

Library outreach to Living Learning Communities

A case study

Living Learning Communities (LLCs), defined as “group[s] of students who live together in the same on-campus building and share similar academic interests,” have been proven to be successful in terms of increasing retention, improving GPAs, easing the transition to college, fostering a sense of community and belonging, and improving the student experience in general.¹ In addition to grouping students in a residence hall and offering a shared learning experience, LLCs provide cocurricular learning activities for engagement with peers. Cocurricular learning activities take place outside of the classroom but complement what is learned within it.² On campus, university libraries have long been thought of as key providers of cocurricular opportunities, offering programming such as faculty lectures, film screenings, game nights, and other research-based events.

Western Kentucky University (WKU) is a public four-year institution that enrolls more than 15,200 undergraduate and more than 2,200 graduate students annually. Approximately 30% of first year students are first generation college students, and 17% of undergraduates identify as an underrepresented minority. WKU has offered LLCs off and on since 2006 but began to emphasize and invest in them in earnest in 2019. Currently, WKU offers roughly 20 LLCs every year, with academic, identity-based, and shared interest options. The overarching goal of the LLCs is to improve student success and retention, and early data indicates they have been successful in achieving this goal: in the 2022 academic year, WKU retained LLC students at a significantly higher rate than non-LLC students.

This article describes how the partnership between WKU Libraries and WKU LLCs began, offers a case study demonstrating alignment between library programming and LLC goals, and explores future goals for the partnership.

Case study: Criminology and Forensic Sciences Living Learning Communities

WKU Libraries' Department of Library Public Services (DLPS) is responsible for library instruction, reference services, collection development, and outreach activities throughout the university. Historically, most library outreach has occurred during class time and by invitation of the teaching faculty, with librarians offering information literacy and research instruction sessions. As part of an effort to find more ways for the library to connect with students outside the classroom, DLPS partnered with the university's LLCs in the spring of 2020. Each LLC was assigned a librarian based on subject specialty or interest so the

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librarians could offer information literacy workshops to support students' coursework and facilitate cocurricular learning. Although delayed due to a curtailment of group activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, direct collaboration between WKU LLCs and DLPS began in fall 2021 with the return to campus.

This case study will focus on DLPS's involvement with two academic LLCs: Criminology and Forensic Sciences. Both LLCs offered linked core curriculum courses that spanned the academic year and enhanced the student experience while engaging students interested in professions related to the two fields. The linked classes for Criminology included CRIM 101 (Introduction to Criminal Justice) and CRIM 234 (Crime and Popular Culture). The Forensic Sciences classes included CHEM 111 (Introduction to Forensic Chemistry) and PS 220 (Judicial Process). These classes and the LLCs themselves represented three WKU academic colleges: the Potter College of Arts and Letters, the Ogden College of Science and Engineering, and the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences. Beyond the classroom, students enrolled in these courses lived in one of the new First-Year Village residence halls, which were constructed specifically to house students enrolled in an LLC. These residence halls feature classroom space in the hall itself, as well as pod-style living, which can accommodate up to twenty-five students with a large community living space. Housing and Residence Life designed these new halls to foster faculty and student interaction both inside and outside the classroom.

Directed by Housing and Residence Life, WKU LLCs were supported by the institutional administration and faculty. Specific goals, objectives, and activities were established to align with the university's strategic plan. Given the increased support for LLCs and academic integration, DLPS recognized the opportunity to support the university's goals and objectives in the LLC initiative. Of the goals and objectives for LLCs at WKU, DLPS strived to assist in reaching the following:

Goal 1: First year students who participate in an LLC will experience a smooth academic transition to WKU.

Objective 1.b—As part of their organized LLC programming each academic term, students will engage the services of at least one WKU academic resource (in addition to standard academic advising).

Goal 2: First year students who participate in an LLC will experience a smooth social transition to WKU.

Objective 2.a—By the end of the first academic term, students will participate in at least two LLC-related activities, with the intention of creating opportunities to connect with a peer group.

Goal 3: First year students who participate in an LLC will develop a sense of belonging at WKU.

Objective 3.a—By the end of the program, students will identify at least one WKU-affiliated individual with whom they have established a relationship.

