

|| || || || || || || ||

Cultivating Community for First- Time Freshmen

Examining the Impact of a Learning Community on
Belonging and Retention

July 29, 2026





Agenda

- Introduction
- Research Timeline
- Survey Results
- Focus Group Results
- Findings
- Future Research
- Questions



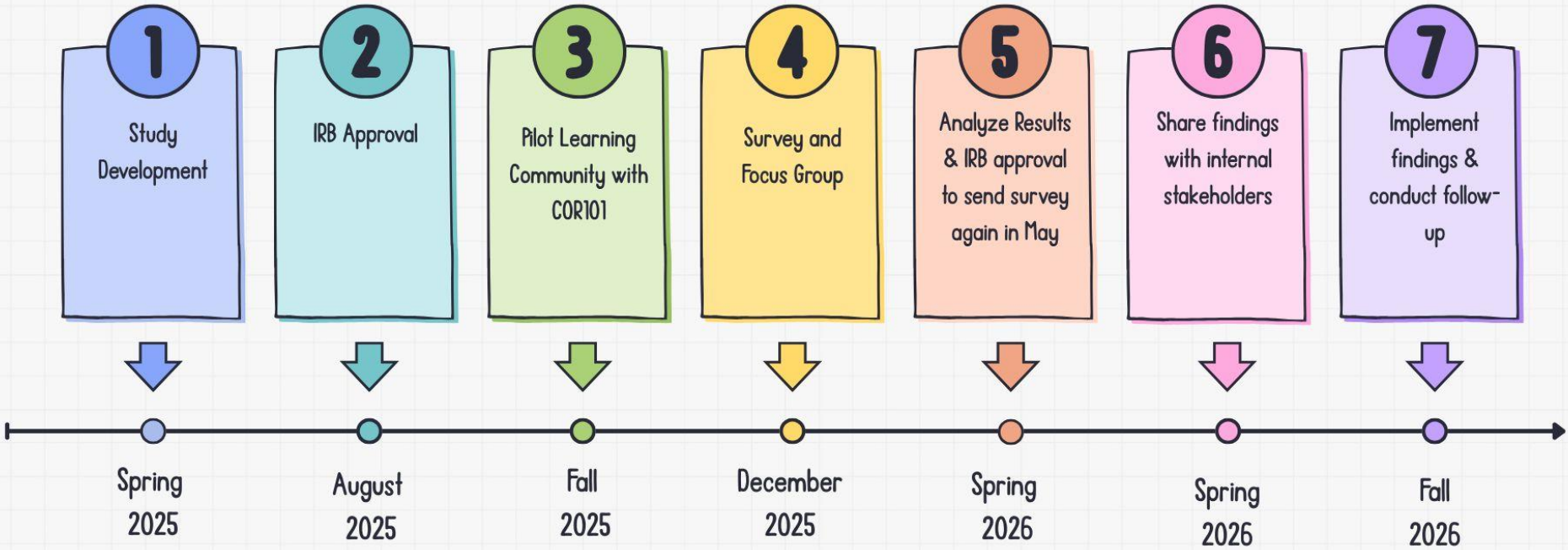


Introduction

- **Researchers:** Dr. Kinney-Walker and Dr. Will Roberts
- **Study Title:** Cultivating Community for First-Time Freshmen: Examining the Impact of a Learning Community on Belonging and Retention
- **Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a Learning Community designed specifically for first-time freshmen at a small, healthcare-focused, four-year private college in the Midwest.
 - Looked at impact on first-semester college retention and belongingness
- **Methods:** Survey, Focus Group, and Archival Data
- **Background & Significance**
 - Student sense of belonging has been found to positively impact retention (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2012)
 - Learning communities have been identified as increasing belonging (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Smith et al., 2004)
 - Tools to measure sense of belonging have been developed; this study used tool from Hoffman, et al. (2002).
- ***Supported by NMC Faculty Fellowship***



RESEARCH TIMELINE



QUANTITATIVE RESULTS



13 **100%**

OF STUDENT RESPONDANTS

OF STUDENTS SAID THEY PLANNED TO RETURN TO NMC

Who are the students?

