LIVING THE NEWS: LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND THE BG NEWS AS AN APPROACH TO ADDRESS JOURNALISM EDUCATION GOALS

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Abstract

Numerous studies have demonstrated the value of learning communities on campus to higher education because students who participate in them are more likely to be engaged in their field of interest, more likely to attend workshops, and more likely to develop relationships with faculty who become mentors. Similarly, anecdotal evidence suggests that working for a student newspaper can have a lasting value for students’ personal and professional development. But while learning communities usually involve students in a common major like theater or an interest like service learning, involvement in the student newspaper on many campuses has no connection to a particular major or department. This is true at Bowling Green State University, where students of any major may begin at The BG News whenever they want and quit whenever they want. In keeping with national accrediting expectations, the BGSU Department of Journalism and Public Relations has eleven learning outcomes for its majors, many of which are furthered when students work at The BG News. This thesis explores how a learning community connected both with The BG News and the journalism department might benefit students, meet the needs of the changing student newspaper landscape and assist the department in preparing majors for professional media careers. A review of the literature provided a list of the academic and social outcomes that scholars have identified as the result of student participation in learning communities. Those results were then matched against the particular journalism objectives to determine whether there was any correlation. The analysis suggests there might be a benefit for both department and students. First, students in a learning community are surrounded by peers with similar interests and faculty who can help at almost any time. Secondly, when students live or meet on a regular basis, they become more engaged. Finally, a community creates a closeness and passion that mimics the newsroom teamwork, which can reinforce the BGSU journalism
objectives. These findings suggest a learning community tied to the paper and the department would be advantageous because it would further departmental goals and enhance the very aspects of teamwork that build better journalists.
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Introduction

Numerous studies have demonstrated the value of learning communities in higher education because students in these programs are more likely to be engaged in their field of interest, more likely to attend workshops, and more likely to develop relationships with faculty who become mentors. Similarly, the student newspaper experience also impacts those pursuing a career in journalism. The experience is marked by lessons that can only be learned by actually working in the field, albeit on a college campus. Covering student government meetings, reporting on tuition increases and writing about football games is all part of the on-job training. This exposure is strengthened by the student media model that allows students to make the paper their own; basically, students run the paper. This exposure, although mostly positive, is currently left up to chance. Students decide if they want to participate in the student media outlet. They can join the paper and quit whenever they want; they do not have to fulfill their reporting and writing obligations, even if the student editor asks them to. There are no significant consequences to shirking their responsibilities.

The BGSU Journalism and Public Relations Department prides itself on earning and keeping professional accreditation. The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, or ACEJMC, evaluates professional journalism and mass communication programs in colleges and universities. This accreditation serves as an indicator of quality; it measures the educational merit and relevance of the program.¹ Prospective students look to this accreditation as an indicator that they will be well-trained if they go to BGSU. Journalism professors seeking jobs will also be more likely to want to work for a journalism department that is accredited because it signifies quality. To maintain this accreditation, the BGSU Journalism

and Public Relations Department has eleven objectives to prepare future journalists for the professional world. The objectives range from preparing students to become ethical practitioners, to properly and effectively use technology, and to understand the history of the profession.

This thesis examined how a learning community, connected both with *The BG News* and the Department of Journalism and Public Relations at Bowling Green State University, might benefit the students and assist the department in preparing majors for professional media careers. A review of the literature provided a list of the academic and social outcomes that scholars have identified as the results of student participation in learning communities. Those results were then matched against the particular objectives prescribed by the journalism department in order to determine whether there was any correlation between the two. As is going to be explored in Chapter 3, there are places where there are synergies and what a learning community does well would feed into the journalism department’s objectives and help *The BG News*. In particular, a learning community gives students the opportunity to take field trips as a group, as well as makes young scholars feel comfortable developing relationships with faculty who they see on regular basis, possibly even in their residence hall.

This is a worthwhile topic to explore at a time when many universities pride themselves on their learning communities like BGSU, which is recognized in *U.S. News and World Report’s “America’s Best Colleges”* for its effect in this area. And with the construction of several new dormitories on campus, discussion has begun to determine what role learning communities might play in the future. A learning community centered on journalism would offer students something more than the student newspaper experience because it would be more structured, students would have more supervision, would receive more enrichment experiences and they would have the opportunity for official mentoring. Because this learning community would be new, students
would be emerged in all the newest technology. Ball State University began something similar with its media-centered learning community. Students there live with people who are interested in media technology. They have easy access to state-of-the-art technology, which they can use at any hour of the day. If universities have a growing interest in learning communities, this is the moment and they have to make sure they aren’t overlooked. These trends in higher education go in cycles. If BGSU’s journalism department and student media organization is not part of the conversation then they are going to miss the opportunity. EVIDENCE

The first section of the thesis has two parts. The first provides a background on The BG News and what it offers to student journalists. Part two provides an in-depth look at the journalism department and its learning objectives. Chapter 2 is the review of the literature that looks at learning communities and their academic and social outcomes. In Chapter 3, those results are then matched against the particular objectives prescribed by the journalism department in order to determine whether there was any correlation between the two. Chapter 4 provides analysis and discussion of the findings. And finally, Chapter 5 offers some concluding thoughts and provides recommendations for what the journalism department should be doing when it comes to learning communities, as well as ideas for future research.

**Chapter I: Background**

Before discussing how learning communities might enhance the relationship between The BG News and the Department of Journalism and Public Relations it is necessary to know more about each of the two units. In the case of The BG News, a brief section gives an overview of the paper and its mission. The background section on the department looks briefly at its history and mission and then lays out the eleven specific objectives the department has established in order
to further its efforts to comply with or meet expectations of the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, or (ACEJMC). The section concludes with possible questions that need to be addressed before forming a learning community between The BG News and the Department of Journalism and Public Relations.

The BG News

The BG News recently celebrated its 90th anniversary as a student voice at BGSU. The paper grew from the Country Life Club, which was one of the first student groups on campus of what was then Bowling Green State Normal School. The club was organized in 1915 as a way to bring students together and “provide enrichment.” 1 In 1920, when the club wanted a more organized way to connect to students, it started the fledging Bee Gee News, first published May 20th.

In the early days, the newspaper focused on campus and social issues, for instance, sports news, club meeting, and wedding announcements. From the beginning, the paper published monthly, 10 times per year, skipping the summer, until 1931. In February 1931, it moved to a weekly publication schedule and the change clearly generated problems. The staff was not accustomed to the monthly deadline and stories took on a dated, delayed style. The student body began to complain. The editor responded bluntly, “Severe criticism and condemnation has been visited upon the editorial staff not publishing a better paper. Most of these chronic kickers have never lifted a pen to help. What under the sun is the matter with the student body? You have the brains to give us good material. Wake up for heaven’s sake.” 2

In 1939, the newspaper started to look like a conventional newspaper with its conversion to a full-sized broadsheet. It also began to acquire a readership base. In 1951, the name Bee Gee

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1 BG News, the Campus Voice For 85 Years, BG News, October, 1, 2005, page 12.

2 BG News, the Campus Voice For 85 Years, BG News, October, 1, 2005, page 12.
News was changed to The BG News. It was around this time that the paper expanded from local campus news to include national issues.

By the 1970s, the paper was publishing four days per week, but moved to five days per week in 1994, which still continues today. The advancements in technology are perhaps the most notable changes in the student newsroom in the past two decades. One of the most impressive aspects of The BG News is its technology, which matches that of most professional papers. The BG News staff works with top-of-the-line computers and sends paginated pages to the printer; nothing is done through the traditional cut-and-paste method of yesteryear. As the Internet became an important aspect of disseminating news, the staff answered the need for an online component with the launch of its website, which is now known as BG Views and can be viewed at bgviews.com.

Today, The BG News is an integral part of campus life. It is a student-run, five-day daily with a circulation of 10,000. It has a special weekly entertainment supplement, “Pulse,” nine seasonal tabular inserts, and a fully functional website that provides news coverage throughout the year. Day-to-day, the paper is supervised by the director of Student Publications, which for the past 30 years has been Robert Bortel, an ad-hoc member of this thesis committee. Bortel reports to the university’s vice president for student affairs, Dr. Edward Whipple, and works with the university’s Student Publications Board, which is a mix of elected and appointed members.

