

**LIVING AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR TEACHER CANDIDATES:****LESSONS LEARNED****Kristina Rouech***Central Michigan University  
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majorana@mackinac.org***Abstract**

Do living and learning communities in higher education positively impact retention, providing a sense of community, and supporting students as they strive to reach their goals? This study gathered insights from 265 students enrolled in an introductory teaching course at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Students completed a survey about course experiences. One group participated in a Future Educator Living and Learning Community (FELC); the other group enrolled in a typical course format. Students enrolled in FELC reported higher college GPAs, a stronger sense of community, higher levels of community and campus involvement, and a smoother? transition to college. By identifying the needs of teacher candidates, colleges can foster supportive learning environments to assist students in achieving their goals.

**Keywords:** teacher candidates, teacher education, college retention, living and learning communities

### **Introduction**

Teacher education programs have been facing a decline in enrollment for the past few years, which has exacerbated teacher shortages. Participation in a collegiate living and learning community has the potential to increase yearly retention in universities, and graduation rates, which is critical to filling the teacher pipeline. Our Educator Preparation Program (OEPP?) why caps if not? noticed difficulties with retention from the introductory education course to admission into the program, prompting a shift in course delivery to the implementation of a living and learning community. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) has identified ten High-Impact Practices (HIPs) “based on evidence of significant educational benefits for students who participate in them.” Learning communities are one of the HIPs identified to assist students in “enjoying higher levels of learning success” (2024). This study focuses on specifically increasing retention in teacher education programs by implementing a living and learning community within a residential college at one mid-western university.

The AACU outlines the goals for learning communities:

The key goals for learning communities are to encourage integration of learning across courses and to involve students with “big questions” that matter beyond the classroom. Students take two or more linked courses as a group and work closely with one another and with their professors. Many learning communities explore a common topic and/or common readings through the lenses of different disciplines. Some deliberately link “liberal arts” and “professional courses;” others feature service learning (2024).

Our goal in developing a learning community was to create an environment for potential teacher candidates to succeed and persist through the teacher education program. This learning community recently completed its fifth year, and the faculty decided this would be an optimal time to stop and reflect on our purpose and goals in addition to

collecting insights from former students. Overall, our purpose was to discover if participation in the community resulted in higher retention rates for teacher education.

### **Literature Review**

The literature indicates numerous potential benefits of living-learning communities for students and institutions. Participating in a living-learning community (LLC) is related to high levels of student satisfaction (Bauer & Kiger, 2017; Cervato & Flory, 2015). Living-learning communities have also traditionally been used as retention tools, and there is some evidence to suggest participating in an LLC can improve student retention. For example, Kern and Kingsbury (2019) found students enrolled in a business learning community were more than twice as likely to be enrolled in the subsequent semester as their peers who were not. It should be noted that the institution in this study primarily served commuter students, possibly indicating a learning community simulated an experience more readily available to students living on campus. Such indications that living-learning community participation can be so important for retention is one of the reasons more and more institutions seem to be engaging with students in this way.

Hall and O'Neal (2016) conducted a pilot program to evaluate if combining multiple high-impact practices (HIPs) within the context of a Residential Learning Community (RLC) would have a positive impact on student engagement and attainment. The design of their program included students living together in a residence hall, enrolled in three general introductory courses that were linked with common content. Their RLC targeted at-risk first-year students (first-generation and/or Pell-Grant eligible). Their study draws on the research of Kuh (2008) and Zhao and Kuh (2004) which examines learning community (LC) features based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The five HIPs utilized were learning communities, first-year seminars, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments, and shared intellectual experiences. Their literature review helps to define the impact of HIPs and RLC models on student attainment, persistence, and retention as well as identifying that there are multiple definitions of LCs. While they can take on multiple forms, they still help in student connection.

Beyond satisfaction and retention, living-learning communities are associated with higher levels of a sense of belonging and community integration (Solanki et al., 2019); an enhanced sense of community within a department, and eagerness to identify with a department (Cervato & Flory, 2015); and better academic performance in terms of GPA (Buch & Spaulding, 2011; Solanki et al., 2019). Various studies also indicate underrepresented students have the most potential to benefit from living-learning communities (Solanki et al., 2019) and faculty involvement is key in helping students thrive in an LLC (Cervato & Flory, 2015; Eidum, 2020).

While the faculty sees the value in the Future Educator Learning Community (FELC) and the connections for students, the purpose of the study was to measure if students involved in FELC were more likely to pursue admission to the Teacher Education program. FELC was designed around three required courses taken early in the education program, scheduled back-to-back, and offered twice per week. The combination of these three classes could lead to a greater connection for students in pursuing teacher education, but also in their intentional engagement on campus.

