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INTRODUCTION

Learning Communities (LCs) are a widely implemented structure in higher educational systems that have been shown to positively impact student experience socially, emotionally, and academically [1,2]. Studies show that students in LCs are more likely to form positive interrelationships with peers and possess positive perceptions of their learning environments. In addition, studies also show decreased fail rates among pharmacy classes implementing LC structures [1]. From an emotional standpoint, LCs have shown a significant impact in giving a sense of belonging and community. Furthermore, several studies have found success in an LC's ability to build student relationships with peers and faculty, allowing for greater student benefit such as guidance, advising, and likelihood to engage in leadership [3].

Among the surplus of research displaying the positive impact of LCs, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the Wayne State University School of Medicine's (WSUSOM) implementation of LCs with the goal to determine its impact and improve any shortcomings.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Obtain a better understanding of the impacts that LCs have on students within a large, urban medical school.
2. Gather opinions on the effectiveness of the current LC program will be used to highlight areas of deficiency as well as areas of success through an online survey.
3. Guide future changes that can be implemented to improve LCs for medical student success.

METHODS

Study Design

To be included in the study, participants were required to be WSUSOM students. Students agreed to participate in the survey via a virtual consent form.

Data Collection

The study was conducted through an online Qualtrics survey with questions on the impact of LCs. 1,200 students were requested via email to participate.

Analysis Plan

Number of responses were tabulated via Qualtrics reports. Filters were used to produce trends when looking at multiple variables simultaneously. Data was synthesized into graphs corresponding to impactful trends.

RESULTS: DEMOGRAPHICS

- Participation within the LC varied from 21-35 years of age.
- Gender: 123 females and 67 males.
- Ethnicity: White (56.8%), Asian participants (24.74%), "Other" (13.16%), Black and African American (4.73%), and American Indian or Alaska Native students (0.53%).

