

The Impact of Students' Social Networks in Living Learning Communities at Dartmouth on
Academic Success

Kaiyah Corona, Alexandra Harland, and Arvind Shankar
Office of Pluralism and Leadership, Community Partner
Professor Kimberly Rogers, Course Instructor
SOCY 91, 23S
4 June 2023

Introduction, Significance, & Literature Review

How do living learning communities (LLCs) contribute to academic success? LLCs – campus housing grouped by a shared identity or interest – have a wide variety of documented benefits for students residing in these tight-knit social groups. Among these merits, scholars have noted a surge in GPAs, retention rates, and first year student experiences for members of these communities (Brown & Hildreth 2007; Inkelas et al. 2007; Caviglia-Harris 2022). The administration at Dartmouth College agrees, contending that LLCs “aspire to combine what is best about the Dartmouth experience: a world-class teaching and learning environment with a vibrant sense of community, guided and supported through engagement with talented faculty and staff” (Admissions 2023). Research has found that these benefits also exist across different categories of LLCs (Stassen 2003).

However, less is known on how students in LLCs are using their networks to improve academic success. How is LLC participation affecting access to opportunities? Do these students study and/or take classes with fellow LLC members? What resources do they use within their LLC community that impacts their success? These are the questions we seek to answer. McCabe (2016) has found that friendship networks of college students are associated with social and academic benefits, and that these networks are both resources and liabilities in academic achievement. Thus, the main objective of this study is to gain a better understanding of how students living in LLCs utilize their networks to increase academic success.

Research Question

Appendix A outlines the conceptual model we use to answer our research question: how do the networks of students living in LLCs at Dartmouth impact academic success? We defined our independent variable – living in an LLC – as students who currently or have previously lived in an LLC at Dartmouth. We defined our dependent variable – academic success – as building better study habits, working more efficiently, and self-rated performance. Finally, our mechanism – social networks – is related to relationships participants had built through their LLC, including with fellow students or friends, faculty advisors, and undergraduate advisors (UGAs).

Methodology

We conducted 6 semi-structured interviews of LLC members at Dartmouth using quota sampling to target participants from as many Dartmouth LLCs as possible.¹ Participants were recruited through our own networks and connections. We chose semi-structured interviews as our method as they aid us in drawing out the specific mechanisms by which LLC networks may boost academic performance. Moreover, interviews enabled resource efficiency and allowed us to engage with members from a greater number of LLCs. Other methods such as web surveys would rely on convenience sampling and cannot guarantee a representative sample of LLCs. We did, however, have our interview participants complete a small online pre-interview survey to

¹ We interviewed members from the following LLCs: Asian and Asian American LLC; Chinese Language House; Hillel LLC; Latin American, Latino, & Caribbean House; Native American House, and Shabazz Center for Intellectual Inquiry.

collect demographic data that could be sensitive to answer (see Appendix C). This data aided us in understanding the background information of our participants, including their LLC, the number of terms they had lived in the LLC, class year, race/ethnicity, and gender.

Our interview questions included three main categories: academics, social networks, and LLC identity/events (see Appendix D). Based on these questions, we deductively developed a set of codes prior to conducting our interviews. Once the interviews were transcribed, we identified patterns and themes to develop inductive codes that related to LLCs and academic success (see Appendix E for full list of codes). We then compared data found between the six LLCs.

Results

We found that while the networks developed by living in an LLC were not directly linked to academic performance, aspects of LLCs are conducive to academic success. When asked if living in an LLC had positively impacted their academics at Dartmouth, most participants responded that it did not. However, some cited shared study spaces in their LLC as a mechanism for improving academic performance. Others stated that more studious individuals typically seek out LLCs. Although these mechanisms were partially responsible for academic success, they did not directly involve social networks. The following subsections outline our main findings in relation to academic success.

Importance of a House

The strongest mechanism we found was the presence of a physical space or house for the LLC (see Appendix B for Theme Table). Almost all participants spoke about the importance of a shared space for their LLC. LLC participants with a house (Shabazz, Chinese Language House, and the Native American House) said that having an accessible study space made them feel safe and supported when studying. For example, an individual from Shabazz stated that

“it's really a great place for resources and like accessibility to things without having to be impacted by like the whole school, walking past you in the library. And if I'm tired I could just go upstairs to my room.”