The BG News offices are located in West Hall. The paper has a staff of about 100, including editors, reporters, photographers, copy editors, designers and sales representatives. Those interested in the position of editor-in-chief compete for the position, prepare portfolios and are interviewed and selected by the publications board.

Department of Journalism and Public Relations
As The BG News was evolving into what it is today, the Department of Journalism and Public Relations began to take shape in 1941 when its first director, Jesse Currier, moved the journalism curriculum out of the English Department into a free-standing unit. Currier headed the School of Journalism for 27 years and oversaw its growth into a nationally accredited program with sequences in print journalism, broadcast journalism, magazine journalism, photojournalism, and public relations.

Today the department has 300 majors who can choose to specialize in one of three sequences: broadcast journalism, print journalism or public relations. The faculty is comprised of 14 full-time members.

The journalism programs are nationally accredited by the ACEJMC and, because of the two-internship requirement, BGSU graduates are guaranteed to have significant practical experience. Students enjoy small class size (limited to 20 in most classes) and direct interaction with faculty, who all have professional experience in journalism.

The majority of undergraduate courses are taught by full-time faculty who are as devoted to teaching as they are to mass communication research. The BGSU Journalism and Public Relations Department prides itself on earning and keeping professional accreditation. ACEJMC evaluates professional journalism and mass communication programs in colleges and universities. This accreditation serves as an indicator of quality; it measures the educational merit and relevance of the program. Prospective students look to this accreditation as an indicator that they will be well-trained if they go to BGSU. Professors seeking jobs will also be more likely to want to work for a journalism department that is accredited because it signifies quality. To maintain this accreditation, the BGSU Journalism and Public Relations Department has eleven objectives to prepare future journalists for the professional world. The objectives range from
preparing them to be ethical practitioners to function with technology and to understand the history of the profession.

The journalism department at BGSU has a series of objectives it wants to achieve with majors. The objectives are drawn from the professional values and competencies specified by the ACEJMC. The eleven objectives are part of an ongoing process to meet the standards outlined by ACEJMC. After a deliberative discussion among journalism faculty members, the objectives adopted were the same as the ACEJMC goals.

In the following section, the outcomes will be stated in verbatim and then paraphrased to explain what this means from a newspaper perspective. ³

\textit{Department Outcomes}

Objective number one is to \textbf{“Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press, including the right to dissent.”} Students, once they complete the program, should be able to monitor and criticize power, and to assemble and petition for redress of grievances. They should recognize that when members of a community dissent this could possibly warrant news coverage.

Objective number two is to \textbf{“Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communities.”} Students need to have a fundamental knowledge of the background and development of their field so they understand how the roles of journalists and journalism institutions have developed in American society. They also need to understand the role journalists, public relations specialists and the organizations they have worked for have shaped American life. Without this knowledge, students will struggle to understand where the industry needs to go in the future. The successes and mistakes of yesterday are the building blocks for tomorrow. While many people bemoan the “death” of the newspaper

³ BGSU Journalism Department Objectives
industry, if they would take the time to review some of the other changes the industry has undergone, they would realize that change is a fundamental part of the growth of any particular industry.

Objective number three is to “Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of groups in a global society in relationship to communications.” Students who understand the diversity of the world strive to include a variety of opinions in their reporting. Students need to realize that people from different backgrounds communicate differently and use those differences to present a comprehensive story. Students, and even professional journalists, tend to interview only people who look and act like them. This is a dangerous habit because opinions vary among ethnicities and among classes. A person who is lower class, for example, may not feel the same about a new law to require everyone to have health care as a person who belongs to the upper class.

Objective number four is to “Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information.” Students need to understand the theory behind effective presentation of information and images. This is important because presentation helps draw people into stories and then subsequently keeps them engaged. Entry points are important because some people might only want one or two parts of the story. Any and all attempts should be made to give people the information they want through the means they want it.

Objective number five is to “Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity.” Students must leave college to be able to conduct themselves ethically, including being able to report with truth, accuracy and fairness. Without these elements, stories might be bias or unfair to those who are covered and those who are reading the stories. A journalist who cannot be trusted is a
journalist whose work is tainted from there on out.

Objective number six is to “Think critically, creatively and independently.” Students must learn to question the information they encounter. They cannot accept that all information is correct; rather, they must look at it with a critical eye. Students must also be creative and independent in how they present information. In order to set that work apart, they need to look at information differently so they don’t write the same story as everyone else.

Objective number seven is to “Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.” Students need to learn the variety of ways they can collect information. This can include conducting interviews in person, via telephone or, in rare cases, through the Internet. They need to realize that talking to people isn’t enough. Students must also ask and review appropriate documents, look through archives and sometimes just observe.

Objective number eight is to “Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve.” Students need to communicate clearly and concisely. They need to make sure that they are appropriately evaluating their audiences, so they can determine the best way to reach them, being careful to neither over-or-underestimate the audience’s intelligence.

Objective number nine is to “Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness.” Students need to realize that their work is judged based on a variety of measures. A loaded word, unnecessary adjective or a misplaced modifier can change the meaning of a story. It is important for students to be able to evaluate their work in case the story has to be put on the website without editing. If they can evaluate the work of others that will allow them to become a better
communicator because they will more easily recognize poor writing. Being able to edit a colleague’s work could also lead to a promotion.

Objective number ten is to “Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts. Students need to be able to understand numbers so they can better report on stories.” Students need to be able to compute and explain what the numbers mean in the context of that story. Stories that simply spit out numbers without real-life examples that put the story into perspective are worse than stories that give no statistical evidence at all.

Objective number eleven is to “Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.” Technology is becoming an integral way to disseminate information. Future journalists need to know how to upload stories, photos and videos to the Web. They also need basic photo and video skills. The possibilities with online journalism are endless, so students need to learn everything they can in college because that will provide a foundation for what is to come. If they do not gain a foundation for the use of technology, they will only get further behind as more advances are made.

Shifting media

Before examining learning communities and their value to journalism programs, the geological shifts in media environments need to be explored. The massive changes in the media industry from print to online reinforce the need for a change in journalism curriculum. Journalism is no longer as simple as reporting and writing the news and then publishing it in a newspaper. Internet and social networking sites, like Facebook and Twitter, are changing the way news is disseminated. While information gathering and distributing is still important, it is being approached differently. This is in part because consumers of news expect information almost immediately at all times of the day.
While the daily newspaper industry goes through a collapse and then reinvention, and television stations are not immune to change, alternative weeklies, blogs, and online-only papers are among those competing to fill the vacuum. This section reviews the news industry and environment, including information about who is and is not reading the paper and what type of news they seek if they do pick up the print product. These results come from the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism. The section ends with a look at an assessment from a journalism educator and newspaper adviser about what these industry changes may mean for journalism pedagogy. It also examines comments from a blogger and offers proceeding suggestions about how journalism programs can navigate the uncertainty of the new media landscape.

The 2008 Pew study by Tyler Marshall included both a survey of daily newspaper editors and in-depth interviews with 259 of the editors from the largest papers. Not surprisingly, the study found that most American newspapers are facing staff reductions and are being given less space for news. The hardest hit in the industry has been the large papers, particularly because the industry has made the decision to devote less space and resources to national and international news. The newsroom staff producing the paper is also smaller, younger, more tech-savvy, and more oriented to serving the demands of both print and the web. The staff is also stressed, has less institutional memory and less knowledge of the community, the report explained.

Despite this sobering news, the report is not all bad. While journalists are discouraged, they are not beaten. They know that the quality of their services is still necessary; they just need to determine – with the help of the paper’s advertising department – how to distribute the information and still make money. Optimistically, the Pew report stated that more people today,

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in more places, read the content produced in the newsrooms of American daily newspapers than at any time in years – they just might not be reading it on a paper product.

