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## *Educational Session*

### **2306 - A Successful Criminal Justice Learning Community for Transfer Students**

Credits and Degree Pathways, Leadership and Strategic Planning

Upon entrance to a new educational institution, transfer students battle with many struggles, resulting in the creation of learning communities to provide these students with the necessary skill set to navigate the challenges of integration into a new university or college. Through this exploratory and descriptive cross-sectional study, this research's purpose was to assess how effective this learning community is in assisting transfer students.

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# The success of a criminal justice learning community for transfer students

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## Introduction

Learning communities, which are small groups of similar students tasked with undergoing the educational process as a cooperating group, have been adapted to be used in many different educational settings. These settings range from undergraduate education to graduate education, and have been used for students who are on campus as well as for online students. Learning communities have been found to be successfully used within STEM fields, fields within the social sciences, and fields such as medicine and dentistry.

Amongst other things, the benefits of involvement in learning communities include both better retention and understanding of course material, as well as a more well-rounded view of the peer-review process and collaborative work.

## The Criminal Justice Learning Community

The goal of the Criminal Justice Learning Community (CJLC) at UNC Charlotte is to help transfer students, a vulnerable population, acclimate to their new university. It does this by aiming to improve transfer students' feelings of community, increase comfort at their new institution during the stressful transitional period, and introduce the students both to their chosen major as and to study aids offered by the University. As the majority of Criminal Justice students in attendance at this University are of transfer status, intervention here on the behalf of transfers is very valuable.

Through interaction with this alternative learning style, students within these learning communities should have better academic outcomes than their equivalent peers.

## Method

Data were collected for this study over a decade, with each learning community group of ~25 students lasting for a year-long period. A total of 246 students participated in the CJLC over this period. The remainder of the transfer student population in the Criminal Justice Department (n=806) served as a comparison group.

Students in the CJLC enjoyed blocked seating which allowed them to take core classes alongside their learning community peers. Classes the students took were Criminal Justice Theory and Criminal Justice Research Methods for established majors and introductory courses such as Statistics and Introduction to Criminal Justice for pre-majors. Grades achieved by participating students were then compared to those of their non-participant peers.

In addition to this, participating students were tasked on three separate occasions to indicate their most-experienced stressor and its intensity. This was done to examine whether this perceived intensity decreased with time and involvement in the CJLC.

	Participants	Non-Participants
Median credits transferred	48	45
Introduction to Criminal Justice Median GPA	3.4	2.6
Statistics (before or while at current institution) Median GPA	2.5	2.2
Criminal Justice Theory Median GPA	3.0	2.8
Criminal Justice Research Methods Median GPA	3.0	2.8
Graduation Rate (In Months)	60%	40%
GPA's of Graduates	3.1	2.8

Table 1 - academic outcomes of participants vs. non-participants

## Results

The results of this study found that students enrolled in the CJLC program had overall better academic performance than their non-participant peers. CJLC members were found to have better GPAs both overall as well as in all measured specific core classes. In addition, it was found that participating students were more likely to graduate sooner (Table 1).