LLCs without a house or shared physical space felt disconnected and did not study with other members. An individual in the Asian-American LLC said

“I think that's like the most important thing that like a housing Yeah. Like right now the Asian American LLC, like, we don't have any space. Right, and like, it's, that's just like a really like poor thing to have when like 25% of your school is Asian American and, and this is supposed to be the LLC like to accommodate that entire community.”

Support from Active Advisors

All participants discussed the importance of having an advisor that was connected to the LLC. The individual from Shabazz said their UGA sends out any resources they need, posts community events on the board, and plans events for the LLC. However, they said their faculty

advisor was less involved. The Native American House has support through an admissions advisor. Our participant said that

“he’s a real lock in the community for like decades at this point, and I think that that contributes to all of the experience.”

On the other hand, the Asian and Asian American LLC had no advisor or UGA. The individual we interviewed stated that,

“I would really stress that any sort of like living, like LLC needs like an adult faculty there who is like dedicated and loyal and like, um, they don't have to live in this space necessarily, but then like they ought to be dedicated to it.”

Overall, it was important to LLC members to have a faculty advisor or UGA available to provide academic support and resources, although they did not need to live in the LLC.

Shared Identity and Interest

Programming that centered the shared identity and/or interest of the LLC was important in delivering a safe and welcoming environment conducive to academic performance. A member of the Hillel LLC, for instance, emphasized that

“Having a [kosher] kitchen was important to me. Also the idea of living with other Jewish students, because there is a community here, but it's not huge.”

Participants indicated that events and activities based on the house’s identity and interests – such as community dinners and guest speakers – were both popular and helped slow down their busy academic schedule.

Conclusions, Implications, & Limitations

In sum, we find that social networks in LLCs have no direct effect on academic success, but that LLCs create an environment conducive to improving academic performance. This study both contributes to prior research about LLCs and academic outcomes, as well as helps our partners at the Office of Pluralism and Leadership (OPAL) who seek to understand the impacts of LLCs at Dartmouth. Our findings have implications for improving the management of LLCs at Dartmouth and the experiences of students living in them. We offer the following recommendations:

- Dedicated houses should be established for all LLCs at Dartmouth.
- LLC advisors should be reviewed through OPAL and Residential Life based on roles, responsibilities and programming to ensure they are active and available in beneficial ways.
- LLC programming should emphasize shared identity/interests to improve participation and benefits.

However, we note two limitations that may undermine the validity of this study: our sample size was relatively small and we lacked quantitative data. Future research should seek to interview members of all LLCs at Dartmouth and add a quantitative method of study.

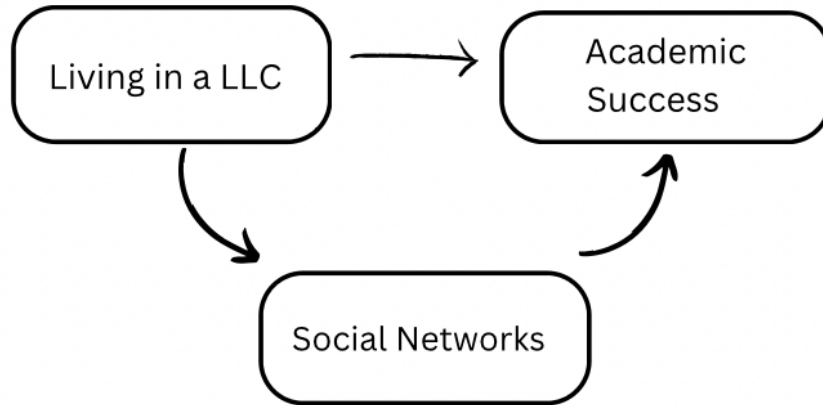
References

- Brown, Shane, and Karyn Hildreth. 2007. "A comparison of student social networks between students living in and out of living learning communities." In *2007 Annual Conference & Exposition* (pp. 12-21).
- Caviglia-Harris, Jill L. 2022. "Community is key: Estimating the impact of living learning communities on college retention and GPA." *Education Economics*, 30(2): 173-190.
- Dartmouth Undergraduate Admissions 2023. "Dimensions of Dartmouth." Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College. Retrieved May 31 2023 (admissions.dartmouth.edu/apply/admitted-students/dimensions-dartmouth).
- Inkelas, K. K., Zaneeta Daver, Kristin Vogt, and Jeannie Leonard. 2007. "Living-learning programs and first-generation college students' academic and social transition to college". *Research in Higher Education* 48(4), 403-434.
- McCabe, Janice M. 2016. *Connecting in College: How Friendship Networks Matter for Academic and Social Success*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Stassen, Martha LA. 2003. "Student outcomes: The impact of varying living-learning community models." *Research in Higher Education* 44(5): 581-613.