### **Background**

In the Spring of 2015, the Dean of Education and Human Services organized a committee of faculty members representing five departments in our college with the charge to enhance teaching, learning, and student retention. This charge was in response to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2007) data provided by the provost of our university. The team brainstormed and explored ideas for increasing student and faculty engagement. One exploratory activity was to attend a week-long institute at the Washington Centre (Evergreen State College) in the Summer of 2016. It was here that an initial plan for instituting an education-learning community was developed. The Washington Centre required that attendees represented a variety of positions from the university, which included faculty from multiple departments, an advisor, and a representative from budgetary control. With a broad perspective, this workgroup began planning our learning community by combining AACU's definition above with linked courses and living-learning communities.

- 1) Linked or paired courses – most common, enrolled in a cohort with at least two courses in common, not team-teaching, two or more integrative assignments.
- 2) Living-learning communities – a variety of forms, typically cohorts of students living together and enrolled in at least one course together, usually thematic (e.g., STEM)

The team reviewed data collected through our Office of Educator Preparation Programs and noticed that enrollment in the second required course in the degree sequence appeared to decline.

Some students who had completed the Introduction to Education course were choosing not to continue in the education program. Given the benefits associated with living-learning communities (Bauer & Kiger, 2017; Cervato & Flory, 2015), the team proposed the development of the Future Educators Learning Community (FELC). Our first step was identifying the three courses students would take as part of the learning community and approaching faculty and support staff to develop specific plans. After exploring options, the core group of faculty and the director for the learning community (an advisor within the college and director of the residential college) developed an application for incoming first-year students. The learning community combined three introductory courses: two required for teacher education students and one leadership course to benefit students as teacher-leaders.

Application questions included demographic information and:

- What grade level and/or subject are you interested in teaching?
- What leadership organizations, activities or service have you been a part of?
- Explain why you would like to be a member of the CEHS Residential College.
- What excites you about the idea of exploring teaching as a career?

Students participating in FELC live together as a subset of the Education and Human Services Residential College. To be selected for the FELC program, students must complete an application and be assigned by the academic advisor who oversees the residential college. Students are recruited in the Spring prior to enrollment and during summer

orientation sessions. Typically, the population of FELC is determined by the start of the Fall semester with no changes in enrollment after classes begin.

Our first group applied in the Summer of 2017 for Fall 2017 admission. Applications were managed by an advisor, who also coordinated their room assignments within the residential college and their course schedules to ensure they were all registered for the three linked courses. The semesters and number of students from the first semester to now are:

- Fall 2017 – 25 students
- Fall 2018 – 25 students
- Fall 2019 – 24 students
- Fall 2020 – 24 students
- Fall 2021 – 16 students

The decline in enrollment from 2017 to 2021 was consistent with the overall decline experienced in our teacher preparation program during those years rather than indicative of declining interest in the FELC program. The decline in 2021 was attributed to the Covid 19 pandemic.

Each semester included the same three courses all students were required to take and are described below:

- Exploring Education: Teaching as a Profession – This course was taught by Instructor 1 for all semesters except for 2018. Due to a scheduling conflict, another instructor stepped in; however, they used the same syllabi and materials as the previous semester and had taught other sections of this course previously.
- Lifespan Development (Writing Intensive) - This course was taught by instructor 2 for all semesters.
- Introduction to Leadership – This course was taught by Instructor 3 for all semesters.

All three of these classes are introductory courses in Teacher Education, Human Development and Family Studies, and Leadership Studies (housed in the Department of

Recreation Parks and Leisure Services). Exploring Education and Lifespan Development are required courses for all teacher education majors and the Introduction to Leadership course was included to highlight the importance of developing teachers as leaders both in, and beyond, the classroom. The three instructors worked together to align course content and engage students in working cooperatively on the following linked assignments:

**Linked Assignment #1: Life Journey Presentation** –The purpose of this assignment is for students to explore their background connected to education, life events, and leadership experiences. In Exploring Education, students compiled educational experiences that influenced their desire to pursue teaching. In Lifespan Development, they created a life map of events that stood out and then selected appropriate events for their final presentation. Lastly, in Introduction to Leadership, they completed a concept map highlighting leadership experiences and selected those that helped support their journey to teaching. They combined all these experiences into a cohesive electronic presentation that displayed their journey to teacher education and their future goals. Students shared their presentations with the entire FELC community and peers provided feedback to the class. Students were evaluated on the quality of their presentation skills and the inclusion of required components from each class area.

