, and development can flourish.

This concept is not new to the higher education literature. Most of the bedrock theories about the college student experience rest on the belief that the integration of students' academic and social spheres is critical to their collegiate success. For example, Vincent Tinto, in his model depicting factors that influence students' persistence or departure, asserts that it is both academic and social experiences in the college environment – and the extent to which students can successfully integrate into both – that shape a student's decision on whether to remain in college. He further delineates the facets of the academic and social spheres of influence in a college environment into four categories: academic performance, faculty/staff interactions, extracurricular activities, and peer group interactions. These concepts are repeated within our LLC best practices model: courses for credit, faculty advising, residence hall academic and social climates, and cocurricular activities. Thus, we argue that an effective LLC can satisfy all of the necessary elements of Tinto's persistence model in one program.

The higher education literature provides another key to understanding how to help students take full advantage of their LLCs: *involvement* or *engagement*. The two terms, as used when describing the college student

experience, are analogous. Alexander Astin's theory of student involvement proposed that student success in college is directly proportional to their involvement with college. In other words, gains from college attendance are related to the extent to which a student is invested psychosocially and physically in the college experience. Similarly, Shouping Hu and George Kuh have defined engagement as "the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes." Thus, for students to truly benefit from a set of integrated activities within an LLC, they must fully engage in those activities that best characterize the ways they are integrated.

For example, say a business LLC offers a class on comparative successful organizational business practices. The instructor for the course could contact a local business that employs one of these practices and invite the owner or president to visit the LLC or ask whether students could meet with them at their place of work. Moreover, the instructor could assign students to develop their own service-learning projects employing one or more of the relevant business practices and sponsor the projects through the LLC. As projects are developed, students can reflect on what they have learned, positive or negative, about specific practices and how this may inform use of these practices in the future. Finally, if possible, those same practices could be infused into the community living agreement among the LLC participants. After a while, students could compare and contrast how effectively the practices may work in living versus working environments. It is not enough for students to merely learn about a concept in a stand-alone course. They should have the opportunity to reengage with the concept through multiple high-quality experiences, such as practical reinforce-

ment (meeting with a local business), application (using the practice in a service-learning project), and personal investment (community living standards). And the strength of the LLC is that students can experience this in- and out-of-class learning environment all in one location.

Although we know that not all LLCs will be able to fully implement a program that incorporates all the building blocks of the best practices model, it nevertheless still is crucial that they – as much as possible – integrate the blocks they do have. An effective LLC is not the sum of its individual parts; it is defined by the level to which those individual parts work in harmony with one another to enhance students' learning capacities. ■

Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas is the research director for Undergraduate Initiatives for the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.
✉ kki5x@Virginia.EDU

Jody Jessup-Anger is an associate professor and the program coordinator of the Student Affairs in Higher Education program through the College of Education at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
✉ jody.jessup-anger@marquette.edu

Mimi Benjamin is an assistant professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.
✉ Mimi.Benjamin@iup.edu

Matthew R. Wawrzynski is an assistant professor in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education (HALE) program at Michigan State University in East Lansing.
✉ mwawrzyn@msu.edu

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