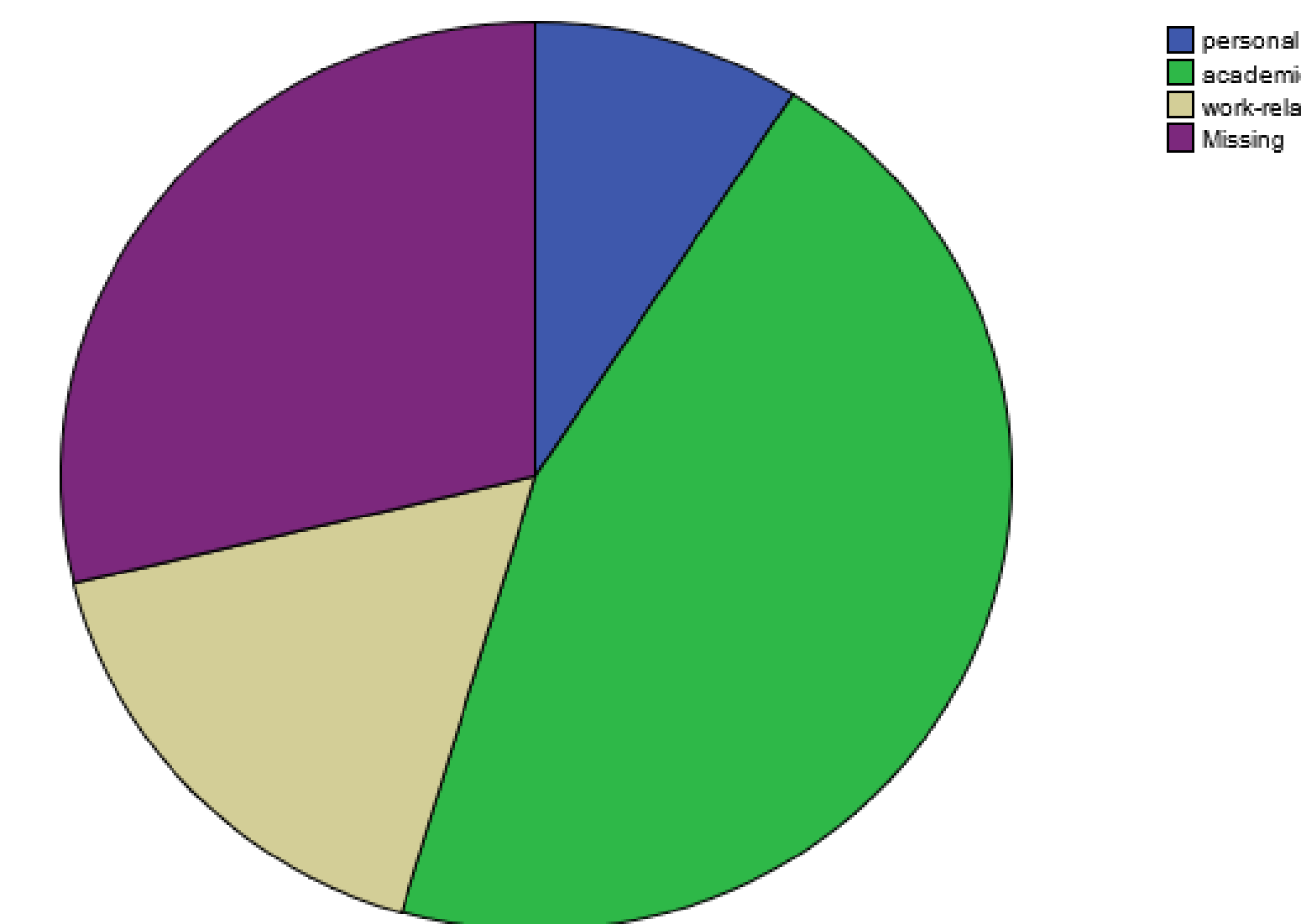


Figure 1 - stressors experienced by participants

In addition to this, it was found that participating students' perceived intensity of stressors of academic, personal, and occupational nature, decreased over the course of their year-long involvement in the CJLC. At both of the times of survey administration following the initial baseline survey, there can be observed a significant drop in perceived intensity of the stressor.



The symbol of the CJLC.

## Conclusions

Learning communities are a burgeoning trend in the field of academic intervention, created with the intention of establishing alternative means of educating vulnerable students. Given their widespread applicability, in undergraduate, graduate, and medical school, learning communities show potential in helping a vast array of students.

As demonstrated in this study with UNCC's own Criminal Justice Learning Community, there are many benefits to involvement in learning communities. These benefits include better overall grades, better grades in specific core courses, and earlier graduation time when compared to their non-participant peers. In addition to this, involvement in the learning community was correlated with the steady reduction of stressor intensity.

While more research is needed in this field, this promising contribution adds to the extant body of literature supporting learning communities as a worthwhile intervention for vulnerable students.