Appendix A. Conceptual Model

HOW DO THE NETWORKS OF STUDENTS LIVING IN
LLC'S AT DARTMOUTH IMPACT ACADEMIC
SUCCESS?

target population: LLC Members



Appendix B. Theme Table

Theme	LLC's with a house	LLC's without a house
Academic Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stronger academic networks due to physical space to study with other residents, connections with active advisors and UGAs. ● Resources provided include bulletin boards, email blasts and LLC events. ● 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Their academic networks and resources were limited. ● They rarely had an advisor that engaged with them about academic opportunities. ● They either used academic resources or support on other parts of campus or none at all.
Friendship Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Many of the participants had friends in their LLC's ● common theme was having more friends outside of the LLC. ● Term system and constant member changes meant they connected with a lot of different people in the house ● Studying with other LLC members was common, but accidental based on shared space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Majority of their friends were outside their LLC or in other campus organizations on campus. ● They were friendly with other members but only saw them in passing or at term meetings where they had food together. ● They struggle to organize and form friendships without a designated space for their LLC
Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The participants had a decent amount of involvement in their houses. ● Have regular sunday dinners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Most students are involved in the limited events that are held, however, these events are rare and overall involvement is low.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● They also tend to be involved with the events that happen at their house, and if they are not involved in the planning they most likely attend most events if they are able to. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is no structured programming in particular for the Asian American LLC. It is run by a student who is a 2025 who is given a budget to use for food and discretionary items. There is a clear gap in programming for the students to connect to each other and their own community.
Retention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Their LLC's were not the primary reason for them attending Dartmouth but they did express how they benefited from living in the houses. They said how they were able to connect with people who looked like them and that they believe that living in an LLC is something that everyone should experience in their time at Dartmouth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The LLC was not the reason for coming to Dartmouth. Majority of them found out about the LLC once they were on campus or during the housing selection process. It is also not a reason they have stayed at Dartmouth. There were other parts of their Dartmouth experience that have kept them engaged with the community. For example, student groups like DAASC.
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● participants viewed their house as a space where they were able to connect with people whom they shared the same identity with. ● Felt family and sense of community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participants expressed that identity was a reason for joining their LCC, however, since joining, identity has not been significantly utilized as a bonding or engagement tool for the members.

<p>Housing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● expressed how they enjoyed living in their houses. Although they can use a few repairs, it is better than living in a dorm. ● They also had space in the house that has been beneficial to them both with their academic and social networks. ● The location did not really matter to them. There was a common theme that although their house may have been far from one part of campus it was close to another space on campus where they tend to hangout. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● interviewees felt they were missing out on experiences that other LLC like Shabazz and LALAC were having. ● They expressed the need for an actual space to study, interact and feel safe. ● The Asian American LLC is housed in some of the nicer dorms on campus and they admitted this was what pulled them slightly towards joining. ● The location did not affect their friendship networks
----------------	--	--

Background information:	LLC's with a house	LLC's without a house
<p>Advisors/UGA's</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● They are very involved with the space and they are easy to contact if needed. The UGA's are active in sending out weekly emails updating residents on different resources that are offered on campus that can be beneficial. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● They are disconnected or without a UGA/advisor. Anh-Ton stressed the need for a faculty advisor for an LLC to be run effectively <p>“I would really stress that any sort of like living, like LLC needs like an adult faculty mm-hmm. <affirmative>, um, there who is like dedicated and loyal and like, um, they don't have to live in this space necessarily, but then like they ought to be dedicated to it.”</p>
<p>Study Spaces</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● They tend to have certain spaces that are 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● They lack study spaces and generally

	conducive to learning.	have to choose other locations to study.
--	------------------------	--

Appendix C. Pre-Interview Survey

Survey Link: https://dartmouth.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3z8208oikRmXrRs

Appendix D. Interview Guide

For this study, we are interested in learning about how living in an LLC affects friendships and your academic experiences at Dartmouth.

You are the expert, I am the learner. I have a list of questions to ask you, but if you find yourself wanting to share something that I haven't asked but you feel is important to understanding your experiences please do so. If you have questions as we go, need clarification, or want to take a minute to think, just let me know.