**Linked Assignment #2: FELC Tank** –The purpose of this assignment is for students to utilize what they have learned about social-emotional learning to design a program to implement in their future education interest area. Students worked in small teams to create a pitch-to-win style presentation, like the TV show Shark Tank (Burnett, 2009). Teams utilized what they had learned across the three courses to create their pitch for a fictional grant. The assignment required them to include research on the topic, educational outcomes, budget planning, and ideas for implementation. Guest judges from local schools/school boards were invited to evaluate the presentations and provide feedback. Peers also provided feedback on the team presentations.

## Methods

This manuscript summarizes the results of a study conducted in 2021 that gathered the perspectives of 265 undergraduate university students who completed an introductory teaching course at a mid-sized Midwestern university in the United States. The team was interested in learning whether participation in FELC impacted their transition to college, enhanced their academic experiences, increased their confidence, and/or increased their level of success compared to students in the traditional introduction to education courses. Data regarding student demographics including gender, ethnicity, high school, and current college grade point averages (GPA) was collected. Study respondents also reported the status of admittance to Teacher Education. Students stated their major and minor, engagement in activities and organizations across the campus and community, as well as participation in leadership roles. All students who completed an introductory teaching course were invited to participate in this study. Fifty-nine of the 265 respondents had participated in the Future Educator Learning Community (FELC) and shared their perspectives on the impact this community had on their learning experiences and opportunities in the college environment.

## Participants

Two hundred sixty-five university students participated in this study as they completed an online survey, gathering perceptions and experiences about their enrollment in the *Exploring Education: Teaching as a Profession* college course, and a subset of these students ( $n = 59$ ) shared insights about their participation in a living and learning community. More females shared their perspectives, as 207 responded (78.11%), as compared to 54 males (18.32%), and four (1.51%) of the respondents chose not to disclose their gender. Regarding ethnicity, the respondents in this study self-identified as primarily White or Caucasian with 248 student responses (93.58%). Other ethnicities represented in the data included eight as Hispanic/Latino (3.02%), five as Black/African American (2.86%), and four as Other (1.51%).



Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Characteristic	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	207	78.11
Male	54	18.32
Did Not Respond	4	1.51
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
White	248	93.58
Hispanic/Latino	8	3.02
Black/African American	5	2.86
Other	4	1.51

### Procedure

An original survey was developed and distributed in the fall of 2021 to targeted undergraduate students via the online survey tool, Qualtrics. The link to the survey was emailed to the student population and remained active for two weeks. Before distribution, the study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

The students self-identified their interest in participating in this study and were able to complete the survey online at their leisure and be as detailed or general as they desired. Respondents did not receive any compensation or course credit for participating in this study. The survey consisted of thirteen demographic questions mentioned previously. Initial questions were followed by opportunities for student respondents to share their anticipated graduation date, if they were first-generation college students, their intended major at enrollment and current major, and their involvement in registered student organizations. Study participants were also asked about their campus activities, community involvement, leadership roles, and involvement in other learning communities such as the

University Honors program or STEM Scholars program. Five of these questions centered on their campus experiences, and eleven questions about FELC or Exploring Education impacts on college life, academics, and social exchanges. These were followed by three questions about the university itself. Finally, participants were asked to share their input through four final open-ended questions.

Table 2. Impact of Enrollment.

Characteristics	<i>Introductory Teaching Course</i>		<i>Future Educator Learning Community</i>	
	<i>n = 206</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n = 59</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Transition to College Easier</b>				
Strongly Agree	51	24.88	30	50.85
Somewhat Agree	77	37.56	18	30.51
Neither Agree or Disagree	52	25.37	8	13.56
Somewhat Disagree	14	6.83	2	3.39
Strongly Disagree	11	5.37	1	1.69
<b>Enhanced Academic Experiences</b>				
Strongly Agree	71	34.47	23	38.98
Somewhat Agree	80	38.83	22	37.29
Neither Agree or Disagree	25	12.62	6	10.17
Somewhat Disagree	16	7.77	5	8.47

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Strongly Disagree	13	6.31	3	5.08
 More Confidence in Ability to Succeed				
Strongly Agree	50	26.27	22	37.29
Somewhat Agree	78	37.86	18	30.51
Neither Agree or Disagree	44	21.36	10	16.95
Somewhat Disagree	20	9.71	5	8.47
Strongly Disagree	14	6.80	4	6.78
 Helped Me Learn About Services/Resources				
Strongly Agree	61	29.61	30	50.85
Somewhat Agree	88	42.72	19	32.20
Neither Agree or Disagree	32	15.53	8	13.56
Somewhat Disagree	15	7.28	1	1.69
Strongly Disagree	10	4.86	1	1.69
 Sense of Belonging				
Strongly Agree	106	51.46	31	52.54
Somewhat Agree	52	25.24	14	23.73
Neither Agree or Disagree	24	11.65	6	10.17

