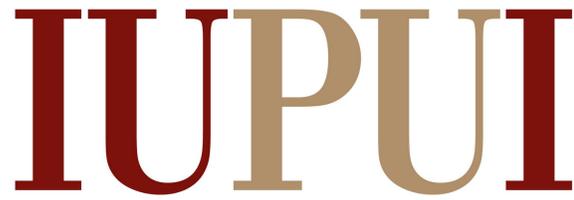


# Assessing Integrative Learning and Assignments in the Context of Themed Learning Communities

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## Abstract

The key goals for learning communities (LCs) are to encourage integration of learning across courses and to involve students with “big questions” that matter beyond the classroom. Integrative learning assignments can be an effective strategy for ensuring that LCs are quality “high impact practices” and improve students’ ability to make meaningful connections between classroom and co-curricular experiences, and real world social issues. We employed a mixed-method, quasi-experimental design to investigate the learning and academic success outcomes associated with completing integrative learning assignments. Results suggested that integrative learning assignments are associated with higher levels of integrative learning and positive academic outcomes.

## Introduction

Institutional researchers are often charged with determining which educational practices are the most effective in terms of improving students’ levels of academic success and learning outcomes. According to Kuh (2008), creating opportunities for students to participate in at least two high impact activities during their undergraduate program, one in the first year, and one taken later in relation to the major field is an effective way to enhance students’ levels of academic success and engagement. The obvious choices for incoming students are first-year seminars and learning communities. Kuh also notes that “to engage students at high levels, these practices must be done well” (p. 20). If high-impact practices have differing effects, we need to know the variability of impact not only across practices, but also between permutations of the same practice. Research has also shown that being intentional in linking courses and using engaging pedagogies within the context of learning Communities can improve academic outcomes (Brownell & Swaner, 2010).

Integrative learning is an “understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus” (AACU, VALUE Rubric, 2010). This study examined the effectiveness of integrative learning assignments in improving students’ ability to make connections between their learning experiences and apply their learning to a diversity of contexts. At the institution in the current study, students had the opportunity to participate in Themed Learning Communities and many instructional teams required integrative learning assignments. This research enhances understanding regarding effectiveness of integrative learning assignments as components of high impact practices. Additionally, it helps researchers and assessment specialists develop methods and techniques to investigate how integrative learning assignments affect academic success and learning outcomes.

## Research Questions

The research questions that guided this investigation were as follows:

1. Do students who complete required integrative learning assignments have better academic success outcomes and learning outcomes compared to students who do not complete integrative learning assignments?
2. Have students’ learning outcomes improved as instructional teams have implemented more integrative assignments over time?
3. What components of Themed Learning Communities significantly predict students’ levels of satisfaction with their learning experiences and successful transitions to college?
4. What are students’ perceptions of integrative learning experiences?

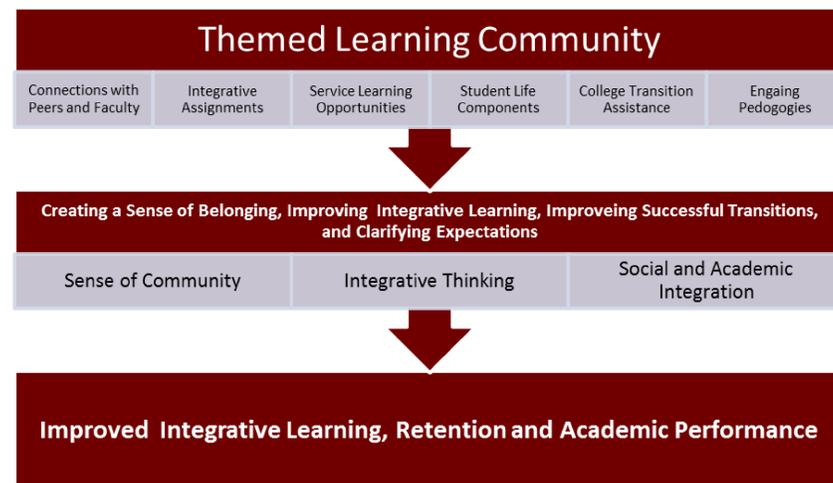
## Methods

A mixed-method design allowed for the measurement of students’ educational outcomes as well as students’ self-reported learning outcomes, perceptions, and intended behaviors. Methods included the following:

- 1) Post Program Academic Success, Retention Rates, and Graduation Rates
- 2) End of Course Questionnaire: Students’ Sense of Community, Perceived levels of Integrative Learning, Peer Interactions, Faculty Interactions, and Communication Skills
- 3) Student Responses to Open-Ended Questions (qualitative data)

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Themed Learning Communities offered at IUPUI during the fall semester. The IUPUI TLC program was designed to improve student retention, persistence, and academic performance. As such, the program was designed to offer students enriching learning experiences such as integrative learning and thinking, service learning, engaging pedagogies, and integrated assignments. Additionally, instructional teams worked collaboratively in efforts to engage in effective educational practices widely recognized as correlates to undergraduate student success such as ensuring positive faculty and peer-student interactions, offering college transitional assistance, helping students feel a sense of belongingness, and creating opportunities for students to develop strong connections with the campus. We employed a series of quantitative analyses to determine program effects on academic outcomes such as retention, GPAs, integrative learning, satisfaction with learning experiences, self-reported learning outcomes, and quality of faculty-student and student-student interactions.