Ultimately we hope to learn about the aspects of your living learning community that are most important to you so we can gain a full understanding of your friendships and your academic experiences at Dartmouth.

If at any point you are uncomfortable answering a question I have asked you, want to remove a response from the record, or want to stop the interview altogether, please let me know. If you are comfortable we will use your name in our research report. However your privacy is important to us, so we can make up a name for you if preferred - we will use this name in our report instead of your real name.

If you don't mind, I am going to record this conversation so that I can listen to you rather than take notes. Is that okay?

If there are any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering, it is fine to skip them. Or if you would feel comfortable answering a question but would like it to be off the record, we can stop recording for a moment and start again when you are ready. Do you have any questions for me?

Are you ready to get started?

Introduction

Prior to the interview the participants will have filled out a survey detailing some information about them and their demographics. We will use this information to have a basic understanding of our participant before completing the interview. These questions will be close ended. The following interview guide contains open ended questions and follow ups that will hopefully enrich our understanding of our research.

LLC membership questions

I'd like to start by talking about your background with your LLC.

1. How and when did you hear about LLCs as a housing option?
2. Why did you decide to join your particular LLC?

- a. Was it for reasons based on: identity, housing, social, retention, and or academic?
3. Was this the only LLC you considered joining? Was it your first preference?
 - a. Was there a reason you chose this LLC over your other options?
4. Would you say you're generally engaged with your LLC community other than participating in events? How so? why/why not?
 - a. How involved have you been in events that occur in or are being organized by your LLC?
 - b. Has your experience changed from term to term? If so, how?
5. How long have you lived in your LLC?
6. Have you ever left your LLC and rejoined or have you remained in your LLC since joining?
 - a. Do you see yourself living in an LLC for the remainder of your time at Dartmouth?
7. Tell me about your favorite memory of living in an LLC?
8. Tell me about your least favorite memory of living in an LLC?
9. Was your LLC what you expected when you joined? Why/why not?

Networks questions

1. How many friends do you have within your LLC? Would you say the majority of your friends live in your LLC?
2. How many friends do you have outside your LLC?
3. Do you have any friends in other LLCs?
4. Do most of your friends know each other or would you say you keep separate groups of friends?
 - a. Can you tell me more about that; how are these groups similar or different?
 - b. How did you become friends?
 - c. What kinds of things do you guys do together?
5. Which group of friends share similar interests or identities to you?
 - a. Do you have friends who study the same major?
 - b. How did you meet them? Was it in classes or through your LLC?
 - c. Are you a part of any clubs or organizations outside of your LLC that connects you to some of your friends?
6. How many times a week do you hang out with friends, i.e eat dinner, go out
 - a. Is this usually with people in your LLC or outside?

Now I'd like to ask you some questions about your friends and your study habits

1. Do you prefer to do your study by yourself or with a particular person/group of people
 - a. **If they study with groups or friends:** which friends do you usually study with? Do any of these friends live in your LLC?
 - b. Why is it this particular friend/friend group? What do you like most about or get out of studying with them?
 - c. How many times a week do you study with other people?

- d. ***If they study alone:*** why is this the case? Are your friends a distraction?
 - e. Do you mostly socialize with others in the LLC and not study with them?
2. Does your LLC experience combine your social and academic life or do you keep them separate?
 - a. Do you tend to take classes with other members?
 - b. Do you usually study with other members in common spaces/or at all?
 - c. Who are these other residents?
 - d. Do you feel you work effectively with these friends?
 - e. Are the study spaces in your LLC conducive to learning?
 - i. Do you usually choose to study in your room/LLC or go somewhere else on campus?
 3. How do you balance friends and academics?
 - a. Do you spend more time socializing with others or studying?
 - b. Do you struggle to balance your social life and academics at Dartmouth
 - i. Has your LLC helped or hindered you with this balance?

Thank you for talking about your friends and study habits. I am now going to ask you some questions about your academic experiences and resources. Please feel free to add anything you think would be helpful.

Academic questions

1. Does living in an LLC affect your academic performance at all? How? Why/why not?
2. Do you feel you have been performing better academically since joining your LLC?
 - a. If you could rate your academic performance on a scale of low, moderately low, moderate, moderately high, and high what would you rate it?
 - b. Why do you think this is the case/not the case?
 - c. What has improved since you joined your LLC, i.e, your performance on tests, papers, studying, public speaking, connecting with professors, connecting with classmates... something else?
 - d. Does living in an LLC impact your academic performance at all?
3. What academic resources are available to you within your LLC? How do these help?
 - a. If there are no academic resources or supports in your LLC, what would you like to see at your LLC?
 - b. What other academic resources do you take advantage of on campus (if any?)