Somewhat Disagree	15	7.28	4	6.78
Strongly Disagree	9	4.37	4	6.78

#### Feel Comfortable on My Campus

Strongly Agree	120	58.54	37	62.71
Somewhat Agree	65	31.71	19	32.20
Neither Agree or Disagree	7	3.41	3	5.08
Somewhat Disagree	10	4.88	0	0
Strongly Disagree	3	1.46	0	0

### Data Analysis

The researchers employed several different techniques to analyze the qualitative and quantitative data collected from university students. After the survey response collection was complete, the researchers analyzed the quantitative data utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to explore the first 32 questions on the survey. A detailed analysis of the data from 265 target surveys took place, including descriptive statistics utilizing a comparative analysis. To determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores between the FELC students and the general introductory teaching students, an independent samples t-test was conducted. Cohen's d was calculated to quantify the effect size or the magnitude of the difference between the two participant groups. The four open-ended question responses were analyzed using open coding. The research team independently read the qualitative data to begin identifying patterns, ideas, and recurring themes. The first level of analysis was completed independently by each member of the research team. After several iterations, the team members shared their themes, engaged in further analysis, and discussed discrepancies in coding. The final level of analysis involved a consensus coding process where the team collectively decided on the final themes that emerged from the data.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) allowed the researchers to identify the main perceptions of students who participated in the learning community and those who just took a general section of introduction to education.

A set of exploratory analyses was completed to investigate the impact of the FELC program on student performance, student involvement, and enrollment in the teacher education program. Students in the FELC program were compared to their counterparts in the Exploring Education course on a demographic basis (i.e., gender, ethnicity). Students in the two groups were compared on their high school GPA and current undergraduate GPA, their major and minors, and their enrollment and intention to enroll in the teacher education program. Based on registered student organization (RSO) involvement, students in each group were compared. Students were also compared based on their campus and community involvement. Additionally, students responded to a Likert scale questionnaire that asked them to rate several aspects of their experience in their respective programs, and for applicable questions, the two groups were compared. The number of students in each group to hold RSO leadership positions was also compared. Additionally, within the FELC program, four different cohorts were compared based on their experience in the program.

## Results

Two hundred sixty-five undergraduate students participated in this study. There were no significant differences in the groups (FELC and general introductory teaching students) based on demographical factors; however, there was a tendency for the FELC program to have a higher number of females, as well as more diversity. Students in the FELC group did rate their current GPA as being significantly higher than students in the Exploring Education group,  $t(109.11) = 2.571, p = .011$ . Cohen's  $d$  was used as a measure of effect size,  $d = 2.01$ . When the groups were compared based on RSO involvement, the FELC group was significantly higher than their counterparts,  $t(88.98) = 2.674, p = .009$ . Cohen's  $d$  was also used for this analysis,  $d = 0.675$ .

We found retention in teacher education was not significant between the learning community and those enrolled in typical introductory coursework. However, the learning community group discussed building community and being connected to their classmates, their professors, and the university more frequently, which may lead to increased overall retention within the university.

During comparisons of campus and community involvement, there was a tendency for students in the FELC program to be more involved on campus and in the community. Students living in FELC agreed more frequently with the statement that their program made their transition to college easier,  $t(262) = 3.58, p < .001; d = 1.05$ . Exploring Education students tended to agree more with the statement, “[Program] helped me learn about services, resources, and programs available on campus that can help me be a more successful student.”,  $t(263) = 2.86, p = .005; d = 1.04$ . When asked to rate their agreement with a statement of support from their program group, students in the FELC program tended to rate more agreement than Exploring Education students, this result nearing significance,  $t(81.20) = 1.70, p = .09$ .

Students in the Exploring Education group were also more likely to agree they are comfortable on campus; this result was not significant,  $t(139.71) = 1.68, p = .09$ . During the comparison of program experience, other comparisons were not significant. There were several differences between the Fall 2019 cohort and the other cohorts. The Fall 2019 cohort were less likely to agree with positive statements of their experience in the program when compared to the other cohorts, for several of the statements. These results were not listed as they did not relate to the hypotheses. Analyses that were not listed did not yield significant or near-significant results.

These analyses were exploratory in nature; our general hypothesis was FELC students would be more successful, more involved, and would rate their experience in their program as higher than the Exploring Education students. Differences between the groups in undergraduate GPA were in support of our hypotheses as the FELC group had a higher undergraduate GPA; however, they did not have a higher high school GPA, supporting the finding that FELC is assisting students in achieving a higher GPA. FELC students indicated

significantly more RSO involvement and had a non-significant increase in other kinds of involvement, supporting the hypothesis FELC causes students to be more involved. FELC students agreed significantly more with a statement describing an easier transition to college, and near-significantly more with a statement of group support, consistent with our hypotheses.

