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## **Policy Brief**

### **Student Engagement at Lewis and Clark College**

#### **Problem Frame**

Many small liberal arts colleges pride themselves on high levels of student engagement. These schools create a supportive environment with powerful connections between students, faculty, and staff. Lewis and Clark identifies itself as one of these schools. It is a small liberal arts college that is selective and attracts high caliber students. With a beautiful campus, located in an exciting city, with good facilities, and a talented faculty, it has the potential to be an elite institution. However, a recent student survey discovered that a main concern for many students is the lack of a sense of community. This is a serious problem for this type of school. It hurts the overall experience for many students and is, in part, reflected in the low retention rate.

Countless studies have proven that student engagement has positive effects on student development, learning, and retention rates. From a moral standpoint, schools should strive to retain the students it recruits. However, low retention is also a competition problem. Schools compete. Because retention is reflected in a school's national ranking, they push for higher retention to improve their reputation.

A lack of community in such a small institution is of major concern. A survey done last year by the sociology department illustrates this problem. The study found that one of the most

commonly voiced complaints by students was the “lack of a sense of community.”<sup>1</sup> In addition, of the 42 percent of students who seriously considered transferring, a major concern was a “lack of a satisfying community.”<sup>2</sup> This lack of a strong community and high levels of engagement that most small liberal arts colleges aim to achieve is missing at Lewis and Clark. Policy should therefore aim at raising student engagement to help improve the lack of community expressed by the students.

## **Evidence**

A survey conducted by the sociology department last year found that the lack of a sense of community was a main concern for students at Lewis and Clark. About 34 percent of the student body responded to the survey. In addition, the respondents’ class level, gender distribution, and ethnic distribution roughly mirrored the undergraduate student body at Lewis and Clark. For example, 64 percent were female, and freshman, sophomores, juniors and seniors each represented about 25 percent of respondents.<sup>3</sup> The study found several key findings that may affect retention rates. It says, “The most commonly voiced complaints were the following: lack of diversity of various kinds, lack of a sense of community amongst students, isolation on campus, financial concerns, and dissatisfaction with food. Many students expressed dissatisfaction at what they take to be cliquish divisions among students, with the most common cliques listed as hipsters, hippies, athletes, and international students.”<sup>4</sup> These “cliquish

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis & Clark College Independent Student Survey, designed and conducted by students of SOAN 201 (April 2012), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis & Clark College Independent Student Survey, designed and conducted by students of SOAN 201 (April 2012), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6.

divisions,” as well as the complaints voiced by students, illustrate that a strong community is missing at this institution.

Retention itself also proves that the lack of community and engagement is a problem. In the survey, over 40 percent of students indicated that they seriously considered transferring.<sup>5</sup> Data on this issue shows that retention rates at this institution have not improved over the past decade. First year retention remains around 85 percent, and fourth year graduation under 70 percent. However, six year graduation rates are around 75 percent. Mark Figueroa explained that this sizable difference was in part due to the fact that many students at Lewis and Clark study abroad. Therefore, many students who do not graduate in four years still graduate in eight semesters, often in the first semester of their fifth year.<sup>6</sup>

In comparison with other institutions that Lewis and Clark sees as competitors, retention rates are lagging. Willamette, for example, has a slight edge in freshman retention and six year graduation rates. Occidental’s rates are well above Lewis and Clark’s at 92 percent freshman retention and 85 percent six year graduation. Occidental’s numbers are a target that Lewis and Clark views as an appropriate goal to reach.<sup>7</sup>

For both moral and competitive reasons, raising student engagement is a goal Lewis and Clark should pursue. Its student body should feel more connected to the school than was expressed in the survey, and retention rates should be improved to raise this institution’s rank and reputation.

## **Alternatives**

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Figueroa, interviewed by the author, April 16, 2013, Portland, Oregon.

<sup>7</sup> Angelica Garcia, interviewed by the author, April 9, 2013, Portland, Oregon.

There exist a countless number of policy options that could raise student engagement and a sense of community at Lewis and Clark. The alternatives introduced below were chosen because they are options that Lewis and Clark is already considering.