The study also found that the culture of the daily newspaper newsroom is also changing. New job demands are drawing a generation of young, versatile, tech-savvy, high-energy staff. Newsroom executives say the infusion of these young journalists has created a new energy in the newsrooms, but, executives also worry about losing talented veteran journalists. Editors are torn between the advantages the web offers and the energy it consumes to produce material often of limited or even questionable value, according to the report. Pew stated that 48 percent of editors, for instance, say they like the speed, depth and interactivity of the web, but worry what they lose in terms of accuracy and journalistic standards. Yet, despite these concerns, 43 percent think web technology offers the greatest chance for newspapers to survive and then thrive.

With or without the Pew report, those running journalism programs have understood for years that journalism is changing but have not been sure how to address it. Sonya Huber-Humes taught journalism at The Ohio State University, where she also served as the adviser for its student newspaper. She wrote about her email inbox being filled with listserv postings about the changing media landscape, the need to podcast, blog and converge. She wrote:

> Journalism programs across the country have rolled out new curricula and courses emphasizing complex social issues, in-depth reporting and new media, such as online news sites with streaming audio and video. Journalism education has rightly taken its cue from media outlets that now find themselves not relevant enough for a new generation of readers, not hip enough, not appealing enough to keep advertising and subscription

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revenues rolling in. As a result, journalism faculty members find themselves confronted with a dazzling array of dilemmas to teach and toys to play with.⁶

In response to the changing media landscape, journalism blog writer Katie Buchholz said editors and reporters have no choice but to adapt. The same goes for journalism schools.⁷ With the industry changing and embracing more personal forms of journalism, not to mention shifting from print to Web, journalism schools are changing their curricula as well. J-schools are putting more emphasis on the new media and opinion journalism, she said. Then there is Susanne Shaw, a professor of journalism at the University of Kansas, who said the numerous changes in the journalism industry are causing many schools to consider changing their curriculum.⁸ She thinks the focus is becoming more on multimedia, including Web-based video and audio. The nation's first J-school, the University of Missouri School of Journalism, is considering a new curriculum track dedicated to opinion and advocacy journalism. She thinks students need a variety of skills in order to have the flexibility to go down any journalistic path they choose.

Learning communities

As journalism has changed, so has higher education. The learning community trend has been popular in higher education for the past two decades. In the 1990s colleges began experimenting with learning communities, and even though every program is slightly different, they had two goals. They wanted to provide an environment where students enroll in several classes together and these courses would be anchored to a theme.

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This section explores the evolution of learning communities, as well as the many different types of programs that carry this label. Then, this section looks at what the scholarly Boyer Commission said is wrong with higher education, and examines its recommendations for learning communities. Research shows that learning communities are not all created equal. Some are nonresidential; some are residential. Some center on academic majors, while others focus on interests. The staffing differs, as does the programming. Some of the most common learning communities involve students living in the same area. These types of communities also happen to be the ones scholars have most carefully researched.

In “Learning Moves Homes,” Inkelas, et. al said learning communities were partially in response to problems identified by the CONTEXT Boyer Commission. In the 1998 report, called “Reinventing Undergraduate Education,” the commission described thousands of undergraduates receiving instruction from novice teaching assistants or professors working from old notes. Meanwhile, these students were enrolled in a smattering of classes that did not link together. Hence, the report concluded, students did not graduate knowing how to think logically, write clearly or speak coherently. Knowing this, North American institutions started organizing learning communities, according to Inkelas, et. al. The Boyer report moved from elaborating on the problems in higher education to recommending learning communities as an answer because they offer an environment in which the problems in undergraduate education can be rectified. This section will now explore each of those recommendations in greater depth.

The first recommendation suggests creating environments where learning is based on inquiry. One of the characteristics of American research universities is their ability to generate
new ideas. When it comes to learning communities, faculty can involve undergraduates in their research and inspire student learning through hands-on projects.

The second recommendation integrates interdisciplinary learning and the intimate first-year experience. This enables students to be better able to make the link among the disciplines and to ask for clarification from their teachers and classmates when they do not understand the material.

The third recommendation builds upon the idea of collaboration and integration beyond the first year. The Boyer Commission recommended that institutions give students the opportunity to inquire, collaborate and receive mentoring from faculty members as early as their first year and to continue with that through graduation.

The fourth recommendation helps students recognize interdisciplinary links through presentations by off-campus speakers or trips to area cultural attractions. This can supplement students’ experiences and expose them to diverse perspectives.

The fifth recommendation suggests helping students more effectively express themselves. The Boyer Commission argued that one of the most serious failings in undergraduate education was that students were inarticulate, and the commission said the ability to write and speak effectively is a crucial job skill, as is the ability to make a clear, concise and logical explanation.

The sixth recommendation advocates fostering a sense of community among students because those in larger university settings often do not feel that they belong there.

In a partial response to the Boyer Report, learning communities began to take shape. Many were developed to strengthen undergraduate students’ learning by helping them to connect the potentially disparate knowledge gained from the academic, co-curricular and residential
arenas. Shapiro and Levine offered a broad definition of these curricular learning communities through a definition created by the well-respected Dr. Alexander Astin:

Such communities can be organized along curricular lines, common career interests, vocational interests, residential living areas, and so on. These can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness and uniqueness; to encourage continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences and to counteract the isolation that many students feel.

Researchers have determined many definitions for learning communities, but a general summary is an experience that inspires learning in and outside of the classroom. In the 2007 National Portrait of Today’s Living-Learning Programs report, Soldner outlined the basic characteristics of living-learning programs. The report defined living-learning communities as a place undergraduates live together in a discrete portion of a residence hall and participate in academic and/or extracurricular programming designed especially for them. The overarching theme of this report was that living-learning communities are all different. The report showed a typical living-learning community includes 52 students. Because of the size, the majority of living-learning programs were contained upon one traditional residence hall floor. Seventy-one percent of programs were housed within a discrete, reserved portion of one residence hall, although some programs were housed within all-living learning buildings. Seventeen percent filled an entire residence hall.

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12 National Study of Living-Learning Programs, 2007
When it comes to the oversight of learning communities, the overwhelming majority of programs reported to just one office on campus, while 47 percent reported to a residence life and only 8 percent reported to an academic department. In most cases, responsibility for day-to-day program direction was left to a single staff person. Although directors came from multiple offices across campus, 43 percent were from residence life. Staff from academic departments were the second most likely to be responsible for directing living learning programs. The NSLLP report also showed that 23 percent of programs had no faculty involvement of any kind, while 64 percent reported working with one to three faculty members. Besides teaching, faculty hosted workshops for students, mentored, attended social events, advised and served on advisory boards.

The NSLLP also outlined the costs of living-learning communities. Again, every program differed, even if just slightly. The average was $21,000; 10 percent of the programs had no budget and 25 percent had budgets of $5,000. The average room rate was nearly $4,300 per student, suggesting that the gross revenue generated by housing five resident students supported the typical living-learning program. Using the report’s results, Soldner noted that more than half of all programs did not include any form of academic coursework. Others employed a variety of strategies that mixed four types of courses: courses just designed for living-learning curriculum; sections of intro-level courses reserved for living-learning participants; general university courses open to all; and noncredit seminars.

A living-learning community can look like the following. At Florida-based Rollins College, all first-year students enroll in a seminar known as the Rollins College Conference.13 Each RCC course is limited to 15 students who meet in addition to meeting three times per week;

13 Jim Eck, Hoyt Edge and Katherine Stephenson, “Investigating Types of Student Engagement through Living-Learning Communities: The Perspective from Rollins College,” Assessment Update 19, no. 3 (May-June 2007): 6-8.
they meet in a “fourth hour,” which provides students with opportunities to attend guest lectures and go on field trips. The assessment of the program revealed that students who participated in the learning community participated more in classroom discussions, had better decision-making skills and were able to see multiple sides of an issue.