85%

Female



23%

First-Gen



77%

Live off-campus



85%

Work 20 hours or less



100%

OF STUDENTS AGREED WITH 7 OF THE BELONGING MEASURES

- I am respected by the NMC campus community.
- If I miss class, I know students who I could get notes from.
- Other students are helpful in reminding me when assignments are due or when tests are approaching.
- I feel comfortable asking questions in my classes.
- I feel that a faculty member would be sympathetic if I was upset.
- I feel that a faculty member would take the time to talk to me if I needed help.
- If I had a reason, I would feel comfortable seeking help from a faculty member outside of class time (office hours etc).

23%

OF STUDENTS DISAGREED WITH 2 OF THE MEASURES

- I have met with classmates outside of classes to study for an exam.
- I invite people I know from my classes to do things socially.



Focus Group Results

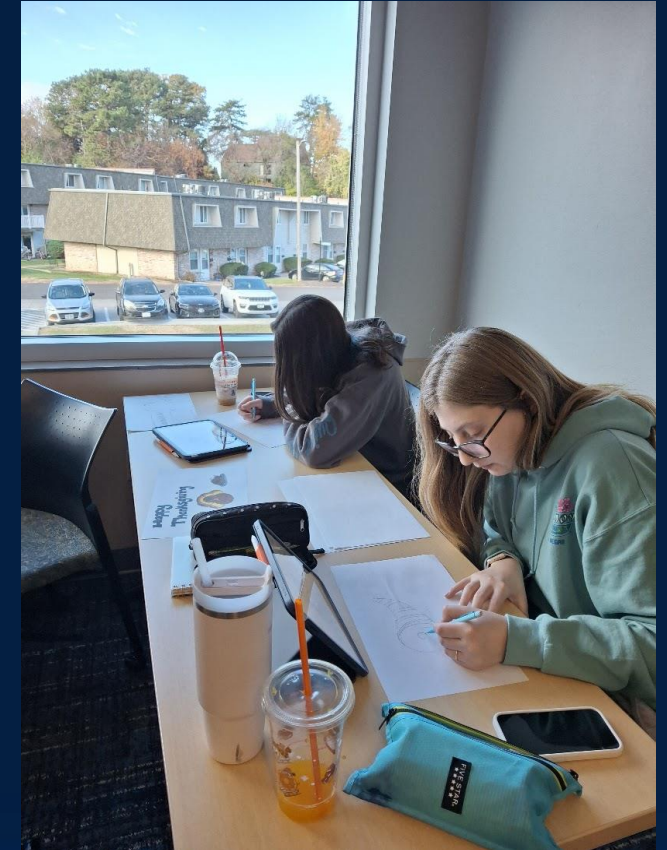
- Sense of Belonging:
 - Learning community effectively fostered *class-level belonging*, but not *institutional belonging*.
- Peer Mentors:
 - Peer mentors matter—but their effectiveness depends on preparation, inclusivity, and intentional facilitation.
- Learning Community Activities:
 - Students strongly favor *active, social, purpose-driven labs* over lecture-style or loosely planned sessions.
- Campus Life & Engagement:
 - The learning community cannot compensate for broader gaps in campus engagement opportunities.
- Structural Feedback:
 - Timing of the course and learning community matter
 - Specific, targeted population in the learning community





Findings

- Belonging:
 - Although sample size was small, students overwhelmingly reported that the Learning Community supported their sense of belonging.
- Persistence:
 - 100% of the 13 students persisted at NMC Fall 2025-Spring 2026
 - 82.1% of all FTF persisted at NMC Fall 2025-Spring 2026



Future Research

- Pilot Learning Community has evolved into the "LAUNCH" program starting in Fall 2026
- Research of First-Time Freshmen students in LAUNCH will continue in Fall 2026
 - Focus will be on how we can extend the class-level belonging to institutional belonging and expand engagement opportunities.





Questions?





Resources

Hoffman, M., Richmond, J., Morrow, J., & Salomone, K. (2002). Investigating “sense of belonging” in first-year college students.

Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 4(3), 227–256. <https://doi.org/10.2190/DRYC-CXQ9-JQ8V-HT4V>

Smith, B. L., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R., & Gabelnick, F. (2004). *Learning communities: Reforming undergraduate education*. Jossey-Bass.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. University of Chicago Press.

Zhao, C. M., & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(2), 115–138. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:RIHE.0000015692.88534.de>

