

Establishing Learning Communities Through Block Scheduling

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Numerous undergraduate programs have been creating learning communities through various approaches of enrolling students in common courses. These arrangements have attempted to foster a sense of community and belonging among students by developing intellectual ties between students.

The National Learning Communities Project (2002) states

Research on the effectiveness of learning communities reveals that they live up to their intentions. Formal empirical studies and program evaluations indicate that learning community programs:

- increase student engagement and motivation;
- increase course completion rates;
- foster increased student intellectual development;
- and contribute to faculty and staff development and revitalization.

During the Fall 2002 Semester Tarleton State University enrolled 229 freshman agriculture students in the course AGRI 1011. Four sections of the course enrolled 128 students that were in non-block schedules, taking a general selection of courses related to their degree program. Five sections of AGRI 1011 enrolled 101 students that were scheduled in blocks having 12 to 15 semester hours of common course work. This allowed the block students the opportunity to have most or all of their semester instruction with a common group of students.

The purpose of the block scheduling was to foster a sense of community among students by giving them more opportunity to become acquainted through common projects in courses and the forming of study groups.

The objectives of this block scheduling in agriculture were:

1. Increase the academic success of students.
2. Decrease the dropout rate of students.
3. Increase retention rate of students at Tarleton State University

Student performance and dropout rate were calculated at the end of the semester. Analysis of the data indicated 2 students (1.98 percent) from the block group dropped out the university during their first semester. The non-block group had 7 students (5.46 percent) drop out during their first semester. The block students had a mean cumulative grade point average of 2.3132 after their first semester of enrollment in the university. The non-block students had a mean cumulative grade point average of 2.1277. This yielded an F value of .037 using a univariate analysis of variance, which is not significant at the .05 level.

The program yielded an adequate level of success and will be continued. We will continue to follow the academic performance of both groups of students and plan to use this block scheduling arrangement with freshman students in the Fall 2003 Semester. As larger numbers of students are evaluated a significant level of difference may be found in cumulative grade point averages.

National Learning Communities Project (2002) Learning Community Commons.

http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/02_nlcp_entry.asp