

“The First-Year Student’s Experience & the Art/Design History Survey” – FINAL REPORT
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Initial Goals:

My project grew out of my teaching experiences in the History of Art and Design Department. Throughout my tenure at Pratt, I have served as an instructor of the Institute’s two-semester Art History survey, HAD 111: Themes in Art and Culture I and HAD 112: Themes in Art and Culture II. I joined the Pratt faculty as the department was overhauling this foundation-year curriculum, changing it from a 4-semester, largely Western Civilization-focused sequence to a two-semester, global overview of the history of art. Around this time, the Institute also launched its first Learning Community program, organized by Residential Life and Housing. I joined as a Learning Community faculty member in 2015 and served with that program throughout its duration.

In recent years, the History of Art and Design Department has been reconsidering how we approach the HAD 111/112 sequence once more. The goal has been to try to more fully deconstruct traditional modes of presenting material that often continues to prioritize European art and history over the rest of the world. As a longtime Survey faculty member invested in this project, I have voluntarily participated in several working groups to rewrite the department syllabi for HAD 111 and 112. The primary focus of these groups has been to develop a more thematic approach to the Art History survey, wherein we explore different cultures from around the world at the same time, rather than the more traditional model supported by the main textbooks, which can sometimes feel like an exploration of the history of European art with other cultures and traditions tacked on.

Following these discussions, I began implementing a thematic approach to HAD 111 and 112 in my classroom two years ago. Since then (and partly also as a response to the changing needs of our student body revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic), my pedagogical interest has increasingly focused on the core skills beyond content knowledge that we develop in HAD 111/112. By teaching this sequence of courses, we are in a unique position in Higher Ed, where we typically teach the same group of students for their entire first year at Pratt, allowing us the remarkable opportunity to scaffold their academic skill development over two semesters rather than one.

Alongside my interest in reconsidering HAD 111/112 skill building, I have been contemplating how I might reinvigorate my approach to Pratt’s Learning Community. Following the COVID-19 shutdown, my old strategies began to feel stagnant and some even irrelevant, given the changes to assignments and assessments triggered by the pandemic. By the end of Fall 2023, I felt that I had fallen into a bit of a rut and that my attempts to involve students in community-building activities outside of movie nights and field trips were no longer cutting it and falling flat.

As I began my CTL Faculty Fellowship in early 2024, I began with broad research questions about Pratt students’ first-year experiences with HAD 111 and 112: How might the HAD 111 &

112 courses help to foster a sense of community & belonging at Pratt? And what are the key skills (beyond content knowledge) we are developing in these courses? How do they build from one semester to the next?

Project Accomplishments:

Toward the beginning of my fellowship, the Institute began implementing a transformation to Pratt's First-Year Experience. Beginning in Fall 2024, Pratt's incoming students were organized into small cohorts across their Foundation-Year courses. This is an expansion of a cohort model Foundations was already using. It also, in essence, functions like an expansion of Pratt's previously existing Learning Community program to the entire first-year class. Prior to the 2024-2025 school year, only a handful of HMS 101 and HAD 111/112 sections were designated as "Learning Communities," and to participate, students had to opt in when they completed their housing forms. With the conclusion of Pratt's former Learning Community and the adoption of a new first-year-wide cohort structure, my fellowship project was forced to adapt as well. Following discussions with several colleagues involved in realizing the new cohort initiative, I readjusted my goals to consider how my fellowship project and research questions might serve to support my department's transition alongside my questions about building community and key skills in HAD 111/112.

Since then, I have been working closely with our current HAD 111/112 Coordinator, Jennifer Babcock, to support her and HAD through the transition to the new cohort model. Together, we planned an Information Session in mid-April 2024 to help introduce the new cohort structure to the existing HAD 111/112 faculty. As the longest-running and most consistent faculty member in our department to work with Pratt's Learning Communities, my role during that meaning was largely to share my experiences with the model and to highlight the benefits of a Living-Learning Community. In addition to this initial information session in late Spring 2024, we then revisited the discussion at our start-of-semester HAD 111/112 meeting to share the goals and thinking behind this type of living-learning cohort model with new as well as existing faculty.

One of the biggest changes impacting HAD 111/112 with the new first-year cohort model is the reduction in class size from 24 to 15 students (maximum). The change in class size has had a twofold impact on HAD. It has necessitated an increase in the number of sections of HAD 111/112 offered and, consequently, the number of faculty members working for the department. Additionally, the smaller classes require different pedagogical strategies to foster a sense of community among the group and encourage maximum participation to create a comfortable and safe learning environment for everyone — especially in the first few weeks of the fall semester, with students who are away from home for the first time and brand new to Pratt, New York City, and the college experience itself.