Engagement questions

1. How do you generally feel engaged with your LLC and the other residents? Why/Why not?
 - a. What are the common events or programs that are run through your LLC?
 - b. Do you attend these events? Do you attend community dinners?

- c. What activities or events does your LLC run that engages you in content related to your LLC? For example; talks, lectures, anything else?
 - i. Are you happy with your level of involvement? Is there anything you'd like to see change that would make you interested in getting more involved?
- 2. Have you seen an increase or decrease in overall engagement from your fellow residents in your LLC during your time in your LLC??
 - a. Do you notice any trends in attendance to events or participation throughout the term?
 - b. Is the LLC usually at full capacity?
 - c. How active is your faculty advisor/grad student/UGA within your LLC?
 - i. Have they started new initiatives
 - ii. Could you describe what their role is
 - iii. Are they good at holding people accountable for participation and maintenance of the LLC?
 - iv. Do you feel heard by your advisor and the administration about problems within your LLC?
 - 1. If not, what are some of the concerns or changes you would like to see?
 - v. Do you have any contact with your faculty advisor?
 - 1. Is this the only faculty member that you have connected with through your LLC? If others, who were they and how did you connect?
 - 2. Are you satisfied with your connections with faculty through your LLC or do you wish you had more or different opportunities to connect with faculty? If so, tell me more about this.
- 3. Do you feel that the location of your LLC impacts your connection to other people and activities on campus?
 - a. If so, what are some of the things you feel disconnected from specifically?
 - b. Tell me about a time when you felt especially connected to others on campus
 - c. Tell me about a time when felt disconnected from others on campus
 - d. Did you LLC contribute to these experiences in any way?

Retention Questions

- 1. Was the LLC one of the reasons you chose dartmouth?
 - a. If not, what were some of the reasons that you chose dartmouth?
 - b. Did you know about the LLC during the admissions process
 - i. Do you remember it being advertised?
 - ii. Were there any events or advertising that you remember seeing during orientation or dimensions?
- 2. Have you ever tried to transfer or leave Dartmouth?
 - a. If yes, why was this, and why did you stay?

- b. Did living in an LLC help you decide to stay at Dartmouth?
- c. If you knew about the LLC earlier would it be something you decided to join as soon as possible?

Closing Questions

Thank you so much for being so open and honest about your experiences. We are almost finished, but I have a few closing reflective questions about your experience in this interview. Is there anything that you thought I would ask that I didn't?

IF YES: Encourage them to answer their own question.

Did you find any of my questions hard to answer? If so, which ones, and why? Is there anything you thought of during the interview that we didn't have the chance to fully discuss yet? Anything that you'd like to add to help me better understand your experiences? Do you have any questions or concerns about the study? Is there anything else that you would like to discuss or ask questions about before we wrap up? Is there anyone else you would suggest I talk to about this topic that could potentially help with our research?

Thank you so much for your time!

Appendix E. Coding Sheet

Coding Sheet Link: <https://forms.gle/6pscurRyWN28NfDm7>

Improving Living Learning Communities!

KAIYAH CORONA, ALEXANDRA HARLAND, & ARVIND SHANKAR

Findings



Having a **physical space or house** for the LLC **positively** impacted friendship and academic networks



Participants expressed that **identity** was an important reason for joining their LLC



People consider their LLC a **significant part** of, but not their only friend circle. There is often some overlap between LLC and non LLC friends



Members who benefit from their LLCs generally have **moderate engagement**



Having a community to **study around**, even when not directly studying together, produces a beneficial academic environment

Action Items

Dedicated **physical spaces** should be established for all living learning communities

Advisors should be available and active, but maintain reasonable space between themselves and students

- Review Advisors through OPAL and Residential Life based on roles, responsibilities and programming

Emphasizing the **shared identity/interest** of the LLC is important in improving participation and benefits

- programming focused on shared identity/ interests needs to improve, for example, community dinners and guest speakers

Advisors are an **important resource** for improving LLCs



Advisors provide counseling, help organize events, and contribute to the community

Study areas improve academic outcomes



Libraries, living rooms, and even kitchens designated as study spaces cultivate a positive learning environment