

Where Are LEARNING COMMUNITIES? Now!

National Leaders Take Stock

A multiyear effort to understand and improve the practice of learning communities across North America has revealed encouraging trends and areas in which work should continue. The authors asked nearly sixty educators involved in the work to write and talk about the state of learning communities.

BY JEAN MACGREGOR AND BARBARA LEIGH SMITH

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, we asked fifty-six of our colleagues, each of them a campus leader in learning communities, to take stock of the learning communities movement. We wanted to learn how learning community programs might become more effective and more sustainable over time. This article synthesizes their perspectives on this creative yet demanding approach to education reform.

All fifty-six of the educators had been involved with us as fellows in the four-year National Learning Communities Project (see sidebar, p. 5), an effort that built on twenty years of work at the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education based at The Evergreen State College.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT LEARNING COMMUNITIES: FIFTEEN LESSONS

1. Learning communities have arrived as a national movement. Curricular learning communities are the purposeful restructuring of an undergraduate curriculum to thematically link or cluster courses and to enroll a common group of students in these courses. The National Learning Communities

Project fellows agree with Vincent Tinto, who said it is “now part of the vocabulary of higher education.” Maria Hesse observed that, “There is a much broader base of understanding and support within institutions than there was even a few short years ago. It is no longer an outlier concept, on the fringe; it’s a regular topic, having reached a level of recognition similar to other key movements such as service learning, classroom research, and cooperative learning.”

One of the earmarks of becoming a movement, Jodi Levine Laufgraben points out, is the “significant increase in publications, presentations, and resources on learning communities.” Many fellows note that the shared understanding of learning community purposes and practices has significantly expanded in recent years as a result of these new resources, including Web sites, new texts, conferences, and regional hubs of learning community practitioners. Perhaps most important, networks of people have emerged who can call on one another for advice and support. Barbara Jackson writes, “A major strength has been the creation of a community of practice with national visibility and a variety of formats for communication and interaction. This has had positive practical and political benefits for our campus. We have been able to draw upon a vast reservoir of

experience. . . . In addition to this very concrete and tangible support, we have clearly benefited from the national visibility and stature of the learning community movement leadership. This has been a major factor in our campus's willingness to commit fully and rapidly to implementation."

Lynn Dunlap notes, "I find the movement and its potential exciting, not just in the sense of exuberance—which indeed it sometimes does generate—but exciting in a deep, intellectually and emotionally satisfying way. . . . It's exciting that the movement is national, that it has the potential to affect the lives of so many students, that it has re-energized so many faculty and administrators about the mission of education, that it has the potential to leverage critical change in education. Over time, I've seen the thinking about learning communities mature in terms of structures, pedagogies, diversity of approaches to implementation, understandings about inclusiveness and partnerships with all sectors of education . . . and in terms of the recognition to think and act holistically about undergraduate reform, not just in isolated institutional efforts."

"The movement itself has been a learning community of sorts," Vincent Tinto adds. "It has brought together a diversity of faculty, student affairs professionals, and disciplines." Both Jacque Mott and Anne Goodsell Love point to the emergence of regional centers of learning community work as a sign of the movement's maturity. The nine-year-old Midwest partnership (comprising Delta and Harper Colleges, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, and the Metropolitan Community Colleges of Kansas City, Missouri), Mott notes, provides a yearly learning community conference and functions throughout the year. The Northeast and Mid-Atlantic region also has a regional center that has support from Brooklyn College and Wagner College. Love describes her enthusiasm for the new Atlantic Center for Learning Communities, which is now recruiting institutional members. She reports that many institutions are interested in being part of the new network, which plans to "sustain an annual curriculum planning retreat and open houses," activities initiated through the National Learning Communities Project. A learning community leader in the South, Jayme Mill-sap Stone, attributes much of the success of the national project to its strategy of promoting grassroots activism. It has "provided the professional networking needed to expand and sustain the education reform effort."

2. Learning communities have taken hold because they are flexible. One of the learning community movement's strengths is that it is "a flexible movement that has been able to include a diversity of interpretations and implementations. The move-

ment does not have an orthodoxy," Vincent Tinto notes. These curriculum-restructuring initiatives vary greatly—from loosely connected course clusters to team-taught programs of integrated, interdisciplinary study. They thrive on commuter and residential campuses and engage a variety of individuals—faculty members, student affairs professionals, librarians, and student mentors—in teaching roles. Yet these programs share common intentions—to rearrange the curricular time and space of both students and their teachers in order to foster community, coherence, and connections among courses and more sustained intellectual interaction among students and teachers—and a growing body of research demonstrates that they are highly effective.