In an effort to assist faculty with this transition to the smaller class size, Jennifer Babcock and I shared some Day 1 activities and strategies to get to know students and create a sense of shared community before the start of the semester. We then held a Brown Bag Workshop open to all HAD 111/112 faculty a few weeks later, titled "In-Class Activities that Build Community and Reinforce Learning in HAD 111/112." During this workshop, seven instructors reflected on

their classroom climate up to that point and shared activities that they found particularly effective. A number of the attending faculty had used some of the Day 1 strategies Jennifer Babcock and I shared, in particular, beginning the semester by asking our first-year students to anonymously share what they were most nervous about in starting college and completing a syllabus survey or trivia game in groups, along with an old department favorite of asking students to draw in pairs.

A bit later in the semester, Jennifer Babcock and I then held a second Brown Bag Workshop that focused more on my second research question around skill development. As we have worked to rethink our departmental approach to HAD 111/112 and develop a more thematic method, one question that has arisen on several occasions has to do with how we give students a sense of chronology and geography. Each of these classes covers vast periods of global history (HAD 111 covers tens of thousands of years, while HAD 112 covers approximately 600-700 years). With the development of a thematic approach to these courses, we have begun to break down the more traditional geographic organization of material. There has similarly been a general shift in our departmental approach over the past 4-5 years, away from the traditional memorization of names and dates. We do still, however, want students to have an understanding of both the temporal and geographic relationship between different cultures, movements, and events. Titled "Engaging Time and Place in HAD 111/112," our second Brown Bag Workshop in November was dedicated to this question. During this discussion, approximately seven faculty members joined to share and brainstorm creative in-class activities and assignments to help our students engage an awareness of time and place by different, and possibly more hands-on, means through creating timelines, visual archives, and dedicating time to teaching map literacy.

Data & Analysis:

Alongside the departmental meetings and workshops, I also delved into some of the literature concerning Living-Learning Communities as well as the importance of a sense of belonging for college students. This research helped me better understand both the concrete value-add of building community among students as well as the significant role that I as a faculty member (and my classroom) can play in doing so.

In terms of the importance of feeling that they belong, *The Impact of a Sense of Belonging in College*, ed Erin M. Bentrin and Gavin W. Henning (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2022) provided some important insights. I found Erin M. Bentrin and Gavin W. Henning's Conclusion as well as Terrell L. Strayhorn's chapter, "Unraveling the Relationship among Engagement, Involvement, and Sense of Belonging," to be particularly insightful.

"Developing and maintaining a sense of belonging is inherent to the academic and cocurricular success of college and university students." (Bentrin and Henning, 273)

"There is agreement across a variety of disciplines that belonging is a human need and can be vital to the social and academic success not only of students enrolled in higher education, but also all beings." (Bentrin and Henning, 279-280)

Bentrim and Henning's Conclusion nicely summarized the essential need for students to feel that they belong on campus and in the classroom.

"In general, sense of belonging characterizes a person's perceived belief in indispensability within a system. Applied to higher education, it reflects the social support that students perceive on campus and refers to a feeling of connectedness, that one is important to others, and one matters. Whereas *engaged* colleges devote effort to using effective educational practices like peer mentoring, intrusive advising, living-learning communities, or intergroup dialogues (*engagement*) and *involved* students invest time and energy toward such activities (*involvement*), it's when students perceive the presence and helpfulness of such services as supportive that they *feel* a sense of belonging." (Strayhorn, 26-27).

"Students with a sense of belonging in academic settings feel socially connected, supported, and respected by others, including peers, faculty/teachers, and administrators. They trust their teachers and peers generally and, consequently, feel a sense of fit at school. They are not worried about being treated like a stereotype or 'less than' and, thus, are confident that they are seen (*visible*), cared about, and a person of worth who adds value to the academic learning space . . . Students who are confident that they belong academically are able to engage more fully in teaching and learning, which links belonging to engagement . . . In short, reams of research have shown that if students feel like they belong, they excel, thrive, and persist through college . . . If students do not feel like they belong, they may transfer or simply drop out." (Strayhorn, 27-28)

"First-year seminar directors, summer bridge staff, activities coordinators, and wellness coaches can boost students' sense of belonging by helping first-year students adjust to college, normalizing feelings like loneliness and homesickness, while also encouraging them to know that such feelings pass with time and active *involvement* in campus life." (Strayhorn, 28)

Strayhorn's chapter then helped establish the impact on academic learning that a sense of belonging holds as well as the role that faculty members play as part of a network that helps students feel engaged and confident.

In addition to a Sense of Belonging, I also delved into studies exploring what components researchers have found to make Living-Learning Communities successful. *Living-Learning Communities that Work: A Research-Based Model for Design, Delivery, and Assessment* by Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas, Jody E. Jessup-Anger, Mimi Benjamin, and Matthew R. Wawrzynski (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2018) helped me to understand the foundational role that faculty can play in helping Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) to succeed.