### **1. Improve and restructure academic advising**

To be engaged in an institution, students must make meaningful connections within the school. Ideally, connections are made with peers, as well as with professors and faculty members. Improving the current academic advising model at Lewis and Clark is one potential solution that the college is considering to encourage professor-student interaction.<sup>8</sup> This is a small college, so there is a distinct advantage in that advisors can get to know their advisees on a much more personal level than at large universities. Presumably, professors at Lewis and Clark are committed to teaching and engaging in their student's learning in and out of the classroom. David Yarbrough echoes this when he writes, "Learning, in the higher education environment, requires an ongoing process that assesses and compares the thoughts, feelings, and goals of the student and the instructor/adviser."<sup>9</sup> Clearly, a meaningful and engaging relationship between advisor and student should be encouraged.

### **2. Raise participation in student organizations**

Student organizations engage students with their peers and involve them in campus activities. Many studies show that involvement in student groups leads to very positive student development. Student organizations teach students valuable skills in communication, leadership

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<sup>8</sup> Angelica Garcia, interviewed by the author, April 9, 2013, Portland, Oregon.

<sup>9</sup> David Yarbrough, "The Engagement Model for Effective Academic Advising With Undergraduate College Students and Student Organizations," *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development*, volume 41 (2002), 61.

and group work. Lewis and Clark has many student run organizations, but must try to raise student participation in them. Raising participation in these organizations could be a very effective way to promote engagement and raise the sense of community. Currently, Dean Gonzalez is looking into options to make the groups more accountable.<sup>10</sup> Some get considerable funding, but have little to show for it. Therefore, raising accountability in student organizations could lead to more student involvement in extracurricular activities.

### **3. Improve new student orientation**

One of the options that Lewis and Clark is considering is improving NSO.<sup>11</sup> Orientation is important for freshman because it facilitates the transition and adjustment process to college life. The appropriate information must be given to new students to facilitate this adjustment and to ensure that they do not feel stranded. Many students have “little idea about scheduling of classes, the large number of organizations and activities, and other areas that require adjustment. Freshmen are unprepared for the wealth of competition for their time and the abundance of choices of curricular and extracurricular activities.”<sup>12</sup> Orientation helps answer these questions and introduces the resources that students need to feel connected to the institution. Successful orientation could encourage student engagement and persistence from the very beginning of their college careers.

### **4. Create living and learning communities**

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<sup>10</sup> Anna Gonzalez, interviewed by the author, April 23, 2013, Portland, Oregon.

<sup>11</sup> Angelica Garcia, interviewed by the author, April 9, 2013, Portland, Oregon.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Kay Martin, “The Effects of Freshman Orientation and Locus of Control on Adjustment to College” (diss., Texas Tech University, 1988), 15.

In an interview with Dean Gonzalez, she expressed her desire to create Living and Learning communities (LLC) at Lewis and Clark.<sup>13</sup> LLCs bring together a group of students with similar interests, who not only live together, but also take at least two of the same classes. Students “spend a substantial amount of time engaged in common intellectual activities.”<sup>14</sup> There currently exists themed housing at Lewis and Clark, however LLCs take this idea to a much more engaging level. Much of the themed housing is very broad in terms of the theme and the types of students they attract. In addition, their residents do not take the same classes, and may have very different academic interests. LLCs give students the opportunity to live and learn with others that share similar interests and participate in similar activities. They create closely-knit communities and increase student involvement in the institution.

## **Objectives and Criteria**

### **1. Effectiveness**

The main goal of these policies is to raise student engagement and the sense of community on campus. One of the criteria we will use for the alternatives is how effective the policy is at fulfilling these goals.

### **2. Cost/feasibility**

The policies being considered must be realistic. Any change or addition to the current system will come at a cost. This cost is not always financial. There can exist important conformity and opportunity costs if the policy is either controversial or if the process gets stalled. Policy changes must try to minimize these three costs.

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<sup>13</sup> Anna Gonzalez, interviewed by the author, April 23, 2013, Portland, Oregon.

