

The Role of Living-Learning Communities and University Agriculture Students' Retention

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Introduction

Living-learning communities are designed to increase student involvement and interactions with faculty and peers within their degree program while being housed in college residential halls (Pike, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1998). They provide opportunities that promote involvement and incorporate relevant educational components that extend beyond the classroom (Tinto, 1998; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Research on living-learning communities has shown they have a positive effect on numerous student outcomes such as (a) persistence, (b) personal development, (c) intellectual development, (d) adjustment to college, and (e) independence (Inkelas et al., 2006; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1999; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). If university students are not able to integrate social and academic learning during their college experience, they are less likely to complete their degree (Tinto, 1993, 1998). Therefore, students who regularly participate in varied activities are more likely to develop connections with similar peers, which leads to improved student retention, personal development, and academic success (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Institutions can improve students' self-efficacy and retention by facilitating student involvement through living-learning communities and freshman seminars (Tinto, 1999).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Bandura (1997) explained that self-efficacy refers to an individual's self-perceived capability to learn or perform actions at a predesignated level. Social self-efficacy, more specifically, is defined by Anderson and Betz (2001) as "confidence in one's ability to engage in the social interactional tasks necessary to initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships in social life and career activities" (p. 101). According to researchers, higher levels of social self-efficacy can lead to greater feelings of social inclusiveness which can have a positive impact on student retention (see Figure 1) (Tinto, 1993). In the current study we examined the role of social inclusiveness, as facilitated by a living-learning community, on Louisiana State University agriculture students' retention.



Figure 1. *Social Self-Efficacy Concept Model*

Methodology

The target population of this study consisted of all Louisiana State University students (N=237) enrolled in a one-credit introductory agriculture course during the fall 2017 semester. At the end of semester, data were collected via Qualtrics using a web-based instrument. A total of 211 students completed the instrument, resulting in an 89% response rate. Fan's and Mak's (1998) social-efficacy scale was used to measure four distinct constructs: (1) social difficulties, (2) social confidence, (3) sharing interests, and (4) friendship initiatives. The resulting instrument contained 20-items, and potential response categories were arranged on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Reverse coding was performed on negatively worded items so that high agreement indicated a higher level of self-efficacy. Each of the constructs held satisfactory ($\alpha > .70$) post-hoc reliability coefficients, and face and content validity were determined by one agricultural education faculty member and four agricultural education graduate assistants for the course. Data were analyzed utilizing SPSS version 26 for Macintosh. Descriptive statistics,

including means, frequencies, and percentages were utilized to address the role of social self-efficacy on retention.

Results

This study aimed to describe the retention of students to the College of Agriculture (COA) based on their residential status (i.e., on campus-agricultural residence college (ARC), on campus-not ARC, and off campus) (see Table 1). Overall, the majority of students were retained to Louisiana State University ($f = 186$; 88.1%). Also, the majority of students who started their freshman year in the COA were retained the following year ($f = 137$; 64.9%). In regard to residential status and retention, the majority of students who were on campus in ARC were retained to COA ($f = 65$; 69.1%) and to Louisiana State University ($f = 83$; 88.3%). Also, the majority of students who were housed on campus not in ARC were retained to COA ($f = 35$; 61.4%) and 52 (91.2%) were retained to Louisiana State University. Finally, the majority of students who lived off campus were retained to COA ($f = 37$; 67.3%) and retained to Louisiana State University ($f = 51$; 92.7%).

Table 1

AGRI 1001 Retention based on Residential Status Demographics

Residential Status	<i>Retained to COA</i>				<i>Retained to LSU</i>			
	<i>Yes</i>		<i>No</i>		<i>Yes</i>		<i>No</i>	
	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
On Campus-ARC	65	69.1	29	30.9	83	88.3	11	11.7
On Campus-Not ARC	35	61.4	22	38.6	52	91.2	5	8.8
Off Campus	37	67.3	18	32.7	51	92.7	4	7.3
Total	137	64.9	69	32.7	186	88.1	20	9.4

**Note: Not all percentages equal 100 due to missing data.*

Conclusions & Recommendations

According to Tinto (1993), students engaging in a university living-learning community program are often provided with numerous opportunities that can foster a greater sense social self-efficacy, leading to increased subsequent retention levels. However, our results provided some new insights in the context of agriculture. For example, 69.1% of students engaged in living-learning communities, or ARC, were retained to the COA while 88.3% were retained to the university itself. Compared to non-ARC students, of which 61.4% and 92.7% were respectively retained, these results demonstrate little differences between the two groups. Although a greater percentage of non-arc students were retained to Louisiana State University, it should be noted that a slightly larger percentage of ARC students were retained to the COA. This may potentially highlight the ability of college-specific residential colleges to promote continued interest in the field among its students. Further retention research should address residential programs' effect on student retention in regards to retention theory. Future qualitative inquiry on how living-learning communities shape student experiences and learning is also warranted.

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