### **Common Themes**

Examining the qualitative data for insights about how the learning and living community and introductory education course impacted their decision-making and future steps, three main themes emerged from students' discussions of their educational experiences and plans for their careers:

- Continued pursuit of teacher education and clarification of future goals related to teaching.
- Confidence in their decision to pursue teaching, excitement about the teaching field, and additional skills learned through their teacher education coursework and field placements.
- Experiences provided a strong sense of community and meaningful friendships.

These three themes and examples are presented in detail below.

***Theme 1: Continued pursuit of teacher education and clarification of future goals related to teaching.*** When this exploratory study initially began, the researchers set a goal to determine if this learning community was positively associated with students remaining committed to pursuing a degree in Teacher Education. Indeed, the most common theme study participants repeatedly reported that, with over half of the qualitative comments reported, enrollment in the living and learning community, or involvement in the introductory teaching course provided encouragement and resources to reach their goal of securing a teaching position as a profession. One student shared that enrollment in the FELC program was particularly helpful for them as a learner:

Right from the beginning of my freshman fall semester, the FELC program helped assure me that I wanted to become an educator. FELC created a sense of supportive educators and future educators that helped spark my passion for teaching further. With this program, I knew I had the support, encouragement, and resources to pursue teaching successfully at [midwestern university name].

Another student focused on the positive impact Exploring Education had on their experiences, “Exploring Education made me fall in love with the idea of being a teacher even more than I already had. It made me passionate and determined on the fact that I would be a successful educator.” Like the study participant above, many students had already determined their desire to enter the teaching field before enrollment in higher education; this next step helped to secure their commitment and dedication to the field of education. For example, statements such as “I already knew I wanted to be a teacher, but it just made me so much more excited to do it” and “It cemented I was on the right path” highlighted the dedication to pursuing this plan of study and career. Others saw the benefit of FELC as helping them to explore and confirm their decision “FELC gave me an idea about the field before getting too far in. It let me know how certain I was in being a teacher.” Other participants discussed their thoughts on what teaching would be like for them as they looked toward the future, “Being in class made me daydream about what I wanted my future classroom to be like.”

The introductory teaching course was often mentioned specifically in responses from students, “Exploring Education made me extremely happy that I decided to switch my major and pursue education. Taking the course made me realize that education was exactly what I wanted to pursue, and I found the passion that I was missing in my previous classes. Similarly, another shared, “I really enjoyed [Exploring Education]. It offered so much insight into the world of teaching. Visiting schools for observation was especially important to me. I was confident in my choice of major and minor while I was taking the course”.

***Theme 2: Confidence in their teacher education decision, excitement about the teaching field, and additional skills earned through teacher education coursework and field placements.*** The second most common theme, with approximately one quarter of the



qualitative comments reported, was being enrolled in this variety of experiences increased their confidence and excitement about the teaching field while also building the foundation of their skillset. For example, some students spoke specifically about the leadership components they benefited from, “I think it taught me a lot about leadership that I didn’t even know existed before. It helped me really recognize the leadership style that I have and how I can utilize it” and “Exploring Education strongly suggested getting involved in educational groups on campus and to learn more about leadership opportunities that are available. I know now that the more opportunities I get involved in, the better teacher I will be”.

Additionally, other students shared examples of how they experienced increased positive emotions and mindsets about the field of teaching as well as beyond, “It helped me gain more confidence and passion towards teaching.” Another student reported, “It gave me the confidence I needed to strive for personal excellence and take a chance on new opportunities”.

***Theme 3: Experiences provided a strong sense of community and meaningful friendships.*** The final theme highlighted in this analysis centers on the positive learning climate the students experienced. Many of these comments focused specifically on the FELC environment:

FELC helped me find a community on campus and encouraged me to find my passions at CMU. This allowed me to find what I wanted to become involved with on campus, and with the support of my FELC community, I knew that I had the skills and resources to become a leader on campus.

Another example in support of FELC includes, “The feeling of community and support the FELC professors, made me realize how close you could be with your colleagues and that’s something I would want in a future teaching position”, and finally, “FELC gave me friendships that I continue to uphold throughout my college experience. Those friends have helped me grow as a future educator and a college student”.

For other students, being enrolled in the introductory teaching course positively impacted their experiences as displayed by their reflections,

Exploring Education fostered a feeling of belonging for me, showing me right in my first semester at CMU that there were other future educators like me. It made me feel like my career choice was valid and I was able to pursue it here at CMU with others like me.