RESULTS: TRENDS

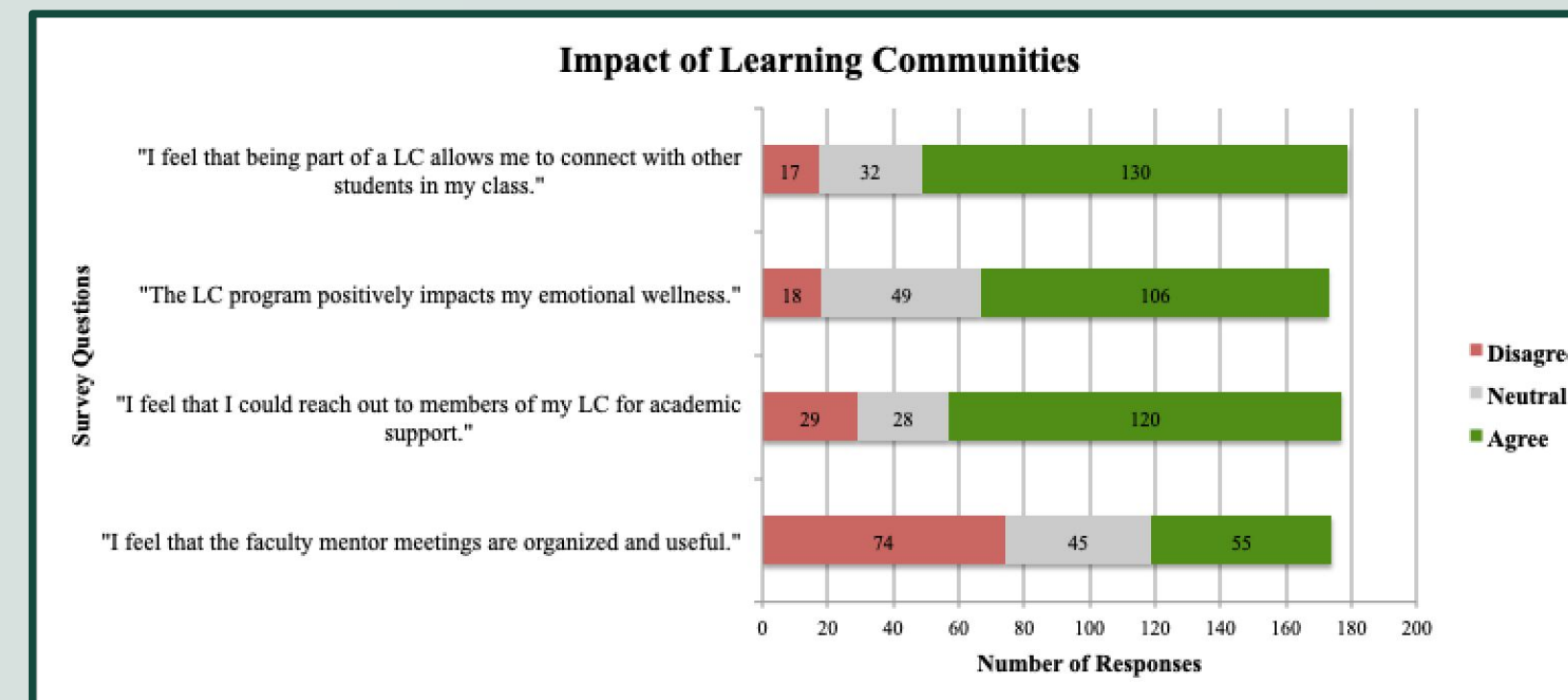


Figure 1. Number of responses to select survey questions: Disagree (Red), Neutral (Gray), and Agree (Green).