Known for its learning communities, BGSU offers its own definition. BGSU sponsors an international clearinghouse devoted to the collection and dissemination of information about residential learning communities. Through this clearinghouse, it defines a residential learning community as a residential education unit that is organized on the basis of an academic theme or approach and integrates academic learning and community living.¹⁴ The unit may or may not be degree-granting and may involve collaboration with formal academic departments outside the unit, the clearinghouse website stated. Residential learning communities provide formal and/or informal, credit and/or noncredit learning opportunities (courses, seminars, tutorials, firesides).

Living the news at BGSU

If The BG News and the journalism department decided to start a learning community together, they would need to resolve certain fundamental questions in order to determine the model for this particular endeavor. Every learning community is unique and there is not one preferred design. Because of this, the parties involved would need to ask themselves the following: Where on this continuum of learning communities – themed to where students do not live together to a residential community where they live together – would this community fall? In a themed community, the students would have similar interests and meet several times per week as they choose, kind of like a student organization, or they could be required to take classes together. Residential could range from living with peers with similar interests and perhaps minimal programs to living together, taking classes together and being required to attend

¹⁴ Fostering Residential Learning at Bowling Green State University: Some Ideas and Direction, February, 23, 2000
programming together. Based on the review of the literature, this model would appear to offer some of the results that would be the most useful for The BG News and the journalism department.

If The BG News and the journalism department adopted this latter model, which is probably the most productive, it might include three classes and common time for field trips and guest speakers. The fall semester would require those in the community to take classes together. See figure 1. Logical classes on that list for the first semester would include an introductory journalism class, a general writing course and a political science lecture. Other similar options could include an intro to ethics, statistics or psychology course. These classes would be integrated to allow for cross-learning. For instance, one of the projects could require students to use the techniques learned in JOUR 1000 to produce a video with a political science theme. Another project could incorporate writing skills, such as proper grammar and parallel verb structure, learned in the General Studies Writing to produce a story for JOUR 1000. A third idea could include a class field trip to Columbus, Ohio, could combine visits to a press secretary’s office and the correspondents who cover the statehouse.

Given the nature of the relationship between The BG News and the journalism department poses an additional set of questions. Would the learning community be open to people from any major? Educators would also have to consider how upperclassmen would be incorporated into the community if these students decided to live off campus. While most universities require that freshmen and sophomores live on campus, how will upperclassmen be integrated into the experience? Given that technology might make it possible to have a newsroom in a facility like this, questions about public access would arise.
Generally, the planning for a learning community like this involves extensive research, interviewing experts who gain their knowledge by starting their own communities, traveling to national conferences to meet with directors of ongoing communities and inviting consultants in to look at the university’s own situation to help it identify what model is going to work for that institution. Given all of this, any further proposal would require information beyond the scope of this thesis.
Objectives

1. Use the techniques learned in JOUR 1000 to produce a video with a political science theme.
2. Use writing skills, such as proper grammar and parallel verb structure, learned in the General Studies Writing to write a story JOUR 1000.
3. Take a class field trip to Columbus, Ohio, to tour a press secretary’s office during campaign season.
Chapter II: Learning Communities

Through the years researchers have looked at the impact student newspapers on the campus communities, but they have not looked yet at the impact of a learning community tied in to a student press. But what scholars have explored intensely is service learning, although this is not what is being explored in this particular thesis. Many scholars have also examined the retention rates, student development and academic success of students as tied to learning communities. This chapter will explore one of the few schools that have tried a learning community based on journalism, although it was not as specific as a student newspaper. The other part of the chapter will look at the benefits of learning communities.

In 1993 and 1994, University of Nebraska-Lincoln administrators commissioned a research project to look at graduation records. They found sobering statistics. About 50 percent of the new freshmen entering 1984-1987 did not graduate within the six-year period following their initial enrollment.\textsuperscript{15} What added to their concern were the numbers coming out of the College of Journalism and Mass Communication. During the time period 1989 to 1999, enrollment declined 8.5 percent from 1,058 to 968. Because of this, the school decided to collectively improve its freshman retention. As part of that, the College of Journalism and Mass Communication established a learning community, which still exists in some of its original form today.

In addition to improving student retention, the journalism faculty members were concerned for other reasons about first-year students. Several faculty members believed that some students did not have the opportunity to be attracted to the field because they did not get to take journalism courses until their sophomore year, according to authors Nancy Mitchell and Jerry Renaud. Some reasoned that one factor contributing to the declining enrollment in journalism programs was because a philosophy endorsed by Accrediting Council of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC). This philosophy encouraged programs to put their professional courses in the last two years of the four-year program. The faculty also feared that more stringent entrance requirements at the university, which were enacted in fall 1997, might result in decreased enrollments. This also inspired the start of the learning community.

Knowing all of this, in the fall of 1998, the learning community in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications was started using the few already-established learning communities as models. The learning community was made up of about 30 students who lived together in one residence hall and, as a group, took three courses together. The faculty settled on a theme of politics and media. The university is located in the capital and the start of the learning community coincided with a gubernatorial election. To reinforce the theme, students in the learning community had to enroll in a course called “The Media Today,” an introductory English composition class, and an intro political science class. Eighty-nine percent of the community was comprised of majors, but non-majors were welcomed as well. To achieve goals of shared learning, students went on organized trips. Everything the community did was deliberate and purposeful. Students toured the athletic department’s sports information and broadcasting facilities to see how the athletic department gave out information to the media. They also saw how coaches’ television shows were produced and how the big screens worked during football
games. One of the major events for the community was a trip to Washington, D.C., where students visited the Freedom Forum’s Newseum and toured the *USA Today* newspaper to talk with political editor Richard Benedetto and international edition editor Fred Anklam. The group also visited the capitol with alumni who were working as press secretaries. Some students attended one hearing of former President Bill Clinton’s impeachment trial, and the group also went to the Holocaust Museum. Something like this would serve students at any university at any program. It takes the classroom into the real world and shows alumni who are using their skills in their chosen profession.

Two major changes were implemented during the second year at Nebraska: adding student mentors and a noncredit lab for members to meet several times before “The Media Today” meeting. The college also designed the class to allow additional opportunities for guest speakers. In one effort, a political science faculty member spoke to the group requesting the students’ participation in the creation of campaign materials.

After the first year of the program, Nebraska administrators evaluated their efforts and found moderate success. They found that the number of students from the first year of the learning community who remained majors in the college was low. Eleven of the 21 students either left or transferred from the college. Five of those 21 students left the university altogether. But the number of students who participated in the second year improved with only three of the 24 students leaving the college or the university by the beginning of their second year, which suggested that the changes made in the second year were helpful. There were encouraging signs, though. A positive result for the learning community is reflected in the analysis of grades. Students in learning communities did better, although how much was not quantified in this study. Students also provided feedback noted they liked the learning community. One student said,
“The students tend to sit together [that] are in the learning community just because we’ve developed a better friendship.\textsuperscript{2} Another student said, “You know that they’re in class because they sit there right next to you.” Other comments included “People will come up to me and ask, ‘Do you have this assignment done?’ and “This past Monday I forgot an assignment that was on the syllabus and so it helps if you have people there to remind you constantly.”

Learning communities have many attributes. They help students transition into college; they help them develop meaningful relationships with fellow students and professors. Learning communities also help students get more involved in extracurricular activities and they help them perform better academically. Astin analyzed responses from 20,000 college students, 25,000 faculty members and 200 institutions.\textsuperscript{16} He found that critical thinking skills are correlated with the number of courses taken that emphasize writing skills. Writing skills are crucial for journalists. The way in which journalists convey information and messages can determine the readability of a story. The language must be clear and concise, not muddled with long, overly descriptive explanations. The best writing is with strong nouns and verbs. Astin also found that critical thinking skills encourage students to discuss and debate, both important skills for journalists weighing the many sides to each story. He also determined that overall academic development is influenced by student-oriented faculty, as well as group projects and having papers critiqued by instructors. What else matters in college? Astin found that leadership skills and interpersonal skills tie into students socializing with those from different racial and ethnic groups. Literature has shown that all of these attributes also arise when students participate in learning communities.