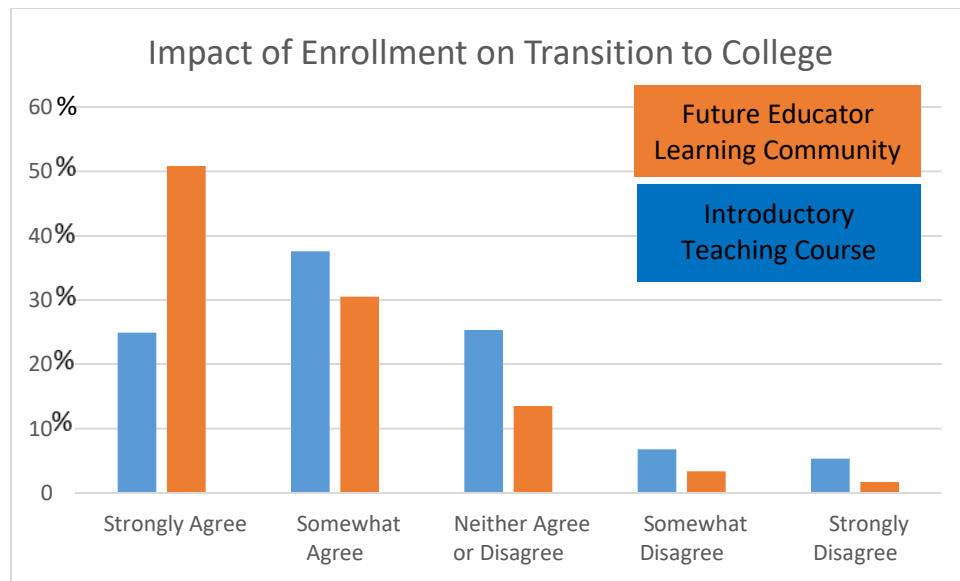
Another example includes, “I made several long-lasting friends in my EDU107 class because there was a strong sense of classroom community”.

The connections made between students within the same major were also discussed:

- “I knew I wanted to be a teacher before I took Exploring Education, but the course helped build a community with other students pursuing the same major.”
- “I very much enjoyed being surrounded by other education students, and it helped to see the same people for multiple classes.”
- “I always wanted to be a teacher, and it was nice to make friends and be surrounded with people (in person) who wanted the same thing!”

***Other impacts of FELC.*** Overall, the largest impact of FELC is that students felt more connected to each other, their professors, and the university. Multiple other topics were discussed by students that are notable including FELC positively impacted the experiences of students as they transitioned to college. Although research questions did not specifically address this, it was interesting that multiple students talked about their experiences in FELC, which helped them successfully transfer to college. Other positive comments about the impact faculty had on their experiences in the college environment.

Figure 1. Impact of Enrollment on Transition to College.



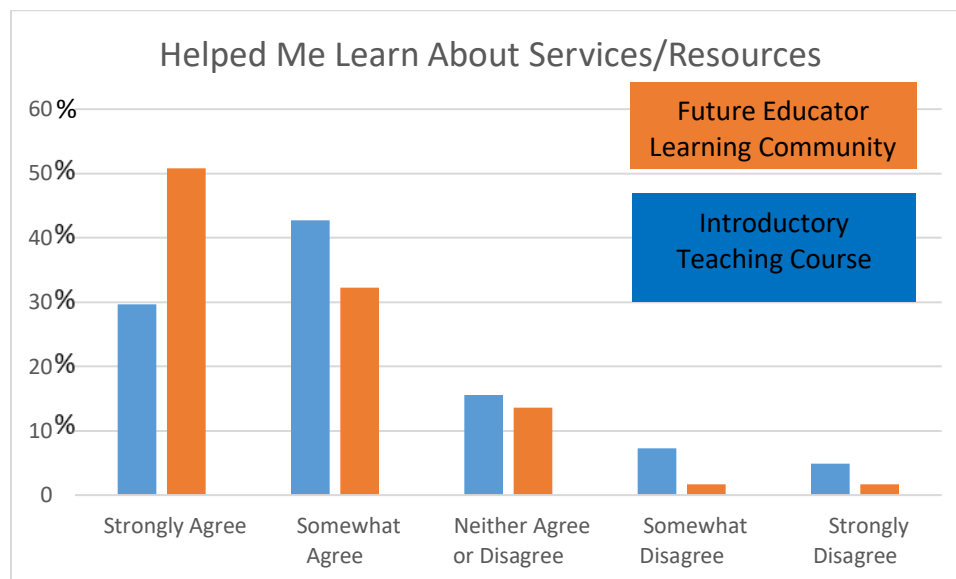
### Discussion

The original intent of the study was to determine if FELC students were more likely to be retained in the teacher education program at our university. Using survey data, the three faculty members analyzed the data to assess the effectiveness of this learning community. One reported benefit of learning communities is retention within the university (Kern & Kingsbury, 2019). There was not a significant difference between our two groups in terms of retention within teacher education; however, the interesting outcome is the number of students who mentioned building friendships and community because of participating in FELC.

