

# Preface

The landscape of innovation in higher education is littered with initiatives and programs that have begun, often with great fanfare, only to flounder and eventually fail in the face of institutional resistance to changes in established practice. Those initiatives that remain are invariably small and typically marginal to the mainstream of institutional life. Most innovations have yet to realize the promised impact of their founders.

Innovations fail to make a substantial impact on established practice for many reasons. The significant reason is the failure of programs to invest in the types of assessment that *improve* practice over time but also demonstrate convincingly, that is *prove*, that their innovative programs benefit higher education and deserve long-term institutional support.

Learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlie them offer another powerful innovation that can benefit students and transform higher education practice. The future of this reform strategy, like the innovations that preceded it, depends in part on the capacity of its assessments to provide data that both improve practice and warrant continued institutional support. But precisely because the learning community movement seeks to transform current organizational, curricular, pedagogical, and assessment practice, it faces *even higher hurdles* in its search for wide-scale adoption than most other innovations; the requirements for convincing assessments are even more demanding. For learning communities to continue to improve and spread beyond the margins of institutional life (where too many are still found), their supporters must engage in even more powerful assessments. Learning community data must provide strong evidence of the capacity of these programs to improve student learning and enrich institutional life in ways that advance the mission of higher education.

In a first major review of learning community research and assessment, Kathie Taylor and her colleagues have applied a set of criteria to learning community interventions and the manner in which they are reported. Overall, the news is very promising. But, the authors argue there is significant room for improvement.

First and foremost, the authors find consistent evidence that learning communities realize positive results. Repeatedly, studies reveal that learning communities increase student retention, improve student academic performance (GPA), and are associated with higher levels of student and teacher satisfaction. These findings hold for a variety of learning community settings and for a range of coursework and types of students.

Second, the authors find a number of assessment reports that are worthy of showcasing. The authors screened more than 110 single-institution assessment reports for those distinguished by their detail about the nature of the learning community intervention, their thoroughness of data gathering, and their clarity in portraying results. Seventeen of these reports are described in this monograph.

Still, the authors note that there is much left to do. A wider range of assessments are needed to fully unravel the complex interplay of context, curriculum, pedagogy, students, and faculty that influence program effectiveness. The authors point out that, generally, learning community assessment relies on data that are more easily gathered, such as retention patterns and grade point

averages. Although these outcomes are important to document, learning community assessment needs to move toward more complex, higher-order measures to fully illuminate the powerful impact of learning communities on both students and faculty and to identify those practices that foster or hinder positive results.

In other words, assessments need to be multimethod and longitudinal because many impacts of learning communities emerge over time and are not captured in one academic term. Time-limited, simple pretest and posttest designs by their very nature tend to understate the full impact of learning communities on the students they serve.

Nevertheless, it is promising that there are more than a few impressive assessment reports. Taylor and her colleagues describe these assessments so that they may serve as examples that future learning community assessment teams can use as templates against which to judge their designs and to shape their reports. In this way, future research and assessments may become more meaningful to learning community practitioners, and may be more effective in educating and influencing decision-makers.

It is to the goal of enriching and expanding learning communities that this work is ultimately directed. Only then will learning communities move from the margins to the center of institutional life.

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