

Bringing Theory to Practice: Psychological Well-Being Grant - Final Report (January 2016)

1. Institution: State University of New York, College at Geneseo
2. Principal Investigator: Monica E. Schneider, Associate Professor of Psychology
1 College Circle Geneseo, New York 14454
schneid@geneseo.edu; (585) 245-5200
3. Description of Initiative and Targeted Outcomes: Our project examined the impact of a Living-Learning Community on first-year students' well-being and college adjustment throughout their first year of college. The project had both a quantitative and qualitative component. For the quantitative component, we compared first-year students who participated in the Living-Learning Community (LLC) with first-year students who did not participate in the LLC (non-LLC) but who were enrolled in the required first-year Writing Seminar course (INTD105) in Fall 2014. All LLC students completed INTD105 during their first-year (either in Fall 2014 or Spring 2015). The incoming first-year students selected for the project completed surveys at three different times, at the beginning of their first year (Time 1: August 2014), after the first semester (Time 2: January 2015) and at the end of the academic year (Time 3: May 2015). The surveys contained the following measures: demographic information, two measures of psychological well-being, a measure of college adjustment, and measures assessing factors that have been found to predict students' well-being, college adjustment, and success in past research. LLC students also completed a survey assessing their perceptions of and satisfaction with the LLC. For the qualitative component, the main goal was to determine if and how living in the LLC improves students' first year experience, focusing on both their academic and social well-being. Two focus groups were conducted in November 2014 on students who were in the LLC for the 2013-2014 academic year, and three focus groups were conducted in Spring 2015 on students who were in the LLC during the 2014-2015 academic year. Results from this project were presented to the campus community and have been used to modify the LLC (now called Tesla House). In addition, the project has provided valuable information regarding the role that baseline psychological measures play in students' adjustment across their first year of college. Lastly, this project has been used to implement changes in other initiatives on campus. [See Appendix A for a copy of the presentation of qualitative results made to the campus community on Assesstivus Day, October 2015.]
4. Substantive Changes: none
5. Infusion of Initiative into Ongoing Opportunities: As a result of our project, the following changes have been made to the LLC (now called Tesla House): 1) the number of students have been decreased from 80 to 60 to better reach learning outcomes, 2) a First Year Experience Seminar for each group of majors was added for the Fall 2015 semester, 3) to improve students' 'integrative learning', the focus of INTD102 (Residential College Seminar) has been changed to include an integrative project where students form groups with different majors and execute a project of their choosing that integrates their disciplines and classwork into the campus and/or community, and 4) to further integrate and apply learning, a pre-semester summer experience in Letchworth State Park was

developed that is open to all incoming first year students (although it is targeted especially to Tesla House students). This experience is taught by 2 Geography professors for credit (http://www.geneseo.edu/first_year_institute/welcome-first-year-institute).

In addition, this project has informed the development of other campus initiatives including: 1) the expansion of Letchworth Pre-Semester trip to other residential communities on campus, 2) the development of a housing option called the "Medical Interest Group" for all students (new and returning) that functions as a living-learning community similar to Tesla House, 3) the continued assessment of Tesla House, and 4) the assessment of other living-learning communities and initiatives (e.g., FYE Seminar in Geology, Education or Physics).

6. Major Preliminary Results from Quantitative Assessment

A total of 109 first-year students (63 LLC students, 46 non-LLC students) completed the baseline survey (Time 1). Results indicated that, on average, the first-year students reported good psychological well-being, reflected by mean scores ranging between 4.64 - 4.84 out of a possible 6 on all baseline measures. These measures included social and academic self-efficacy, academic identification, flourishing, and expected college adjustment. However, some students reported scores as low as 2 – 3.48 out of 6 on these measures, suggesting that some of the first-year students had low psychological well-being at the start of college. There were no significant differences on these measures between LLC and non-LLC students. These results challenge the notion that students who opt to live in living-learning communities are psychologically different and perhaps more likely to be adaptive than the general student population.

A total of 74 students (41 LLC, 33 non-LLC) completed both baseline and the Time 2 survey. Significant or marginally significant differences emerged between the LLC and non-LLC students, with LLC students having greater flourishing, perceived peer support, adaptive social behaviors, and college adjustment (social, emotional) than non-LLC students after their first semester. A total of 44 students (24 LLC, 20 non-LLC) completed the Time 3 survey. Although LLC students reported higher means on several outcomes compared to non-LLC students, the only marginally significant difference between LLC and non-LLC students were in adaptive social behaviors. However, when multivariate analyses were conducted, significant or marginally significant differences emerged in social, academic, and emotional adjustment. One possible explanation for the lack of significant findings may be the small sample size, which significantly decreases power. Another possible explanation may be that the benefits of the LLC for first-year students may be stronger earlier in their first year (i.e., during the first semester), with non-LLC students “finding their way” through other mechanisms as the year progresses.