<sup>14</sup>Chun-Mei Zhao and George D. Kuh, “Learning Communities and Student Engagement,” *Research in Higher Education*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2004), 116.

### **3. Equity**

Certain policies that only benefit a certain portion of the student body must be very carefully considered. The excluded group must not feel marginalized or targeted by the policy. Already worrying is the 25 percent of Lewis and Clark students who feel marginalized due to their class background and 37 percent of Lewis and Clark non-white students who feel marginalized due to their race.<sup>15</sup> Any policy change must not raise these figures any higher than they already are.

### **4. Retention rate**

Retention rate is a good indicator of student engagement and satisfaction. High retention rates generally point towards strong communities because many students feel connected to the institution, and decide to stay. Therefore, whether or not a policy improves retention rates will be an important factor in judging its success.

## **Analysis and Results**

### **1. Improve academic advising**

Research indicates that improving academic advising could be extremely effective in improving student involvement in the institution. Many studies point towards a correlation between advising and persistence. Retention generally points towards higher levels of student engagement and involvement, therefore academic advising may indirectly raise engagement by raising retention. Pascarella and Terenzini write, “Forrest found that a group of nine institutions

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<sup>15</sup> Lewis & Clark College Independent Student Survey, designed and conducted by students of SOAN 201 (April 2012), 3.

with the most comprehensive set of orientation and advising programs had a graduation rate 9 percent higher than that of a group of nine institutions with the least comprehensive programs.”<sup>16</sup>

In the same book, they make many references to studies that show this correlation between advising and retention. They write, “Some studies report a statistically significant positive link between advising and measures of persistence (for example, Brigman, Kuh, & Stager, 1982; Endo & Harpel, 1979; Louis, Colten, & Demeke, 1984; Meyers, 1981; Smith, 1980; Taylor, 1982).”<sup>17</sup> In addition, Metzner writes, “Improvement in academic advising ranks among the most frequently recommended and implemented interventions for increasing retention.”<sup>18</sup>

Many studies verify the correlation between an effective advising structure and persistence. Advising at Lewis and Clark is required for all students, therefore, no students will feel marginalized by this policy. The cost of advising depends on the extent to which the advising structure changes. Professors that are advisors will spend less time teaching. The institution may need to hire more faculty members to compensate. The number of advisees each professor has will influence the cost of such a program.

## **2. Raise participation in student organizations**

Student participation in student organizations is proven to lead to higher levels of student engagement and attachment to the institution because it aids in development and growth. A study done by Foubert and Grainger indicates that there is a “strong connection between involvement in student organizations and higher levels of development on several indicators of

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<sup>16</sup> Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini, *How College Effects Students* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2005), 385.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 404.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara S. Metzner, “Perceived Quality of Academic Advising: The Effect on Freshman Attrition,” *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 26, no. 3 (1989), 422.



psychosocial development.”<sup>19</sup> In their study, there was a strong relationship between involvement and student growth. Even though it was only conducted using students from a single university in the Southeast, their findings were very clear and match many other findings from other studies. For example, Abrahamowicz concluded that “participation in student organizations seems to lead to greater involvement in the overall college experience.”<sup>20</sup>

Participation in student groups is therefore very important for students’ development, growth and overall college experience. High levels of participation will be effective in engaging students. The cost will not will not be a major concern with any policy because there already exists a large budget for student organizations at Lewis and Clark.<sup>21</sup> The financial costs of each organization are supported by the institution, and therefore should help reduce the number of students who may feel excluded for monetary reasons. In addition, students may join any club at Lewis and Clark. This openness should avoid any feelings of marginalization.

### **3. Improve new student orientation**

Several studies have examined whether there exists a correlation between orientation and persistence. A study by Nancy K. Martin predicted that successful new student orientation leads to higher persistence.<sup>22</sup> However, the findings in her study, as well as in another one done by Pascarella, Terenzini and Wolfle, were inconclusive. Martin writes, “Results of this study did not reveal any significant differences between the adjustment of orientation attenders and non-attenders at mid- semester. Still, orientation attenders may be more well adjusted than non-

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<sup>19</sup> John D. Foubert and Lauren U. Grainger, “Effects of Involvement in Clubs and Organizations on the Psychosocial Development of First-Year and Senior College Students,” *NASPA Journal*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2006), 175.