In addition, many FELC students talked about how the courses helped them build confidence and skills for pursuing teaching. This qualitative data supports retention by confirming their choice to pursue teacher education and examining skills and dispositions necessary for teaching. At a time when teacher education is being criticized and overall enrollment in teacher education programs is declining (AACTE, 2022), we are excited to see our learning community is contributing to student confidence in choosing the field. Enhancing student confidence can contribute to an increase in self-efficacy which has lasting impacts on the success of teachers in the classroom (Clark & Newberry, 2019).

The comparison of persistence to teacher education was disconfirming. However, one unintended finding of the study was the emphasis students placed on their sense of connection to the campus community, particularly to their peers. A sense of belonging is created for students when they see themselves as a member of a community and have personal interactions on campus which is a critical factor in their decision to stay or leave college (Solanki et al., 2019; Tinto, 2012; 2017). Instructors need to help create these conditions among students to support their sense of belonging which impacts academic success and retention. (Davis et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2018).

Figure 2. Helped Me Learn About Services/Resources



### Limitations

Several factors contributed to the limitations of this study. First, students from one mid-size midwestern university in the United States participated in this project. Diverse perceptions and experiences as they relate to enrollment in an introductory teaching course may not be represented in the data collected and therefore conclusions cannot be drawn as a whole, only about the survey respondents. Additionally, the overall response rate for this survey is low, with 18.3% of the students who received the study invitation completing it. Students enrolled in FELC had a response rate of 55.2%, and general students completing the introductory education course completed the survey at 15.2%.

The survey was distributed to students during the summer when most are not on campus and may be disconnected with college activities and responsibilities. This disparity in the response rate impacts the voices heard throughout this project, as the two groups vary significantly.

The study was also limited to the fact that many of the demographics of the population represented one demographic much more heavily than the others. For example, 78.11% of the survey respondents were female, whereas 76.1% of teacher education students were female at the target university were admitted and enrolled (Central Michigan University, 2021), and only 44.3% of university students are female across the United States (U.S. Department of Commerce Census Bureau, 2020). Additionally, 248 or 93.58% of students self-identified as White/Caucasian when asked about their ethnicity. This demographic is higher than the 89.5% of White/Caucasian students at Central Michigan University (2021) and does not represent the 41.1% of university students identified as White/Caucasian in the United States (U.S. Department of Commerce Census Bureau, 2020).

Another limitation of this study is that participation in FELC was voluntary. The students who chose to participate in FELC may have found community and belonging without a living-learning community. Additionally, since this survey was optional and all students who were enrolled in the introductory education course were invited to participate in the study, self-selection bias may impact the findings of this investigation. The students invited to participate in the project were not chosen randomly; all students who completed the course were encouraged to respond to the survey. Lastly, students self-selected to participate in FELC so there are inherent differences between the students who participated in FELC and those who did not.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The survey that guided this study was an initial attempt to understand the impact of the FELC program on student success, several forms of campus involvement, persistence in education, and possession of leadership positions. The FELC program was developed to

assist students in pursuing teacher education, and their general success as college students, as well as developing knowledge of the relative success of the FELC program.

Throughout this study, several topics arose as possible topics of in-depth research that would assist in building the knowledge base regarding the impact of learning communities. Focusing on the specific characteristics of services, support, and opportunities available to students in learning communities would provide vital insights and perspectives to inform future practices in the higher education learning environment.

### **Conclusion**

Based on a comprehensive literature review and survey of 265 pre-professional teacher education students, we concluded that, when compared with students not enrolled in a living and learning community, several differences occur. In addition to a strong commitment to continued study in the field of education, college students in the living and learning community also reported higher levels of confidence and excitement about their involvement in the field of education. They also shared productive and helpful skills they learned during their teacher education journey that would benefit these teachers in their future careers. Additionally, the living and learning community provided an environment that supported a strong sense of community and connection with others. Finally, students engaging in FELC more often held leadership positions across the college campus and community. Research addressing retention issues for novice teachers has included residency models where the focus is on careful recruitment and selection of residents, strong partnerships between school districts and university programs, and tightly integrated curriculum within an extended clinical placement with supportive mentoring (Guha, Hyler, & Darling-Hammond, 2017). While this research is beyond the scope of the current study, it does provide some important insights for supporting the recruitment and retention of new teachers that might be useful for the research team to consider related to the recruitment and retention of teacher candidates in an educator preparation program. The research team will continue to explore ways to recruit students and expand the FELC program. As each student enters the college campus destined to determine the next steps in their journey, institutions of higher education could support and guide the next generation.