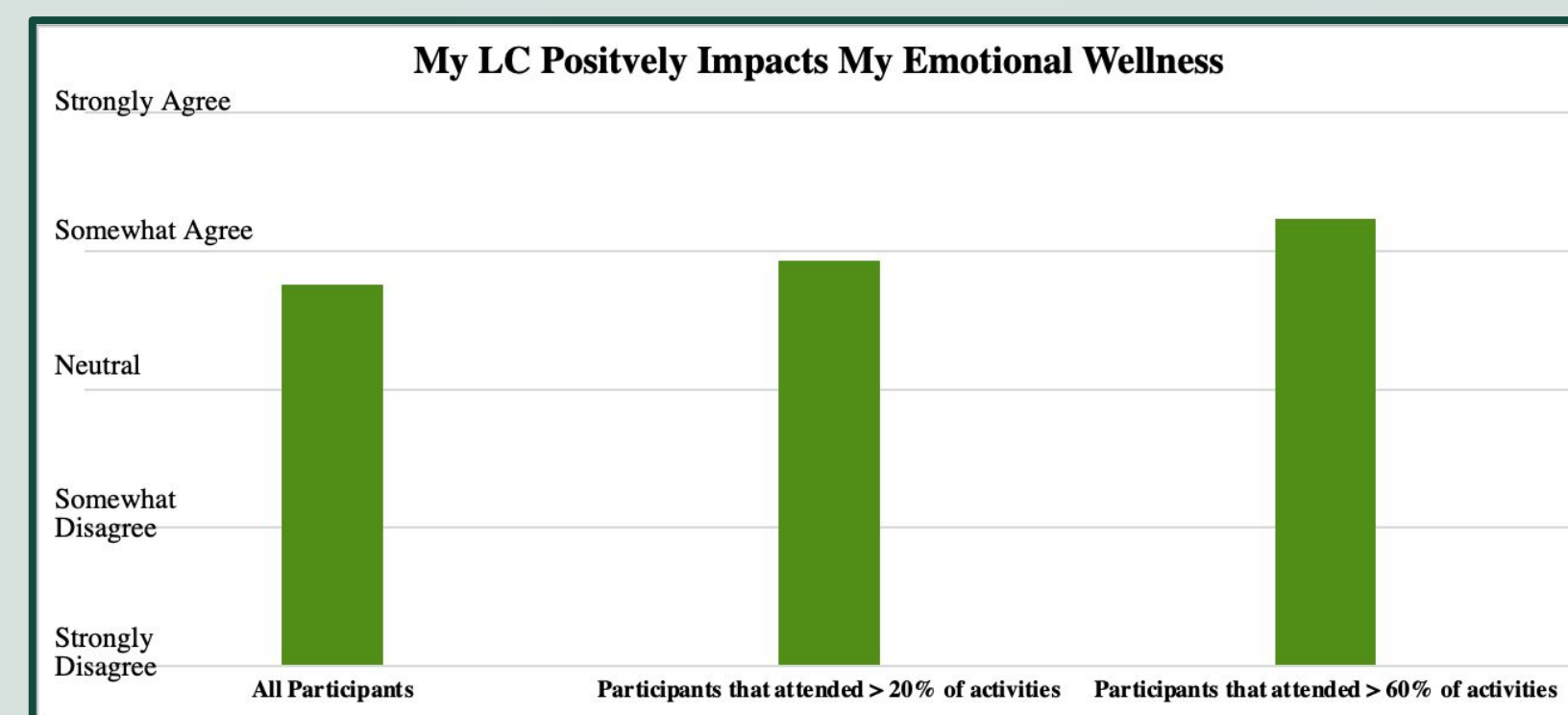


Figure 2. Survey Scoring: Strongly Disagree (1), Somewhat Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Somewhat Agree (4), Strongly Agree (5). All participants had an average of 3.76. Participants that attended >20% of activities had an average of 3.93. Participants that attended >60% of activities had an average of 4.23.