<sup>20</sup> D. Abrahamowicz, “College Involvement, Perceptions, and Satisfaction: A Study of Membership in Student Organizations,” *Journal of College Student Development*, vol. 29, no. 3 (1988), 237.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Gonzalez, interviewed by the author, April 23, Portland, Oregon. The budget for ASLC is \$750,000 per year.

<sup>22</sup> Nancy Kay Martin, “The Effects of Freshman Orientation and Locus of Control on Adjustment to College” (diss., Texas Tech University, 1988), 57.

attenders during the first few weeks of the semester.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the other study found that “orientation had only a small direct influence on persistence.”<sup>24</sup> The effectiveness of orientation at retaining students and encouraging engagement is questionable. Because all freshmen at Lewis and Clark must attend orientation, there would be no equity issues. Policies that aim at changing the information presented during orientation would not affect the current costs of this event. However, policies that increase the number of social activities could potentially increase the costs.

#### **4. Create living and learning communities**

LLCs have proven to be extremely effective in increasing student involvement and development. Many studies have shown their benefits. Zhao and Kuh write, “Students who actively participate in various out-of-class activities are more likely to connect with an affinity group of peers, which is important for student retention, success, and personal development.”<sup>25</sup> LLCs encourage this sort of connection. In this study, Zhao and Kuh reference many other authors who also support learning communities. For example, they write, “Learning communities enhance student involvement, which in turn positively affects student success (Pike, 2000).”<sup>26</sup> In another study, Stassen references several other scholars that have concluded that students in LLCs are more engaged and involved.<sup>27</sup> She also writes, “These studies indicate that students in LCs show greater institutional commitment.”<sup>28</sup> There is therefore a large amount

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>24</sup> Ernest T. Pascarella, Patrick T. Terenzini, Lee M. Wolfle, “Orientation to College and Freshman Year Persistence/Withdrawal Decisions,” *The Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 57, no. 2 (1986), 169.

<sup>25</sup> Chun-Mei Zhao and George D. Kuh, “Learning Communities and Student Engagement,” *Research in Higher Education*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2004), 116.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>27</sup> Scholars include Tinto, Love, and Russo (1994) and Green, Mino, Snider, and Venable (1999).

<sup>28</sup> Martha L. A. Stassen, “Student Outcomes: The Impact of Varying Living-Learning Community Models,” *Research in Higher Education*, vol. 44, no. 5 (2003), 583.

of evidence to prove the effectiveness of LLCs. They have also proven to raise the retention rates of students who participate in them.<sup>29</sup> In addition, students in LLCs would reside in facilities that already exist and have a faculty advisor that is already employed by the institution. Therefore, the cost of LLCs should not be a major issue. The only problem with them then is equity. Arguably, LLCs favor students who have a clear idea of their interests and academic goals. At a liberal arts college, many students arrive with little idea of their major or even their interests. LLCs potentially exclude these students from this type of community. With that said, LLCs are open to anyone, so a student could join an LLC once they define their interests and field of study.

## **Recommendations**

Policies that are effective, low cost, equitable and raise retention rates should be considered. Of the options explored above, LLCs and an improvement of academic advising should be of highest priority.

Several studies on new student orientation are inconclusive. Their effectiveness at increasing a sense of community is indirect. Orientation is merely a three day process at Lewis and Clark. Policies that span over a longer period of time and that have a higher chance of influencing students should be considered first.

Many of the hundred or so student groups at Lewis and Clark are inactive and promote little engagement. Raising accountability for these groups could help fix this problem.<sup>30</sup> This alternative would most likely reduce the total number of clubs and organizations. There is no research on whether the total number of organizations is important or if the level of activity of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 590.

<sup>30</sup> Anna Gonzalez, interview conducted by the author, April 23, 2013, Portland, Oregon.

each organization is more important. Requiring all students to participate in a group is also an option. However, this alternative would likely be met with strong opposition and be very tough to implement. While there exists plenty of evidence to prove that participation in student organizations leads to high levels of student engagement, Lewis and Clark already has over one hundred student groups. Given that there are already plenty of opportunities for students to get involved in these organizations, the college should place a higher priority on policies that have a greater need of improvement.

