Outcomes of Living-Learning Programs for First-Generation College Students

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The Problem.

First-generation college students face a number of unique challenges in college. They are at risk of premature college dropout and academic underperformance. They also tend to have less social and family support.

The Odds.

Only 27% of all first-generation college students graduate in four years. This means roughly 50% as many first-generation students graduate in four years when compared to their continuing generation peers. This gap remains after six years.

The Hope.

Research suggests that first-generation college students benefit from participating in living-learning programs (LLPs). LLPs formally group students of similar academic interests or identities into learning communities. Living-learning programs have been shown to boost students' academic motivation and school involvement as well as their retention in college.

The Project.

Using institutional data from a public, land-grant university in the southeastern U.S., we evaluated the effectiveness of an LLP for first-generation college students at improving student grades and retention rates. Specifically, we compared the academic outcomes of students enrolled in an LLP especially designed for first-generation students (“First-Gen LLP”) to those of similar peers who lived in other LLPs (“Other LLP”) and to those of similar peers who did not live in any LLP (“No LLP”).
Method.

We used a matched-control sampling procedure\(^8\) to ensure that both comparison groups were similar to the First-Gen LLP students in terms of demographic background and key academic preparation variables. Each group consisted of 41 first-generation students, 11 of whom were considered underrepresented minorities. There were no statistically significant differences in high school GPA or ACT/SAT equivalent scores.

All three groups reported similar high school GPAs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Gen LLP</th>
<th>Other LLP</th>
<th>No LLP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>3.75</td>
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All three groups reported similar ACT/SAT scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Gen LLP</th>
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<th>No LLP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>24.90</td>
<td>26.27</td>
<td>24.56</td>
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Academic Outcomes.

Even though all three groups had similar academic background characteristics, students in the First-Gen LLP had better academic outcomes across their first year compared to the other groups.

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Figure 1. Mean GPA comparison of first-gen students by LLP enrollment. All between-groups means are significantly different at the \(p < .05\) level with the exception of Other LLP and No LLP in Spring 2017.

So what?
This study offers preliminary evidence that LLPs tailored to first-generation college students can help facilitate persistence and success in college. These LLPs could be a first step towards reducing the achievement gap between continuing and first-generation students.
References