In conclusion, the study at Nebraska is just the beginning of what could be explored when it comes to media and learning communities. The Nebraska analysis revealed that some positives

could come from a learning community, such as better grades and eventual retention. It would be worthwhile to follow up on how the program has changed since being founded 18 years ago.
Chapter III: Analysis

The BGSU Journalism and Public Relations Department adheres to eleven objectives that it wants to achieve with each of its majors. The BG News aids in achieving these, but could possibly do a more comprehensive job with the use of learning communities. This chapter looks at each objective, individually or as part of a group of similar-themed objectives, and provides literature that demonstrates how a student newspaper could benefit from a learning community component.

Objective one is to “Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press, including the right to dissent, to monitor and criticize power and to assemble and petition for redress of grievances.”

The first objective is for students to learn the rights of the press, including a person’s right to dissent and criticize power. These skills are crucial for journalists, and learning communities could help shape the ability to dissent and criticize power because students are encouraged and able to frequently gather and discuss ideas. Journalists should not just accept information at face value. They need to learn how to ask the right questions. The newspaper has to be concerned about media law and the free press. Just when journalists start taking it for granted, the rights could be threatened. They need to seek multiple opinions on topics. This philosophy is supported by Longerbeam, Inkelas and Brower who studied a group of students who participated in living-learning communities and came to several conclusions.17 The authors said students in living-learning communities explore the meaning of facts when introduced to new ideas and have disagreed with authors of books and articles. Students who participate in

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learning communities also tended to challenge professors’ statements before accepting them as right. These same students also developed opinions by analyzing different points of view and discussing issues with people who disagreed with them, even if the conversation got heated. Their research also showed that these same students were able to critically analyze ideas and information on their own and were able to learn on their own, pursue ideas and find information when needed. They also see relationships between ideas and build upon what they learn from class to class.

This argument was strengthened by Rowan-Kenyon, Soldner & Inkelas, who said students who participate in a learning community have a stronger sense of commitment to contributing to their communities and the greater good.\(^\text{18}\) Living-learning programs have also helped students who are the first in their family to attend college, although the benefits are not limited to that population. But in that transition, first-generation college students benefited from course-related faculty interactions and the use of co-curricular residence hall resources, like career workshops and peer counselors. In these cases, students learned the importance of getting together to discuss ideas, which led to lively but respectful, conversations among those participating. This type of lesson would aid those participating in a learning community through *The BG News* because students could possibly get together to discuss story coverage, the pros and cons of dedicating space to this particular story, and also take classes together and then put the classroom material to work in a student media experience. These students would also have the benefit of working with mentors and people experienced in journalism who could help navigate the discussion in determining news coverage.

Research also pointed to learning communities when it came to positively affecting a student’s intellectual growth, which would enable them to better understand media law. Intellectual growth is not just acquiring facts; it is reasoning and showing good judgment. Inkelas said students participating in learning communities experience intellectual growth and are open to new ideas. They also demonstrate cognitive complexity, which Streufert, S., & Swezey explained as meaning the extent to which an individual or organization differentiates and integrates an event. Streufert and Swezey said people who are high in cognitive complexity can analyze and make connections. They are multidimensional in their thinking, which, in the case of The BG News, would enable students to apply the principles of freedom of press. This lends itself to rich discussion, which is important when working in a student media organization. Discussions about coverage should not be arbitrary. The watchdog function of the media needs to be reinforced. Students need to understand that the role of the media is to hold people, businesses and government bodies accountable.

Objective number two is “Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communities.”

The second objective – understanding history and the role of professionals and institutions in shaping communities – could possibly be enhanced through learning communities. The research is convincing. Inkelas, et. al wrote that learning communities create a more a seamless experience, helping students understand how topics like history and skills from their

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profession intertwine. They described living-learning communities as places in which students not only pursue a curricular or co-curricular theme together, but also live together in a reserve portion of a residence hall. This could benefit student newspapers because students would study and work together. The newsroom might be incorporated into the residential hall, which would enable the students to participate on a more consistent basis. When students live near the newsroom, they might be more engaged because they will witness their peers participating and be encouraged to be more involved.

Learning communities are also linked to an increase in students’ academic achievement and an increase in interaction with faculty who are knowledge about media history. Pascerella, Terenzini and Blimling stated that students in learning programs are more likely to persist, exhibit strong academic achievement, interact with faculty and engage in a more intellectual residence hall atmosphere than students in traditional residence halls. They also found that students’ residence in a living-learning community has “positive and significant effects on students’ gains in autonomy and personal independence, intellectual dispositions and orientations and generalized personal development, as well as declines in authoritarianism and dogmatism.”

The importance of autonomy cannot be understated. Students who are interested in journalism need to be self-motivated to seek help from faculty and mentors who have experience. Just because a living-learning community exists does not mean students will take advantage of it, but the above research demonstrates students are more likely to seek help and get involved because of the living arrangement that surround them.

Objective number three is “Demonstrate an

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understanding of the diversity of groups in a global society in relationship to communications.”

The third objective of the BGSU Journalism and Public Relations Department aims to help students understand the diversity of people and cultures throughout the United States and the world and then understand how diversity affects communications. Learning communities could help increase this understanding because of the many different types of people who live in a residential learning community residence hall or participate in a learning community. In journalism, the job requires talking to a variety of people because news organizations cover communities that are made up of many groups of people and these media outlets do not do a good job of covering those communities. Newspapers have been struggling for years to make their staff more diverse with women and men, Muslims and Asians, Latinos and Hispanics. Journalists cannot think that a certain population is excluded from coverage. They must be comfortable and willing to talk to a variety of sources, including people who are not like them whether they are rich or poor of a different ethnicity, or of a different sex. The work of Rocconi showed how an appreciation for diversity can be gained from learning communities. He conducted a study that investigated the direct and indirect relationships between participating in a learning community, student engagement and self-reported learning outcomes. He used a sample of 241 freshmen at an urban research university who took the College Student Experience Questionnaire. Participants included traditional age, first-time and full-time freshmen of whom 149 participated in nine learning communities. The courses they took were tied to themes, such as science and art; speaking, writing and film; and human and computer interaction. The results indicated that students who participated took advantage of opportunities to interact

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with faculty members and a variety of peers. Rocconi’s study also showed that learning community participation is strongly related to student engagement and that the relationship between learning community participation and educational gains is indirect.

These findings are consistent with prior research that found participating in a learning community was positively related to interactions with faculty members and interactions with peers, all important skills when learning how to function as a journalist, working in a newsroom with a variety of people. Learning communities have two common elements: shared or collaborative learning and connected learning.\textsuperscript{25} This type of learning comes from students enrolling in similar courses, which increases the possibility of social and academic experiences that are shared among many different types of people. In the case of the BGSU Journalism and Public Relations Department, \textit{The BG News} experience could be paired with complementary courses and/or workshops. Students would not have to take all of their classes together, but they will have certain classes available, but they also have to have common time to do activities together.

Recommending the perfect model for The BG News and the journalism department is beyond the scope of this research, but it is important to examine what other communities look like so it can be used as a guide for eventually designing for the paper and department. The scholar Schussler examined four residential learning community models located at one northeastern, private, selective and midsized university.\textsuperscript{26} For many that Schussler studied, the residence halls provided opportunities for students to build an academic support network and social and academic connections. Schussler also found three aspects. One, students liked the


open atmosphere of class where others valued their opinions and were open to interaction. Two, they had sense of belonging. Socially, students in all learning communities found places to form friendships and become involved. And competitiveness is the antithesis to a sense of community. Only a few students noted feeling competitive, mostly they just wanted to learn.

Other scholars find additional benefits. Garrett and Zabriskie found students participating in a learning community are more likely to interact with faculty members. They suggested this might be because of the type of student who is choosing to be a member of the community. Given their strong belief, colleges and universities continue to plan and implement a variety of learning programs due to the idea that specifically targeted programs have a lasting and positive impact. Previous research findings confirm that a broad range of college experiences influence students’ learning and intellectual development, Garrett said.

The authors also found that those who participated in learning communities appreciated racial diversity, learned about other racial/ethnic groups and grew to appreciate the dynamics of interracial communication. These same students also improved their critical thinking and analysis abilities, while strengthening their appreciation of different races and ethnicities and different religions and sexual orientations. This contributed to the positive environment of the residence hall, where it is easier to achieve academic success, form student groups and get help with academics.