One acknowledged shortcoming of this flexibility is that learning community programs across the nation are highly variable in quality. The fellows point out that while many programs exhibit good or even exemplary practices, others are less effective and struggle to survive. Nonetheless, these programs are serving a wide variety of student audiences and curricular needs. The fact that learning community programs are now present in more than five hundred colleges and universities speaks well to the viability and adaptability of this approach.

John O'Connor agrees that program flexibility is important, noting particularly the value of low-cost models of linked courses in which faculty members can choose to mesh their class material slightly or a great deal. "I've learned that the basic linked-course version of learning communities is relatively easy to implement and has the potential for continuing campus development; [they] need not make substantial calls upon faculty time while providing faculty members a structure to share teaching and content interests; they need not cost much to administer, and that cost can be recouped by student retention and satisfaction; they can be an easy way to bring some coherence to a curriculum while creating an opportunity for much more curricular innovation and experimentation; they can provide opportunities for partnerships with student affairs professionals and other individuals on campus and in the community; and they need not change conventional habits of assessment (for example, student grades) while often raising questions about the purpose of learning and the measures of achievement."

At the same time, O'Connor worries that "we have settled for a species of learning communities that in some ways undercuts more exotic varieties of the genus. The linked-course, first-year general education program, possibly tied to a residential program, has become the common form. How can we create learning communities that are more capacious? Ones that are more responsive to the issues facing higher education? Can

we move beyond the credit-hour model for accounting for learning? Can we use the learning community as a nexus for connecting various campus reforms to achieve a greater whole? Can we extend the community learning beyond the classroom and the campus? Can we be more responsive to societal and technological change? A related but lesser concern is that we have sold learning communities primarily as a retention solution. That creates certain expectations and parameters. It also diffuses or distracts from other purposes.”

A number of fellows voiced concerns about perceived flexibility and unintentional rigidity, seeing both as critical tensions that must be carefully handled. Frankie Shackelford worries that learning community terminology “has been appropriated everywhere by everyone, making quality control difficult.” On the other hand, Marie Eaton points out that as the movement expands, “There is a danger of reification of the learning community model (or models). The movement must stay flexible and responsive to new ideas about what learning communities might be while holding on to the key elements that have proven to have power.”

Looking to the future, William S. Moore describes the movement as “strengthening and deepening in pockets while fragmenting overall, weighed down perhaps by its popularity. There seem to be some institutions doing and studying some form of learning communities very seriously, but most institutions don’t have the time, resources, or inclination to do that. Maybe such a process is natural, the inevitable consequence of any reform movement within the far-flung and wildly disparate landscape of higher education. If so, next steps might simply mean a contraction of sorts, with an emphasis on a smaller number of high-quality efforts and concentrating on local or regional collaborations or support.”

3. Learning communities have become locations for faculty, staff, and student development. The fellows nearly unanimously agree with Lynn West that one of the major strengths of learning communities “rests in the experience itself and in the growth potential for both students and faculty.” In those programs planned or team-taught by instructional teams (or by more diverse teams that might include faculty, student affairs staff, librarians, or students), the faculty and staff development benefits are substantial but often underreported. As Jan Swinton notes, “For our faculty members, students’ success has not been the only reward of teaching together in learning communities. Participating in another instructor’s class, preferably in an area outside one’s own discipline, is one of the most powerful and sustained faculty development activities available to instructors.” Bruce Koller says, “Learning communities create powerful synergies

(an overused term but true nonetheless), subtle but meaningful improvements in the work teachers do. Learning communities acknowledge the emotional and social component of teaching and learning, which applies to teachers as well as students.”

4. Learning communities have become important seedbeds for pedagogical innovation. Most fellows agree that learning communities offer an important platform for multiple pedagogical initiatives. In learning communities, the multiple courses, multiple teachers, and, often, cocurricular components combine to create more time as well as multidisciplinary contexts for such promising pedagogies as collaborative learning, service learning, problem-based or project-based learning, writing across the curriculum, a focus on diversity and pluralism, and performance-based assessment. Yet many fellows point out that the course-linking and co-registration elements of learning communities have been more successful than serious integration with the reform efforts that these pedagogies represent. David Schoem observes that “learning communities have provided a structure to allow broader undergraduate innovations,” but he voices concern that the connections to diversity are not yet central enough. Karen Spear argues that “because they cut across all kinds of organizational boundaries, learning communities offer the clearest and best-documented solution for overcoming the great divides within institutions to create more vital, responsive, engaged institutions that can capitalize on a degree of public trust that remains strong. But I’m not sure the implications of the learning community movement as a lever for institution-level reform have been fully met.”

In regard to next steps, Jim Harnish argues for “the need to research and develop new pedagogies that produce the kinds of learning outcomes we want. The curriculum design of learning communities has come along much faster than changes in how faculty members actually teach.”

Note: See the acknowledgment at the end of the article for a complete list of contributors.