When DLPS renewed outreach efforts to LLCs at the beginning of the fall 2021 semester, the humanities and social sciences librarian was assigned to the Criminology and Forensic Sciences LLCs to provide outreach for information literacy instruction. Early in the fall semester and during a library faculty meeting, the special collections library instructor suggested that the Criminology and Forensic Sciences students might be interested in primary sources related to a local true crime story. These sources, including crime scene photos, autopsy photos, and personal journals, were used to author the book, *The Cemetery Road Murders: The Shocking True Tale of Kentucky's Murder Mansion*, which tells the story of a double murder that occurred in Bowling Green, Kentucky, in 1948.³ This suggestion sparked a new collaboration among DLPS, the Department of Library Special Collections, and the LLCs.

The humanities and social sciences librarian connected with the faculty fellows and devised a plan for the LLC students to visit the Special Collections Library early in the spring 2022 semester. The special collections instruction librarian prepared for these visits by gathering the pertinent materials related to the true-crime book and prepared to offer a short synopsis of the story. Several of the students participated in a book club during the spring semester and discussed aspects of the book. They also offered their thoughts and theories during the class visits.

It was at this time that the librarians and the chair of DLPS began discussions about a possible campus visit focused on *The Cemetery Road Murders*. The book's author, Wes Swietek, resided in Bowling Green and served as the managing editor of the local newspaper. Planning for this event began upon approval from the dean of University Libraries.

On April 19, 2022, more than 20 Criminology and Forensic Sciences LLC students gathered in the Hardcastle Kentucky Building, which houses the Department of Library Special Collections, to listen to Swietek speak about his book including his research process, his communications with the descendants of those directly involved in the story, and his writing process. Several students posed thoughtful questions to the author, and he responded with detailed answers. The time spent with the author offered the LLC students a chance to connect with a community leader.

Among the established goals and outcomes specifically for the LLCs at WKU, DLPS played a role in achieving several of these objectives. Through library instruction and the author event, DLPS directly impacted the academic transition, social transition, and sense of belonging for two of the university's LLCs throughout the 2021–2022 academic year.



Criminology Living Learning Community students view crime scene photos and autopsy photos housed in the WKU Special Collections Library during a class visit. Photo credit: Dr. Crystal Bohlander.

Conclusion

In the example discussed above, WKU Libraries coordinated events for LLC students that met three of the LLC program's objectives: through their participation in a book club, close study of primary sources, and an author event, students in the Criminology and Forensic Science LLCs engaged with the services of the library (1.b.), participated in activities with their peer group (2.a), and established a relationship with a WKU librarian (3.a.). WKU Libraries will plan activities for other LLCs around these same goals and will also align programming with course-specific learning outcomes as appropriate.

The next step is to assess how well each activity met the goals of the LLC and identify areas for improvement. Libraries will continue to track student participation in outreach activities and will develop satisfaction surveys for LLC students and faculty mentors. For some programming (for example, the workshop on primary sources) the library will also assess the activity based on library learning outcomes. Finally, WKU Libraries will develop a plan to communicate touches the impact and value of library activities for LLC students in coordination with Housing and Residence Life. The partnership with LLCs effectively demonstrates the libraries' value based on several key components of the ACRL Academic Library Impact agenda: collaboration across campus, enhancing teaching and learning, alignment with institutional priorities, and communicating the library's contributions.⁴ ❧

Notes

1. Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas and Matthew Edward Soldner, "Undergraduate Living-Learning Programs and Student Outcomes," in John Smart and Michael Paulsen, *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, vol. 26 (2011): 1–55.
2. Linda Suskie, "Introduction to Measuring Co-Curricular Learning," in *Measuring Cocurricular Learning: The Role of the IR Office*, ed. Lance C. Kennedy-Phillips, Angela Bal-dasare, and Michael N. Christakis, *New Directions for Institutional Research* 164 (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015).
3. Wes Swietek, *The Cemetery Road Murders: The Shocking True Tale of Kentucky's Murder Mansion* (Sikeston, MO: Acclaim Press, 2020).
4. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Academic Library Impact: Improving Practice and Essential Areas to Research Prepared* by Lynn Silipigni Connaway, William Harvey, Vanessa Kitzie, and Stephanie Mikitish of OCLC Research (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017).