## Program Theory

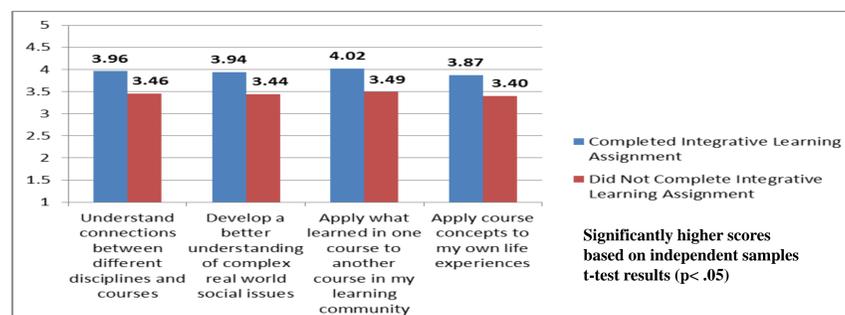


## Logistic Regression Predicting One Year Retention

|        | Variable         | B    | SE  | Wald Statistic | 95% CI     | p    | Odd Ratio |
|--------|------------------|------|-----|----------------|------------|------|-----------|
| Step 1 | H.S GPA          | 1.15 | .13 | 77.37          | 2.44, 4.06 | .000 | 3.15      |
|        | SAT Score        | .00  | .00 | 2.21           | 1.00, 1.00 | .137 | 1.00      |
|        | First Generation | -.10 | .10 | 1.03           | .74, 1.10  | .310 | .90       |
|        | Female           | -.01 | .10 | .01            | .81, 1.21  | .932 | .99       |
| Step 2 | Low Income       | -.18 | .10 | 3.34           | .68, 1.01  | .068 | .83       |
|        | H.S GPA          | 1.17 | .13 | 79.33          | 2.48, 4.14 | .000 | 3.21      |
|        | SAT Score        | .00  | .00 | 2.51           | 1.00, 1.00 | .113 | 1.00      |
|        | First Generation | -.11 | .10 | 1.30           | .73, 1.09  | .255 | .89       |
| TLC    | Female           | -.02 | .10 | .04            | .80, 1.20  | .835 | .98       |
|        | Low Income       | -.18 | .10 | 3.11           | .69, 1.02  | .078 | .84       |
|        | TLC              | .28  | .11 | 7.16           | 1.08, 1.63 | .007 | 1.33      |

TLC participants have a 33% better odds of being retained compared to non-participants (based on the odds ratio).

## Students who Completed Integrative Assignments had Significantly Higher Levels of Integrative Learning



## Results Highlights

- The vast majority of students who participated in a Themed Learning Community completed an Integrative Learning Assignment (about 90%).
- Students participating in fall TLCs also had significantly higher retention rates compared to nonparticipants.
- Results from a multiple regression analysis conducted on TLC participants’ responses to the end-of-course questionnaire suggested that the higher students’ levels of Sense of Community, Integrative Learning, and Peer Interactions were, the higher their overall satisfaction with their TLC learning experiences.
- Overall results imply that TLC interventions with integrative learning assignments can have positive impacts on academic success outcomes (academic performance and persistence).
- Pedagogical strategies that facilitate Sense of Community, Integrative Learning, and Peer Interactions may be the most effective strategy for enhancing students’ Overall Satisfaction with their learning experiences.
- TLC instructional teams have developed pedagogical strategies that facilitate positive connections, interactions, equip students with skills necessary to effectively adjust to college, and help students make connections between courses.
- In terms of future research, it is important to continue to develop assessment techniques and methods to investigate impacts of TLC interventions and integrative learning activities and assignments. Future investigations should consider using actual student work as authentic evidence of integrative learning in order to determine if there are meaningful impacts on student learning outcomes.

## Integrative Learning Experiences Theme from Qualitative Data Analysis: Students’ Voices

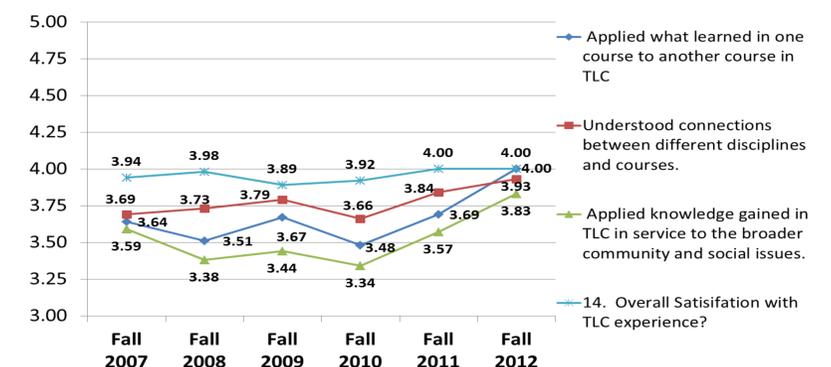
“The courses are very connected which really puts the concepts in perspective”.

“It helped me better see the relationships between different disciplines”.

“My TLC experience allowed me to tie together my classes for a more meaningful learning environment. It helped me connect three seemingly different courses”.

“It really helped me learn topics and ideas that were used in all classes and made it easier with connecting similar ideas”.

## Integrative Learning Improves Over Time



For questions, comments, or to request a copy of the completed study’s findings, please contact: Michele J. Hansen, [mjhansen@iupui.edu](mailto:mjhansen@iupui.edu)  
Please see handout for more detailed information.