Objective number four “is to understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information; and 7 is to conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.”

Both of these objectives focus on understanding concepts and applying theories when it comes to presenting images and information. While information on student media-centered learning communities is limited, Ball State University has created a community that sheds some light on the benefits. The Emerging Media Living-Learning Community is open to all students who have an interest in exploring new technology and innovations in media. Students participating in this community are provided the following opportunities. First, students participate in community events to learn about new media and innovations that are changing the world. Secondly, they utilize the “Emerging Media Penthouse,” a lab equipped with the latest audio-visual equipment, including a green screen, video cameras, computers with editing software, flat screen television with Blu Ray DVD and surround sound system, dry erase walls, and more. Finally, students get to network with faculty and staff, upper-level students and professionals on academic and personal projects.

These objectives are achieved through an array of activities, including publications night, featuring discussions from local media. Many other activities are offered as well. They include: workshops on design programs, career advice, music workshops and a radio night. All of these ideas could be used as possible components of a learning community involving The BG News and the journalism department.

Longerbeam, et. al. said secondhand benefits of learning programs are also evident. This study just looked at secondhand benefits for those who lived near, but were not formal members of a community. The authors drew from four flagship public research universities with substantial undergrad enrollment. Based on the results, it appeared that just living near learning

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communities was beneficial. The benefits included attending social events together, sharing meals, participating in intellectual discussion outside of class and sharing personal feelings and problems. The benefits also included discussing race relations and participating in extracurricular activities together. This suggests that even if students were not a member of a possible student newspaper/journalism department community, they would be able to share in the intellectual discussion. This would also expose those in the learning community to more individuals and more ideas.

Scholar Greig Stewart looked at the qualities that make up a living-learning community. Stewart wrote about how the College Park Scholars at the University of Maryland was born out of institutional measures that demanded a new approach to the undergrad experience. Today, this Scholars program is comprised of a class of 12 comprehensive, interdisciplinary living-learning programs for select freshmen and sophomores, each directed by faculty appointed by their programs’ sponsoring deans. The qualities of the learning communities include strong academic rigor, active learning by engaging in field experiences and reflective learning. The best practices of living-learning communities feature a strong web presence, advisory councils, full-time staff presence, leadership and support and clarity of responsibilities, according to Stewart. These same features could help journalists participating in a student media outlet like The BG News. Students need to work with the web when posting stories and videos. Students also need to exhibit leadership qualities in order to run the newsroom or manage their beat.

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The fifth and eighth objectives of the BGSU Journalism Department “are to understand professional ethical principles, as well as to work to ethically to pursue truth, accuracy and fairness.”

All of this has to be done within the demands of the profession with a small staff in difficult circumstances. They have to understand these ethical practices because when something comes up, they have to know who to find or what to do. In the journalism industry, onsite experience is often the best way to learn about the pursuit of truth, accuracy and fairness. A program in Malawi highlights this idea of onsite experience to the test. Although this program was for medical students, it could be applied to other disciplines like journalism or an activity like a student media organization. Adamson Muula explored how these ideals could be achieved through a learning program. This particular program goes beyond the campus. In the Malawi College of Medicine with Learning by Living Program, students are allocated to rural households in Mangochi. The medical students stay with a rural family for five to seven days during this experience. A day before going to the households, the students are briefed on cultural aspect of rural life and trained on the cultural aspects of rural life and on qualitative research methods, especially in-depth interviews because that is what will be used during their stay with these families. The students are also introduced to several potential research topics and expected to conduct research during their stay, which includes problems in villages, sexual and reproductive health and nutrition and feeding practices of children who are younger than 5. In his research, Muula stated that students generally have positive attitudes toward the Learning by Living program, describing it as an eye-opener to rural life. Students also appreciated the less hectic life in rural community, he said. One student reported, “It was like a holiday for me. Unfortunately, you only got used to the environment by the fifth or sixth day. By which time, 

you are leaving the community.” 32 Most students experienced a cultural shock – one student said, “Yes, I liked the place, but where I was sleeping kind of had lizards, mosquitoes, ants and other kinds of insects.” 33 On the last day of the program, students were requested to complete an evaluation form. Out of 36 students who participated in the evaluation, when asked about their understanding of rural life, 12 indicated that their understanding of rural life improved very much, 20 quite a bit, 2 a little and one not at all.

While embedding a journalist in a neighbor might not be beneficial to the journalism department, putting a student in a newsroom would give them some of the same benefits as those who participated in the Malawi program. If an onsite internship was not a possibility, one-day trips could be impactful. For instance, at BG possible trips for Bowling Green students interested in journalism could include a visit to nearby The Blade, one of the Toledo television and radio stations, a sit-down meeting with the editors of the multicultural newspaper, The Sojourner’s Truth, as well as bringing in guest speakers from throughout Ohio who are involved in various mediums, not just newspapers.

Learning communities can also address specific needs of students, such as making sure students are connecting with the campus and using support services. 34 At the University of Richmond, there is a learning community that addresses sophomores’ specific needs. Instead of a prescribed theme, this program helps sophomores find majors. One of these programs is Sophomore Scholars-in-Residence (SSIR). SSIR includes a one-unit course, which typically incorporates trips to course-related destinations in the fall and a half-unit course during the spring in which students work on group projects that they present at the university’s annual research symposium. The university wants students to gain the following: in-depth knowledge of

34 Living-Learning Communities Help Sophomores Find Their Way, Rob Kelly, March 1, 2010:
their themed discipline; the ability to identify apply knowledge and techniques to solve problems critically and to create a mode of inquiry; effective communication skills with faculty, peers and other professionals; the capacity for self-reflection; the ability to interact with peers and engage them in the process of learning as part of a team approach; and professional skills, good work ethic, positive attitude, responsibility and listening skills.

A program like SSIR could help The BG News strengthen the objectives of the journalism department by arranging trips to media outlets, such as The Toledo Blade, The Columbus Dispatch and the Cleveland Plain Dealer. Students could also work on group reporting assignments or research journalistic topics relevant to their desired careers. This could include writing a paper on a day-in-the-life of a journalist who covers cops and courts.

In addition to the shared experience in classrooms and on trips, learning programs can be enhanced through the incorporation of everyone living in a residence hall. Learning communities can be designed so that professors’ offices and classrooms can be part of that central space. Kelly demonstrated this viability through the following observation:

“When the class is over, everybody disperses and it is unlikely that they will spend considerable time with someone else in the class. There’s no natural place to go afterward to debrief. With this program, students go back to the same place, so it’s natural for them to plop down in the lounge and continue the conversation.”

The National Study of Living-Learning Programs also provided insight on this phenomenon. The results revealed that living-learning students were more likely to hold out-of-
class discussions with their peers on topics introduced in their coursework. These same students engaged with peers in conversations about social and cultural issues. Whether they intentionally set out to facilitate greater interpersonal communication or not, living-learning programs provide a setting in which students can sharpen their communication skills, the report stated. Finally, living-learning students were more likely to express confidence in their writing ability, which would certainly be helpful for journalism students. Some living-learning programs specialize in communication and expression, something else that would benefit BGSU. For example, two living-learning programs in the NSLLP pilot study concentrated on writing. One program, the Lloyd Halls Scholars Program (LHSP) at the University of Michigan, focused on writing and the arts, while it emphasized critical thinking skills across disciplines. LHSP offered special writing and art courses and workshops and provides onsite resources, such as an art studio, a photography darkroom and peer tutors trained by the University’s Writing Center who help students work through topic development, paper organization and writing mechanics. LHSP students also participated in a wide array of educational and social programs, including a student-run poetry slam and fireside chats and workshops with noted authors, artists and journalists and campus leaders. Similar to other living-learning students in the NSLLP pilot study, LHSP students are more likely to engage in conversations with their peers on academic and social or cultural issues and these peer discussions were significantly related to a number of intellectual outcomes, including openness to new ideas and commitment to values. This openness to ideas would be vital for BGSU journalism students to prepare for the professional world. Journalists need to be nonjudgmental when writing a story and willingly to listen and record a variety of perspectives.

