



How do student leaders help to create and sustain college communities?

Siti Fitriah, PhD candidate, School of Social Sciences, College Community Assistant, Lancaster University

James Fuller, Head of College Operations, Lancaster University

Desmond Ng, PhD candidate, School of Global Affairs, College Community Assistant, Lancaster University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71957/j151tp62>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Abstract

Lancaster University is distinctive in having a collegiate system. Colleges are vibrant centres for activity and engagement, providing support and co-ordinating overlapping networks for all members of the University community. Essential to university experience is the importance of belonging and community, in which individuals have a sense of “membership, influence, integration” and experience “fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection” (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Institutions and sector bodies are currently rethinking the way that student communities are built and maintained to meet the needs of Generation Z (Vytniorgu, R, 2022). This report will focus on the importance of College Community Assistants (CCAs), Junior Common Rooms (JCRs) and Postgraduate Board (PG Board) in actively creating and sustaining belonging in a way that empowers students and staff to thrive, build networks, and contribute to the wider community. The authors have used work on community and belonging by Masika & Jones (2016), Thomas (2012), Blake et al. (2022), and Ahn & Davis (2020) to inform a pilot qualitative study which uses student and CCA focus groups to explore how the roles of CCAs and student leaders help create and sustain belonging within college community and how they understand their roles. We found that community is defined mainly in three general themes, namely comfort and support, opportunity, and tradition, in which CCAs and student leaders all play significant roles. It is hoped that our findings can be applied to other contexts where student leadership roles are



deployed, not only within universities, but also to other educational institutions and bodies inside and outside of the UK.

Introduction

Colleges are an extremely important part of the Lancaster University experience, but the specifics of this contribution are not always well articulated or universally well understood. In this research, we aim to find out more about the role that student leaders play in shaping our college communities. We interviewed them with a focus on how they feel that their roles have contributed to student experience of community.

In 2024 Lancaster University rebranded and reshaped the serious-sounding “Assistant Dean” role into the “College Community Assistant”—the CCA. CCAs are postgraduate student staff members that assist with resolving Deanery incidents and collegiate admin duties, as well as carrying out events alongside student leaders from the JCRs and PG Board. We were therefore interested in finding out how our CCAs and student leaders understood the concept of *community* and also how students with responsibilities in the collegiate system contribute to building student belonging and community.

Definitions

- **College:** the Lancaster University Website states: “The colleges are individual, inclusive and diverse communities, offering a range of facilities and services. Your college is where your first friendships are formed—your university family. “
- **CCA (College Community Assistants):** These are postgraduate students who take a leadership role within a specific college but might work across all nine over the course of an academic year. They are paid by the University and undertake a broad range of tasks for the colleges.
- **JCR (Junior Common Room):** These are voluntary student bodies under the supervision of Lancaster University Students’ Union who represent students and lead events. A PG Board is elected to serve in Graduate College.

Methodology

We held workshops with eight CCAs from various colleges within Lancaster University, and two presidents from a college JCR and the Postgraduate Board (PG Board). These workshops, as informed by works such as Masika & Jones (2016), Thomas (2012), Blake et al. (2022), and Ahn & Davis (2020), involved four two hour-long workshops (with semi-structured interviews and group discussions) on the 14th of May 2026, with participants being assigned to a session



based on their availabilities. It is hoped that garnering insights from both student leaders will allow us to have a much more comprehensive idea of how they conceive and promote community and belonging at Lancaster University. Our analysis of interview data was done from a pragmatic viewpoint as an exercise in getting staff and student feedback to improve future provisions.

How Do Student Leaders Define Belonging and Engagement within Community?

We found that there were commonalities amongst the JCR and CCA teams regarding the concept of community—it is the primary medium that will allow for the creation of a sense of belonging and engagement amongst students. We also observed that “community” is an all-encompassing term and that, even in our small sample of interviewees, there were many different interpretations.

Community as comfort and support

Colleges were mentioned as important first ports-of-call for students to form connections and to belong to the wider University community. One interviewee mentioned studying at a university would have been incoming students’ “first time away from home, and students need help with surviving, and a community to help with ‘little things’, like learning how to cook”; like-minded students can mutually support one another, thereby leading to better academic performance, self-actualisation, and the exploration of other avenues of community.

Community as opportunity

Collegiate student leadership roles were seen as opportunities to develop relevant soft skills. Early interventions, such as those made during Welcome Week were seen by the JCR and PG Board presidents as the most important opportunities for colleges to set students in a positive direction from day one, and they stressed the importance of colleges as “avenues of community and opportunities”. This instinctive view is supported by Thomas (2012), who stresses the importance of early contacts with students.

Community as tradition

All participants stressed the importance of collegiate identities and heritage practices as badges of recognition and belonging for existing students and the alumni. The JCRs and PG Board work to reinforce identities, which some participants felt might have faded due to



changing student behaviour, and the COVID lockdown. The PG Board president involved, who was previously a JCR president in his Undergraduate years, even claimed that “healthy rivalry and traditions are important to build a sense of community within different colleges”.

What Roles do Student Leaders Play in Promoting Belonging and Engagement within Community?

We found that student leaders are essential in creating a welcoming and inclusive community for students, and they cooperate frequently throughout the academic year.

