

Building Community in Medical School During a Pandemic: Identifying the Impact of Learning Communities and College Systems on Interpersonal Relationships During COVID-19

LeAnn Lam, BS, Jeewoo Kim, BA, Samuel Ufuah, BS, Simone Herzberg, BS, Amy Fleming, MD MHPE
Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Nashville, TN



BACKGROUND

Student matriculation into medical school has increased by over 30% in the past decade with an incoming class of 21,622 new students entering medical school in 2019.¹ Many incoming medical students uproot their lives as they leave home to traverse unfamiliar territory. This already challenging process of integrating into a new community has become exponentially more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic where student interaction has deliberately been limited due to national guidelines.

Learning Communities is an integral component of Vanderbilt’s curriculum, with the goal of establishing smaller, stronger communities within the medical school. The Learning Communities are based on the college system, where all of the students are divided into 4 longitudinal groups for the entirety of their medical school journey. COVID-19 has provided a unique opportunity to examine the role Learning Communities play in building interpersonal relationships.



College Cup (Teams divided by Learning Communities) - October 2019

COVID-19 CONTEXT

- Class of 2025 (M1) started the school year under similar circumstances to the class of 2023 (M3/G1) due to change in COVID-19 restrictions
- Class of 2024 (M2) started the school year under strict COVID guidelines with restricted social interaction, and most school activities were grouped based on colleges/learning communities.

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study is to identify how **COVID-19 has affected the sense of community** at Vanderbilt University Medical School both **within classes and between different class years**. With the restrictions of social gatherings and organizations, we hypothesize that learning communities and colleges served a larger role in forming interpersonal bonds during COVID-19 than in previous years. We also predict that the relationships between class years have been notably affected by the restrictions.

METHODS

- A cross-sectional survey of medical students (M1-M3) gathered demographic information and medical student opinion on social interaction with peers, housing, and the impact of COVID-19 and Learning Communities on their sense of community.
- A REDCap optional survey was sent via email. Study data were collected and managed using REDCap electronic data capture tools hosted at Vanderbilt University.

RESULTS

- 53 students responded (16 M1s, 21 M2s, 16 M3s)
- 46-53% of students attributed College events and Learning Communities college sessions as an avenue to meet friends in medical school.
- 48% of students met other class years through college events (which are the same groups students participate with in LC sessions)
- 57.5% of students agree or strongly agree that LC sessions played a significant role in building community in medical school.

	M1	M2	M3	Fisher exact
I was able to make friends in my first year	88%	81%	88%	0.246
My closest friendships were with students in my assigned learning community/college	38%	67%	44%	0.184
My college has had a significant effect on my medical school experience	75%	62%	69%	0.819
I feel more connected to the students in my class compared to students outside my class	44%	52%	81%	0.004
Learning communities (LC) sessions played a significant role in building my community in medical school	50%	62%	50%	0.804
% = agree/strongly agree				

CONCLUSIONS

- There were no statistically significant differences between class years with respect to making friends during first year or closest friendships being within learning communities. This may be due to limitations of the small sample sizes.
- The majority of students of all class years agreed that learning communities/college system had a significant role in building community and a positive effect on medical school experience.
- More M3s felt connected to students in the same class year compared to students outside of their class. This may be due to COVID-19 causing an abrupt transition to a virtual medical education platform.
- Learning Communities program remains a strong presence at Vanderbilt. Our study suggests that LC played an instrumental role in mitigating negative impacts of COVID-19 on the sense of community felt by medical students.

REFERENCES
1. Enrollment Up at U.S. Medical Schools. AAMC. Accessed September 15, 2021. <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/press-releases/enrollment-us-medical-schools>