37 2007 NSLLP Report
Objective six “is to think critically, creatively and independently and objective 9 is to critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity appropriate style and grammatical correctness.”

The sixth and ninth objectives emphasize thinking critically, creatively and independently. These are important characteristics to learn because journalists often have to develop and work their beat. Working a beat involves covering, city government, for instance, and connecting with people who are involved or impacted by city government. It requires reporters to develop relationships, to get creative when people will not call back and to be independent when it comes to developing stories and taking photographs. Editors expect reporters to come up with most of their story ideas. A living-learning community could help develop these skills. According to the NSLLL report, students who participate in living-learning communities gain these skills because they are more likely to discuss academic and career issues, in addition to socio-cultural issues with peers more than students who don’t live in living-learning communities.38 By discussing academic and career issues with faculty and classmates, students learn from the conversations and gain confidence, which will aid in developing critically thinking skills. Living-learning community students also reported more use of residence hall resources (computer lab, interactions with faculty, attendance at seminars and resources). The more resources students take advantage of while in college, the more they might learn to apply in their professional lives. The report also revealed that living-learning community students were more likely to spend more time attending class, doing homework, participating in arts or music performances, working with student government, involving themselves with political social activism, participating in ethnic/cross-cultural clubs/activities. Again, participation in these types

38 2007 NSLLL report
of activities could inspire creativity and independence, especially if a student is given a leadership role within one of these organizations and/or activities.

The tenth objective “is to apply basic numerical and statistical concepts.”

This objective is to make sure journalists learn to use and apply figures to stories that explore public affairs stories. Living-learning or curricular communities might make learning these specific skills easier, which are thought to be harder for journalists. You have coaches who come in; have sessions geared to everybody, so it doesn’t seem like reporters are the only ones who struggle with math. Apply the numbers to situations like housing starts by talking to a contractor.

An example of a curricular community being used to teach a basic skill was demonstrated through a program that taught English as a second language at a community college. Smith said look at 13 community colleges and determined that learning communities have become more prevalent on college campuses across the United States, and at community colleges, these learning communities have often focused on basic skills classes. One group of students who benefit by these types of programs includes students who speak English as a second language. Smith studied a cohort of students who took two or more linked courses together, but they do not live together as they would in a residential model. Smith said some learning community faculty and staff members attempted to employ pedagogies that help students make connections to course material. Smith found that they did this by team-teaching, collaborative learning strategies, problem-based learning and service learning. The commonalities of these teaching methods are that they create a collaborative, coherent learning environment; hence students can be encouraged to learn from each other as well as from the instructor.

The results of Smith’s study reinforced the idea that participation in a basic skills learning community is tied to learning outcomes. Therefore, the message of this study is that students’ feelings of being encouraged and supported play a large part in successful learning. If journalism students who are participating in The BG News feel encouraged, they will more likely improve as reporters and writers because they know faculty and staff are invested in their progress. Students need to know that they have potential and sometimes harsh, not encouraging, words can discourage them from continuing on the educational journey.

Another example of a learning community embracing a certain topic is the Green Quad at the University of South Carolina. This is an experimental living-learning community that opened in the fall of 2004. The building was designed to be the first green building on campus and attained the silver level of environmental standards. Three of the buildings in the complex are four-story residence halls and the fourth is the learning center for sustainable futures, which contains three classrooms, a lounge, a kitchen and five offices. The initial focus of programming was on student understanding of green building technology and the kinds of individual actions such as recycling and resource conservation, played in environmentally friendly lifestyles. In its third year, the focus began to emphasize a vision of green pedagogy and explored personal, social, political and cultural and technological changes. The highest priority is to facilitate programs initiated by students and this requires a presence of a critical mass of engaged or activist students. One might think that the mere construction of a green hall might attract

environmentalists—it didn’t. Only 20 percent were self-identified environmentalists. Each year, the learning center established a central theme (food, water) and offers a variety of related speakers. This Green Quad demonstrated that themes and objectives can change year to year, which is helpful for a changing industry like the media. This could be done with *The BG News*. Each year, in addition to putting out a newspaper, *The BG News* could adopt a theme for that year, such as the study of journalism law and ethics, investigative reporting, alternative news writing, etc.

The eleventh objective is to **“apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communication professions in which they work.”**

Journalism needs to adapt to technology. Living-learning programs can help with this transition. In “Living-Learning Programs in the Digital Age,” Zeller wrote that today’s college student spends nearly one day out of every week using Internet-related technologies, so it should not be surprising that technology is an important element of the learning process.\(^4\) Specifically, technology plays two important mediating roles. First, technology has begun to change the way in which students, peers and faculty interact around learning. Secondly, evidence exists that technology is mediating the learning process itself, causing students to value increased immediacy and engagement with their learning. There are several ways to incorporate new technology systems to enhance the living-learning instructional environment. The first strategy is to design classrooms and other public spaces within the living-learning facility to support active and experiential learning. The next step is to install instructional technologies, which allow students to collaborate and to debate, research and solve problems.

The second strategy is to build physical infrastructures within the living-learning program to support new tech. Flexible and movable furniture will allow for students in living-learning classes to redesign their spaces when small groups and teamwork is optimal.

The third strategy is an Internet radio broadcast initiative within the living-learning program to provide skill development and community development opportunities for students who participate.

This could aid *The BG News* as it strives to enhance its use of technology. Student journalists need to use technology in order to learn how to operate the equipment correctly. A learning community that enables students to use the equipment with the supervision of experts would be beneficial because students would be exposed to various guest speakers and workshops. The above strategies for how to set up this type of community would be optimal, although even implementing part of this scenario and expanding into the other areas when possible would be a good plan. Technology, and its usage, is important for journalists. Using the equipment just in class or just when there is a project is not conducive to fully learning how to use the various types of equipment available to journalists.
Chapter IV: Discussion

So what does this all mean for *The BG News* as it aims to achieve the objectives of the BGSU Journalism and Public Relations Department? Could learning communities play a role in achieving these goals? This chapter examines the findings that would appear to suggest that, in fact, learning communities could help both The BG News and the journalism department. One of the major findings is that learning communities could provide additional opportunities for guest speakers and workshops. They could also enable students to develop deeper relationships with faculty and classmates. While this chapter will only discuss the benefits of the incorporation of a learning community, the possible downfalls will be suggested as an area for additional research in the conclusion. The chapter is organized around 10 findings. There are several that deal with retention.

Residential learning communities put students together in a wing, while nonresidential learning communities have students meet a few times per week. While the literature does not really speak to which one is more prevalent, the residential communities seem to get more attention. In finding No. 1, both of these types allow students to feed off of each other’s passion for that major, hobby or, in this case, journalism. If a residential learning community was started, *The BG News* could be within the residence hall, hence allowing students easier and more frequent access. It seems that this would help with covering breaking news and creating an environment of a 24/7 newsroom. Students who are in their residence halls would be more likely to come down the hall into the newsroom than travel across campus. This would also help the journalism department because students would be practicing their skills outside of the classroom. While writing four to five assignments per semester is helpful, writing a few stories each week for the newspaper would reinforce what was learned in the classroom. Because in a residential
learning community the classes come to the students, it would make sense for the journalism
department to follow suit. The journalism department could come to the residence hall to teach
students and then come right into the newsroom, when needed, to work through real-life
assignments with students. If The BG News decided to go with a nonresidential learning
community, the staff would meet a few times per week for structured lessons and workshops.
The students would still be in charge of running the paper, but would receive more consistent
feedback.

Finding number two is that learning communities have turned out students with better
writing skills, according to the NSLLP report.\textsuperscript{42} This is partially because students are receiving
feedback from students and faculty within their community. Writing is an important skill for
journalism students. The better they write, the better they achieve the objectives of the
journalism department.