LLCs have proven to be extremely effective at engaging students, raising retention rates and contributing to student growth and success. Of the four alternatives listed above, LLCs have the greatest potential for increasing student engagement. Granted, academic advising helps with engagement, however its influence is indirect.<sup>31</sup> LLCs are the most effective solution to raising student engagement. Unfortunately, they could also be the most expensive. However, the costs are manageable given that Lewis and Clark already has the infrastructure to support this sort of policy.

Research suggests that integrated advising is very helpful for students. Integrated advising includes academic advice, as well as career and life planning. A study conducted by Joanne K. Dammingier found that students were very satisfied with advising when it was integrated. The study was conducted at Rowan University in 2001. Rowan is a public institution in New Jersey with ten thousand undergraduates, and an acceptance rate around 60 percent.<sup>32</sup> While the nature of the institution is vastly different from Lewis and Clark, the results of integrated advising are very clear. Of the students who participated in the study, none marked

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<sup>31</sup> Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini, *How College Effects Students* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2005), 420.

<sup>32</sup> US News and World Report, <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rowan-university-2609> (accessed May 4, 2013).

“dissatisfied” or even “only satisfied” with integrated advising. The results were extremely favorable towards this type of advising.

Damminger’s study cites many other sources that illustrate the benefits of integrated career and academic advising. These other sources all “indicate the need for the inclusion of career counseling in academic advising.”<sup>33</sup> These authors include Betsy McCalla-Wriggins, Vivian Carroll McCollum, Jerry R. Wilder, and Virginia Gordon.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, while the example Rowan University might not be generalizable to Lewis and Clark due to differences in institution type, there exists strong evidence to prove that integrated academic advising is very beneficial to students.

LLCs and integrated advising are the two main policies that Lewis and Clark should prioritize. Since the college is already looking to improve academic advising, it should consider combining it with career advising. Currently, 3CE is separate from academic advising, however considerable evidence shows that a combination of the two would be highly effective. LLCs should also be implemented into campus housing. Research shows that it not only raises involvement, but also contributes considerably to student growth and development.

We will know if the objectives are met by observing the strength of the community over the next few years. Surveys should continue to be administered to monitor whether students feel a lack of community. Another factor that will measure the effectiveness of policies to create a stronger community is the retention rate itself. Higher retention and graduation rates point towards good levels of student involvement.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

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<sup>33</sup> Joanne K. Damminger, *Student Satisfaction with Quality of Academic Advising Offered by Integrated Department of Academic Advising and Career Life Planning* (New Jersey: Rowan University), 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9.

There exist countless policies that could improve student engagement at Lewis and Clark. The four alternatives in this brief are some of the most direct ways to improve student involvement, however many other options exist. Interviews with Angelica Garcia, Anna Gonzalez, Mark Figueroa, and Rob Kugler illuminated many different approaches and directions that these policies could take. Some of these alternatives are broad, long-term goals like gaining a better understanding of students' needs. Other options that could be effective in increasing involvement have more indirect effects on student engagement. For example, creating an institutional identity was another alternative that I had hoped to incorporate into this brief. How does Lewis and Clark define itself, and how does it portray that image to all members of the community, as well as to prospective students? There exists a strategic plan for all three schools (Law, Graduate and College of Arts and Sciences), however there is no such document for the undergraduate campus. Further research should look into the benefits of creating a strong institutional identity. There are therefore a variety of other policy options that could increase student engagement. Research should continue to explore the effectiveness of these options.

Much can be said about the efforts already being made to improve student involvement and retention. The faculty and staff at Lewis and Clark are aware of these issues and several committees have been formed to solve these problems. Prospects for increased engagement and retention look promising. Improvement will require the efforts of the entire community. Lewis and Clark is clearly committed to its students and will take the necessary steps fix retention related problems, as well as elevate its reputation as an elite liberal arts college.

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