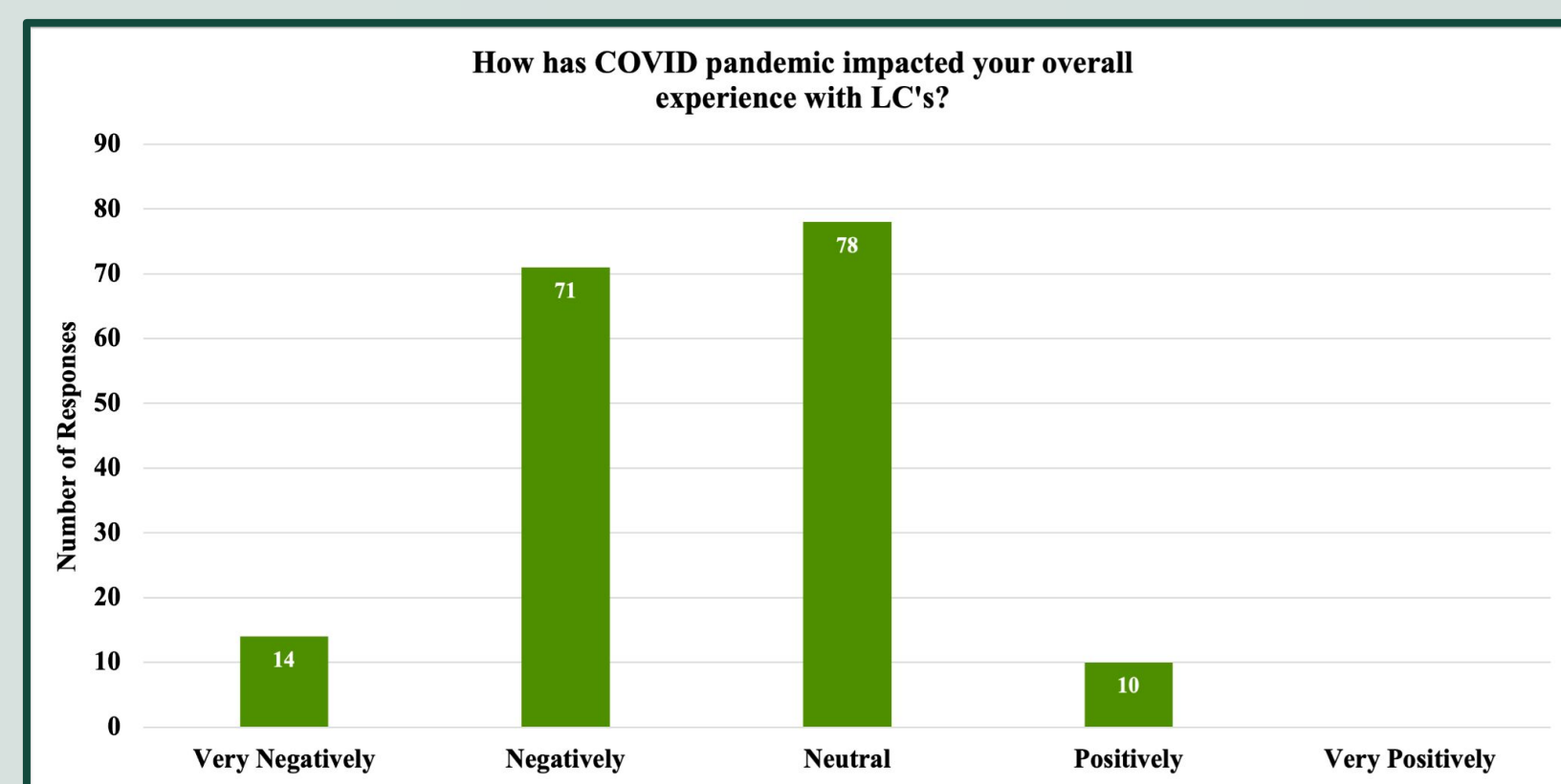


Figure 3. Number of Responses to "How has COVID pandemic impacted your overall experience with LC's?"

5 questions were utilized to evaluate the impact of LCs on each of the following aspects:

- **Social:** 72.6% of students felt that their LC provided a means to connect with their peers (Figure 1).
- **Academic:** While less than 14% of individuals reported forming study groups with members of their LC, 54% of respondents felt comfortable reaching out to members of their LC for academic support (Figure 1).
- **Emotional support:** 61% of students felt that their LC provided emotional support. For students who attended over 60% of events, LCs had an even greater impact on their emotional well being (Figure 2).
- **Faculty Mentor Program:** 37.6% of participants feel comfortable reaching out to their faculty mentors while 37.6% do not feel comfortable. The rest of the participants felt neutral.
- **Effects of COVID-19:** Of the 49% of students that felt that COVID-19 negatively impacted their overall LC experience, 76% still claimed to have enjoyed having LCs in medical school (Figure 3).

DISCUSSION

Within a class of 300 students, LCs were established at Wayne State as a means for students to connect with each other. This study was conducted to determine whether LCs are effective in attributing to a sense of community and well being amongst students. The emotional, social, and academic impact that the LCs had on students was examined and the role of faculty mentors was also evaluated. As expected, LCs fostered social connections among students. While it has been previously observed that LCs foster student emotional wellness, our results further show that this effect is enhanced as student participation in activities increases. While results show that students do not commonly use LCs for academic support, a slight majority of students did feel comfortable reaching out to their LCs for academic support.

The LC experience has been different this year due to the circumstances surrounding COVID-19. Overall, COVID-19 had an expected negative impact on the medical school experience; however, LCs still proved to have had a positive impact on student wellbeing. Therefore, LCs play a valuable role in connecting the medical school community and the positive effect of LCs can still be felt in a virtual setting.

Lastly, the overall attitude towards the faculty mentor program was explored. The results suggest that mentors are not consistent in meeting program expectations such as hosting organized and useful meetings, connecting with students, and being punctual to meetings.

Overall, these results suggest that LCs serve as a means for medical students to connect with one another, allowing students to become familiar with a subset of their class. LCs are a medium for student interaction and provide opportunities for students to reach out to their LC peers when facing challenges.

LIMITATIONS/FUTURE DIRECTIONS

WSUSOM LC Program can be further improved by better communicating expectations to faculty mentors, and implementing a more standardized program with a stronger emphasis on helping students develop skills that will be beneficial to them in their future careers as physicians.

The study was limited by varying participation levels among age ranges and survey questions, potentially due to the length of the survey. Thus, full evaluation of connections drawn between responses with unequal participation level could be skewed. Further studies with increased sample size and methods to ensure participation are needed for a more comprehensive study of learning communities.

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