"The results of the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) multiple case study showed that faculty involvement is considered an important, if not a crucial,

aspect of effective LLC programming. [...] The Best Practices Model (BPM) recommends that student-faculty interactions optimal to effective programming should be generally organized around specific courses or academic advising, which in turn may lead to more sustained mentoring relationships in the future.” (Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, and Wawrzynski, 20)

“To realize the potential of LLCs, attention must be paid to creating the conditions that feed the academic environment, namely, fostering faculty involvement and creating an academically and socially supportive culture . . . merely placing students in a residence hall together and providing opportunities for faculty-student interaction outside class is not sufficient to compel such interaction to occur.” (Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, and Wawrzynski, 49)

“An LLC works better when instructors understand its goals and are willing to get to know its students and help foster a sense of community. If instructor continuity is not possible from year to year, steps should be taken to ensure new instructors understand and commit to advancing the goals of the LLC.” (Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, and Wawrzynski, 51)

“Seeing faculty in varied circumstances in the LLC, such as in office hours as well as sharing meals and attending social events, may help students see professors as more than intellectual repositories and instead as people with varied and possibly shared interests. Here, the LLC can provide the setting for transformation in students’ cognitive development to seeing professors as learned colleagues rather than experts and focusing on their own sense of purpose and meaning rather than any perceived lack of competence.” (Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, and Wawrzynski, 54)

“Numerous studies illustrate the benefits of LLC environments in enhancing students’ social integration, associating this integration with outcomes including the successful transition to college, sense of belonging, appreciation of diversity/multiculturalism, and commitment to civic engagement.” (Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, and Wawrzynski, 57)

Some other, shorter studies I consulted included:

Arendsdorf, Jill and Janett Naylor-Tincknell. “Beyond the Traditional Retention Data: A Qualitative Study of the Social Benefits of Living Learning Communities.” *Learning Communities: Research & Practice*, 4, no. 1 (2016): Article 4.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1112861.pdf>

Buell, Kathleen J., Vaughn L. Love, and Christina W. Yao. "Living-Learning Programs Through the Years: A Reflection on Partnerships Between Students, Faculty, and Student Affairs." *Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 44, no. 1 (2017): 86-101.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1088&context=cehsedadfacpub>

Choset, Rachel L. "Are Living Learning Communities Beneficial?" *Journal of Student Affairs, New York University*, 17 (2021): 64-70.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1336688.pdf>

Next Steps:

One of my main takeaways from these studies was the important role that faculty members play in the success of Living-Learning Communities and a student's sense of belonging on campus. It also has become very clear that intentional faculty engagement and buy-in in developing community within the classroom and between faculty and students is also critical. With that knowledge, my next steps are to work with the HAD 111/112 Coordinator to consider how we might best create systems to archive and share this information for future use when onboarding new First-Year Cohort faculty members. Based on the research, their understanding of the philosophy and reasoning behind Living-Learning Community structures can play an important role in helping set first-year students up for success by helping them to find their community and sense of belonging at Pratt.

In addition to this larger departmental knowledge banking, I am continuing to work with our current HAD 111/112 Coordinator this semester (Spring 2025) to organize more Brown Bag Workshops along related themes for our HAD 111/112 faculty. At the end of the Fall 2024 semester, I sent out a very informal Check-In Survey to our survey faculty to try to get a sense of what they felt really worked and didn't over our first semester with the new cohort system. Of the five faculty members who responded, it seems like everyone agreed that they felt a strong sense of community and bonding among the students in their classes. There were, however, some concerns about how to better engage disengaged students and how to negotiate classroom dynamics when there's a palpable misalignment between room and class size (i.e., a very large classroom with a small number of students). These topics will provide an excellent point of departure for our next round of Brown Bag Workshops for the Spring 2025 semester. Additionally, in consideration of student skills, there was also an interest expressed in a workshop focused on rubrics and assessment.

And, finally, I am currently a member of the History and Design Department's working group to rethink and rewrite our departmental syllabus for HAD 112: Themes in Art and Culture II. As part of that initiative, I hope to continue to work with my colleagues to consider the skills that we are building across this two-semester course sequence to best prepare our first-year students for upper-division coursework (and beyond).

Reflection:

This fellowship project has been an incredibly rewarding experience. The research that I have conducted has helped me to better understand the data supporting the benefits of structures and programs that I have been involved in and felt invested in for almost a decade. Better understanding the very real impact and outcomes that serving as a Living-Learning Community

faculty member can have for our students has really helped me rethink my role in this system and has helped reinfuse my investment in it. I hope to be able to take what I have learned through this project not only to inform my teaching with this cohort of students for the 2024-2025 school year but into the future (and into any/all of my non-cohort classrooms).

Additionally, in relation to the idea of the importance of community that has been at the center of my investigation with this fellowship, the opportunity to meet and work with other faculty members across the Institute who likewise teach first-year curriculum has been invaluable. Through conversations with my fellow fellows, I was able to establish a better sense of what happens in the classrooms of other departments and the key skills that their courses focus on developing. That helped provide me with a much better sense of how HAD 111/112 fits into the larger first-year curriculum at a skill-building level. The opportunity to engage with faculty members from other departments has truly been one of the highlights of the CTL Faculty Fellowship.