One survey respondent stated that the focused learning environment, additional support, and enriched activities from the living and learning community resulted in a positive outcome, “It reassured me that I’m doing the right thing..” Isn’t that what we all strive for on our educational journeys?

We conclude with a poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997) and synthesis of the Common Themes section of this article and focus specifically on the voices of our students. The Common Themes section was copied into a Word document and then each sentence or logical text segment was put on its own line; from there, the text was pared down to that just of the students. The remaining text was read and pared down further, taking out extraneous words and combining similar responses while not impacting the meaning. Each line was edited to start with a verb to indicate the growth and evolution of the FELC students and references to “I” were substituted with “we” to present the new third point of data, this poem, as one of community that was reflected throughout the comments.

### **FINDING A COMMUNITY ON CAMPUS**

Continuing the journey of teacher education

Knowing we want to be teachers, now so much more excited to do it

Developing confidence, passion in the teacher education decision

Creating excitement about the teaching field

Experiencing supportive professors and future educators that helped spark my passion for  
teaching

Feeling the support, encouragement, and access to resources to pursue teaching  
successfully

Falling in love with the idea of being a teacher even more than I already had

Cementing that I was on the right path

Understanding the field before getting too far in – confirming this path

Daydreaming what future classrooms will be like

Switching majors and pursue education

Finding the passion that was missing in previous classes

Offering so much insight to the world of teaching

Visiting schools for observation was especially important

Learning a lot about leadership in areas that were new

Recognizing leadership styles and how to use them

Getting involved in educational groups on campus

Learning more about leadership opportunities that are available

Knowing that the more opportunities we get involved in, the better teachers we will be

Striving for personal excellence and taking a on new opportunities

Feeling the community and support amongst our professors

Realizing how close we will be with our future colleagues

Fostering a feeling of belonging

Developing a strong sense of community and meaningful,

long-lasting friendships

Seeing the same people for multiple classes,

surrounded by people who want the same thing

Knowing that with passion and determination,

we will be successful educators.



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### Appendix – FELC Participants Survey Questions

1. Which FELC group were you part of?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. What was your high school GPA at graduation?
5. What is your current GPA at XXX?
6. Are you admitted to the teacher education program?
7. If you are not admitted to the teacher education program, are you planning on applying?
8. If you are not applying to teacher education at XXX, would you explain why?
9. What is your graduation date or anticipated graduation date?
10. Are you the first one in your family to go to college?
11. What was your intended major and minor prior to enrolling in FELC?
12. What is your major now?
13. What is your minor now?
14. Which RSOs are you a member of?
15. What other types of activities have you been involved in on campus? (i.e., residential hall, committees, etc.)
16. What types of community involvement have you pursued? (i.e., soup kitchen, thrift shop, parks and rec, etc.)
17. What leadership positions have you held since being at XXX?
18. What other learning group/community/cohort are you a member of? (i.e. Honors, MAC, STEM Scholars, etc.)
19. Participation in FELC helped make my transition to college easier. (Likert scale)
20. I learned things in FELC that have enhanced my academic experience. (Likert scale)
21. I have more confidence in my ability to succeed in college because of participation in FELC. (Likert scale)
22. FELC helped me learn how to get the most from my college experience. (Likert scale)
23. FELC helped me learn about services, resources, and programs available on campus that can help me be a more successful student. (Likert scale)
24. I am satisfied with my FELC experience. (Likert scale)
25. I am glad I chose to join FELC. (Likert scale)
26. I would recommend FELC to future education students. (Likert scale)
27. I felt a sense of belonging to FELC. (Likert scale)
28. I would choose to enroll in FELC again. (Likert scale)
29. My FELC group is supportive of me. (Likert scale)
30. I feel a sense of belonging to my university. (Likert scale)
31. I feel comfortable on my campus. (Likert scale)
32. If given the choice, I would choose the same university over again. (Likert scale)
33. What influence did FELC have on your feelings of persistence to teacher education?
34. What influence did FELC have on your feelings of pursuing leadership positions?
35. Thinking about your experience with FELC, please finish the following statement: I want the FELC instructors to know that...
36. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience in FELC?