JCR members rated their contribution as vital in providing a first introduction to the collegiate system and for supporting students during the all-important first week of university. The role of student leaders is particularly important for freshers during their major transition in a new environment. Thus, student-led activities create welcoming spaces for students to build relationships and be a part of the university community. These early experiences clearly shape how students feel throughout their time at university. Community is not only built but also sustained: more opportunities should be created for students to connect and grow, such as intercollegiate events where students create a shared identity, make new connections, and strengthen their existing friendships. JCR and PG Board interviewees, as transmitters of traditions, felt that they were vital in helping to develop and maintain collegiate identities and a sense of “college patriotism”.

This is echoed by the CCAs, as they recognised that they are the first port of contact for students and cited the importance of knowing University support structures and being able to signpost them to students. CCAs also stated that they are an extremely important resource for ensuring compliance to community rules. Both student leader types emphasised the importance of regular and active organisation and participation throughout student-facing events, commenting that this contribution helps to ensure that students continue to be supported by the colleges, with CCAs playing an active role in assisting with planning and holding events alongside the JCRs and PG Board, aside from their admin and Deanery duties. One CCA stated that “CCAs were like ketchup—they go with everything”. The authors felt that was a very insightful summary on the multifunctional and flexible nature of the role.

Conclusion

Student leaders (staff and volunteers) play an important role in creating opportunities for students to connect. Because they are students themselves, student leaders understand



what matters to their peers and create activities that are meaningful and relevant. From our interviews, we noted some misunderstandings amongst JCR and PG Board members regarding the role of the CCAs following the name change from AD, and issues over payment and access over social media. Therefore, we are planning on conducting early training for clarification on responsibilities of both roles and more effective and impactful inter-role collaboration in developing community and belonging. Additionally, the authors intend to carry this work into the next academic year and continue to conduct action-research in this area, like an updated training programme for new CCAs. We intend to use our findings to continue to enhance the planning and delivery of college activities, and the new cohort of CCAs will be inducted using insights from this research.

References

- Ahn, M.Y. and Davis, H.H. (2020). "Four domains of students' sense of belonging to university," *Studies in higher education (Dorchester-on-Thames)*, 45(3), pp. 622–634. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1564902>.
- Blake, S. et. al. (2022). *Building Belonging in Higher Education: Recommendations for Developing an Integrated Institutional Approach*. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/10/Building-Belonging-October-2022.pdf> (Accessed: 9 April 2026).
- Lancaster University Website <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/about-us/colleges/> (Accessed 15th July 2026).
- Masika, R. and Jones, J. (2016) "Building student belonging and engagement: insights into higher education students' experiences of participating and learning together," *Teaching in higher education*, 21(2), pp. 138–150. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2015.1122585>.
- McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(1), 6–23. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629\(198601\)14:1<6::AID-JCOP2290140103>3.0.CO;2-I](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:1<6::AID-JCOP2290140103>3.0.CO;2-I)
- Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. Available at: https://iicseonline.org/Study_Engagement_in_Higher_Education1.pdf (Accessed 9 April 2026).
- Vytiniorgu, R. (2022). *Student Belonging and the Wider Context*. Higher Education Policy Institute Note 39. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/student-belonging-and-the-wider-context/> (Accessed: 9 April 2026).



Appendix – Interview Questions

Introduction: A brief summary on the objectives of the interview/study.

Community and Sense of Belonging

- What do you understand by the term 'community' in its very broadest sense?
- Why are communities important?
- Why are communities important in HE? What is specific and different about HE communities?
- How important is a sense of belonging for a student at University?
- If there are four domains of belonging for students (academic engagement, social engagement, surroundings, personal space) which is most important? Why?
- Academic engagement (curricula and activities such as interactions between students and academic staff as well as learning and teaching experiences)
- Social engagement (social relationships with friends and peers through clubs and societies and other social spaces)
- Surroundings (students' physical living spaces such as accommodation, flats, and halls, but also expands to the geographic location, the natural environment, and cultural milieu)
- Personal space (students' psychological aspects of belonging such as their self-esteem and identity, life satisfaction and attitudes, and personal interests)
- How do colleges build communities and students' sense of belonging?
- How do colleges and the communities add value to Lancaster University?
- Why do some universities fail to create a sense of community and engagement amongst students?
- What does an ideal community within a university look like?

Roles and Responsibilities

College Community Assistant (CCA)

- In your role as a CCA, how do you help to build and maintain communities?
- What works best and what doesn't work?
- How important is your role?
- How important is JCR role?
- What could or should be done to maximise your role in building and maintaining communities?



Junior Common Room (JCR) Executive Members

- In your role as a JCR Exec member, how do you help to build and maintain communities?
- What works best and what doesn't work?
- How important is your role?
- How important is CCA role?
- What could or should be done to maximise your role in building and maintaining communities?

Events and Activities

- How do you think events and activities help build and maintain communities?
- What makes some events successful in building and maintaining communities?
- Why do some events fail/are not as successful?
- How have the ways in which students interact, and form communities changed in recent years? Is dividing people by named generations such as Gen Z helpful?
- What could and should the colleges do more of to build and maintain communities?