We examined the extent to which the LLC impacts students differently depending on their initial academic, social, or psychological needs. Results suggest that the LLC benefits students with lower psychological well-being scores at baseline differently than students with higher well-being baseline scores. For example, among students with lower baseline flourishing scores, those who were in the LLC had significantly higher flourishing scores and greater emotional college adjustment after the first semester (Time 2) and greater emotional college adjustment at the end of the year (Time 3) than those who were not in the LLC. For students with higher flourishing baseline scores, those in

the LLC reported significantly more socially adaptive behaviors after the first semester (Time 2) and at the end of the year (Time 3) than those who were not in the LLC. Also, students in the LLC had significantly greater social college adjustment and perceived more faculty support at the end of the year (Time 3) than those who were not in the LLC.

Major Preliminary Results from Qualitative Assessment

Ten students from the 2013-2014 cohort and 21 students from the 2014-2015 cohort participated in focus groups. Results suggest that the LLC provides excellent support for the academic and social transitions for students. Students praised the “instant friendships” and commented that taking classes together and living together created deeper and stronger friendships than they would have had otherwise. Students were able to meet and develop relationships with professors in their own academic major department and expressed gratitude in having the ability to meet professors outside their major department. In the 2013-2014 cohort, the academic transition was reported as the biggest benefit for, specifically, the Physics students. A number of students were asked to do research with Physics faculty in their first year, which they recognized as a huge advantage in their academic careers. Students from the 2014-2015 cohort did not have any opportunities for research in departments and did not make the same academic connections, but they reported a much easier social transition. Whereas the 2013-2014 cohort found the LLC to be competitive to a fault, the 2014-2015 cohort found the LLC to be extremely supportive and was a place where they were comfortable expressing themselves because other people felt the same way. Although we believe that there is integrative learning in the LLC, students did not recognize this learning when reporting their experiences. They reported that the LLC seemed isolated from the rest of campus and isolated from other first-year students. They noted a particular lack of communication between the Residence Life staff, the faculty who came to the LLC for events, and their faculty advisors. This lack of communication stood in the way of collaboration and integration between majors. Moreover, the narrative of the interviews provides no evidence that students increased their perspective-taking skills. One major finding echoed across all five focus groups was the benefit of peer education. Students recognized that finding a time and place to get together in study groups and to work on projects is much harder than it seems and that the LLC makes it easy. “Being able to ask for help from your neighbors is one of the greatest advantages. On south side, you’re lucky is one person on your hall has the same major as you, much less is in your class.” “The resources in the [LLC] were the best. Learning from tutors and from my peers is what helped me the most and it’s better than anywhere else on campus.”

7. Projected Timetable – Next Steps

- See section on *Infusion of Initiative into Ongoing Opportunities* for a summary of the changes being made to Tesla House and the implementation of other campus initiatives based on our project results.
- Regarding the presentation of results of the project, we will be presenting the quantitative portion of the project to members of the Division of Student Affairs, submitting a proposal of our results to present at a national conference, and writing a manuscript of the project results for publication during the next two semesters.

8. Financial Aspects of Project: See Appendix B for official documentation of specific expenditure categories and amounts for grant and matching funds from SUNY Geneseo

Faculty Course Reduction (Geneseo Match):

\$ [REDACTED] Course Release, Spring 2014

\$ [REDACTED] Course Release, Fall 2015

Salary

Research Assistant: \$ [REDACTED]

Fringes: \$ [REDACTED]

Participant Incentives:

Gift Certificates: \$ [REDACTED] (150 gift certificates @ \$ [REDACTED] each)

Gift Certificates: \$ [REDACTED] (Aunt Cookies sub shop, 8 @ \$ [REDACTED] each)

Cash Raffle: \$ [REDACTED]

Give-a-ways: \$ [REDACTED] (nylon bags, lanyards, sports bottles, tumblers)

Food: \$ [REDACTED]

Total Project Expenses: \$ [REDACTED]

Remaining Funds (to be returned): \$ [REDACTED]