Finding number three revolves around the idea that learning communities help students
transition from high school to college. Successful participation in the student media experience
requires they are there for three to four years. If students leave the organization prematurely, they
will not be able to practice all the skills that the journalism department wants them to develop
before graduating. Professional journalists cite student media experience as being crucial to their
personal development. David Chandler, who worked at \textit{The Boston Globe} for 21 years, spent his
four years on campus working at the student newspaper. “In retrospect it turns out I was getting
all the education I needed for what turned out to be my career.”\textsuperscript{43} Joe Grimm, a former \textit{Detroit
Free Press} recruiting and development editor and visiting journalist at Michigan State
University’s School of Journalism, in an online article stated that a journalism degree with no

\textsuperscript{42} 2007 NSLLP report
experience won’t take a person very far. These testimonials show that students who come and go in one year might never get to the point of finding out that they have what it takes to make this a career.

The fourth finding focuses on learning communities exposing students to a range of people and ideas. Literature shows participants in learning communities are more likely to discuss and disagree with each other. One of the objectives of the BGSU Journalism and Public Relations Department is to learn how to think critically and independently. It seems that learning communities allow for free flowing of information because students either live together or meet a few times per week. They become comfortable talking with each other, even if they disagree. This ability to question information and ask probing questions would benefit budding journalists because these are skills they will need in the professional journalism world.

The fifth finding centers on the idea that learning communities create opportunities for mentoring relationships with faculty and staff. Students in journalism need constant feedback on their work, but receiving critiques can be difficult. If trusted mentors were to deliver this feedback day after day, students might be more receptive to criticism, especially as they see their work improve. Sometimes students who work for The BG News might think because their work is published, it does not need to get better, while actually they need to realize that reporting and writing is a gradual process. Stories that were published their freshmen year should not be as good as the stories they publish their senior year. The same can be said for the professional world. Work done as a cub reporter will not be as good as work done as a veteran.

Finding number six is that learning communities offer a setting to provide guest speakers and workshops for the students. If the guest speakers and workshops came to them, it would be easier to attend, especially if students saw other students participating. It is easy for students to

skip events when they have to leave their dorm or apartment and walk through campus to get to a particular event. One of the BGSU Journalism Department’s objectives is for students to learn ways to present material and other images. A workshop would be an ideal setting for learning about the art of presentation.

The seventh finding is that learning communities also offer continual access to materials that might otherwise be “closed.” For instance, one of the BGSU Journalism and Public Relations Department’s objectives is for students to understand and operate technological equipment. If this equipment was available for all in the learning community to use whenever they wanted, they would be more apt to work on their skills and ultimately learn how to use the equipment. Plus, they could use the equipment for their other classes, which would give them additional experience with the technology.

Finding number eight tackles the idea that learning communities encourage both academic and social support. Students experience a variety of emotions while in college, sometimes deciding to drop out. Being supported in their academic and social endeavors would help them feel part of a community and possibly keep them in school. One of the communities that could benefit from this is The BG News. If students felt like what they were doing mattered, and had a purpose for their career, they would be more likely to stay in school and stay involved. This would help the journalism’s department’s bottom line as they need students in the program.

The ninth finding is that learning communities expose students to a diverse set of people and ideas, whether this is from the students themselves or the guest speakers brought in to talk with the students. Diversity, and understanding its role in global communications, is one of the goals of the journalism department.
Finding number ten is that learning communities would allow for easier organization of trips. Students would be able to go during class time, or at other times, that would be set aside for trips.
Chapter V: Conclusion

Numerous studies have demonstrated the value of learning communities to higher education because students who participate in them are more likely to be engaged in their field of interest, more likely to attend workshops, and more likely to develop relationships with faculty who become mentors. Similarly, anecdotal evidence suggests that working for a student newspaper can have a lasting value for students’ personal and professional development. While researchers have looked at green living and community college programs that emphasize remedial reading and English as a second language, this thesis is the first that looks at it from this topical perspective. This conclusion explores why a learning community might help the BGSU Department of Journalism and Public Relations achieve the eleven learning outcomes for its majors, many of which are furthered when students work at *The BG News*. There are essentially two parts to this conclusion: One is what was found through this study and the second is what this works suggests for further research.

Probably the single most important conclusion that comes out of this analysis is that a learning community would help *The BG News* redefine itself during a time that the student media landscape is changing in midst of declining revenues and readership, but more than that, this is a time that universities are trying to integrate curricular and co-curricular activities. BGSU student adviser Robert Kline suggests there are many reasons to intertwine the two:

First, not every student can afford the big internship; they can’t go to New York and LA because it might be a $1,000 a month for rent…. If they don’t have on-campus opportunities they might not get the experience they need. The days of walking out of college and finding a job is becoming more and more limited, so they need on-campus opportunities.\(^{45}\)

\(^{45}\) Robert Kline, BGSU, College of Arts and Sciences, advisor.
Clearly, requiring students to live or participate in learning communities would also help the Department of Journalism and Public Relations achieve its eleven objectives. A review of the literature revealed a list of academic and social outcomes from student participation in learning communities. The correlation that emerged from analyzing the literature and the department’s objectives suggests there might be a benefit for both department and students. The most important of the correlations arise out of issues of proximity and access that learning communities provide.

Proximity has a lot of meaning for students who are brought together in a residential or nonresidential community. If students learn together, they share a base knowledge and that knowledge becomes a foundation for further learning in all types of classes. Students in a learning community are surrounded by peers with similar interests and faculty who can help at almost any time of the day. When students live or meet on a regular basis, they become more engaged, in general. This is important because it keeps them in school, makes them do better in their studies and could enhance their job prospects. Finally, learning communities create a closeness and passion that mimics the teamwork necessary for a newsroom. If students live near or next to the newsroom, there will be fewer excuses to not report a story. This is especially important in the time of the 24/7 news cycle.

A learning community means that technology and resources can be made accessible to students, but it also means they become accessible to faculty, staff and guest speakers. This would mean they would take classes together, have peers to study with and faculty who come right to them for programming and office hours. This access would also enhance their technological skills through something like Ball State’s technology facility.
One of the most important findings about learning communities is that they promote critical thinking. Fundamental to more than half of the journalism department’s objectives is students who develop the ability to think critically and engage critically with issues of law, history, ethics and design. Therefore, having students begin college in a learning community is a step in the direction of developing students who can complete these objectives.

Learning communities would also help with retention. Students who participate in The BG News might be inspired to stick with the major, as opposed to those who just take the introductory class alone. Alumni looking back at their BG News experience associate their major with the warming feelings they have with their student media experience. They develop a relationship with student media that lasts and carries into their future interests and brings them back to campus.

In all of the learning community literature, one of the things noticeable by its absence was research on how and why learning communities don’t succeed. It would seem to be as important for researchers to consider the downsides because how will colleges be able to avoid replicating problems if people aren’t willing to discuss them. Universities that encountered a problem and overcame it have a responsibility to share it.

Because it is such a new field, there is next to nothing about learning communities as they relate to media and media studies. There has not been much, so one can anticipate as the Ball State and Nebraska programs develop, there will be research outcomes there and elsewhere that will add to literature.

While this study only looked at the viability of creating a learning community with The BG News and the journalism department, there could be other ways to configure a learning community. It could include all the media, it could be media-related, but not a have a formal
relationship to a department or the student media. The scope of this thesis was not to look at all these different ways, but that is something that other scholars could do.

Exciting opportunities for future scholarship could include research with students who have experienced the media-related learning communities at Ball State and Nebraska or with the faculty who are building those or other similar communities elsewhere.

Learning communities are worthwhile topic to explore at a time when many universities pride themselves on their learning communities like BGSU, which is recognized in U.S. News and World Report’s “America’s Best Colleges” for its learning communities. Whether the new buildings on campus would prompt discussion on the extension of learning communities is unclear, but this is a moment where learning communities will be discussed, and thus having the foundation about media-related communities is important.


The BG News, the Campus Voice For 85 Years, BG News, October, 1, 2005.


Kline, Robert, BGSU adviser, College of Arts and Sciences. Interview April 9, 2011.


The National Study of Living-Learning Programs, 2007