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Often threatening moves into new pedagogical territory is that old adversary, content coverage. Speaking as a scientist, Rob Cole observes that “scientists seem particularly concerned about coverage in their courses, and the resistance to doing substantive interdisciplinary work—or dealing with issues that depart from the prescription of courses necessary for the major—remains large. Linked courses can serve as a balm to faculty who want to engage in some kind of reform but don’t want to rock the boat very much.” Reflecting on the challenges of team teaching, Beth Hill comments, “We are still struggling with convincing new faculty that they will be able to cover their subject matter in fifteen weeks if they share the platform by teaching with another teacher. They *cannot* see how they will ever be able to do what they do in a stand-alone class. . . . We need to find more effective ways to address this issue.”

5. Learning communities have built strong links between disciplines and divisions. Just as important as the linkages described earlier are new linkages between academic affairs and student affairs and new ways of thinking about collaboration on behalf of student learning and success. Frankie Minor observes that there are many examples of successful living-learning community programs, especially in research universities, “many with short-term but solid, demonstrable outcomes. Many of these began or still originate in student affairs and residential life, but there are also examples of true partnerships with simultaneous commitment from both academic affairs and student affairs. Where these have occurred, many of the institutional challenges were more easily overcome or bypassed. The increasing number of programs has

allowed for more peer-to-peer learning between faculty and staff at institutions that have more commonalities. Earlier in this movement, there were limited programs at institutions that had more in common. Now, the diversity of programs and institutions provides opportunities for both new initiatives’ and existing programs’ adapting and expanding to learn from one another. Some of this is occurring through informal networks, often facilitated by the highly mobile student affairs population (something quite different from faculty culture) but also aided by an aspect of faculty culture, interinstitutional communication within similar disciplines.”

6. Learning community assessment is good but not yet great. Fellows are mixed in their appraisal of the impact of assessment on learning communities. Some see it as a strength that so many campuses have embraced intensive assessment of their learning community programs. Frankie Minor reports “increasing efforts to provide a consistent body of knowledge, research, and assessment of learning community programs. Most of this has been institution-specific, outcomes-based assessment related to increased retention and academic success of students, but there are also efforts to examine other aspects of students’ growth and development, including openness to diversity, reduction in binge drinking, the development of leadership skills, and community formation.” Nevertheless, many fellows agree that learning community assessment, like assessment in higher education in general, can do much better at measuring student learning outcomes. Speaking from an institution that is deeply invested in learning community assessment, Judy Patton asserts,

HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES PROJECT

THE Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, a national resource for learning community development, is located at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. The center maintains a large Web site that includes a national directory of learning communities as well as extensive resources on starting and sustaining learning communities. The center also hosts an annual National Summer Institute on Learning Communities, a weeklong residential experience for campus teams. Interested campuses are invited to contact the center’s co-directors, Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich, at washcenter@evergreen.edu.

A 1996 Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education grant to the Washington Center to disseminate learning community work nationally was followed in 2000 by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts to support the National Learning Communities Project (NLCP). Co-directed by Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor, the project led to strengthening of learning community programs on individual campuses, development of regional consortia of learning community practitioners, and expansion of resources and literature through

the creation of a national learning communities Web site (<http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu>) and monograph series (<http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu/monographs/mono.asp>).

The Pew-funded project, which ended in 2004, led to the development of a new generation of learning community leaders, the project fellows. These leaders, recruited from all types of colleges and universities and holding diverse positions in their institutions:

- Served as resource faculty at learning community institutes
- Conducted site visits and provided other consulting to campuses
- Made presentations on learning community theory and practice
- Hosted regional open houses, conferences, and workshops
- Served as authors on the monograph series
- Served as mentors to one another

“Assessment often helps uncover assumptions about teaching and learning, and testing them leads to improved teaching and learning. It can help answer questions about whether the innovations are getting the intended results.”

“Getting the assessment folks involved early in the discussion is crucial,” notes Bruce Koller. Similarly, Lynn Dunlap observes, “Assessment is the key to understanding needs and understanding what is and isn’t working. It’s crucial that colleges approach learning communities in a thoughtful, programmatic way to assess institutional and student needs and to imagine how learning communities—and which structures—can best help them address those needs.” Marie Eaton sees assessment as critical in building allies: “We must continue our work in assessment so that we have the language (and data) to persuade those who may be open to change but are reluctant or resistant to move ahead without data they understand.”

7. The need to offer low-cost learning communities or demonstrate cost-effectiveness of more expensive programs will increase. As they examine the larger question of sustaining reform in the rapidly changing context of higher education, many fellows acknowledge that increasingly restrictive fiscal environments can dampen efforts to innovate and can move institutions to implement the least expensive and sometimes the least effective forms of learning communities or to abandon reform work altogether. Jan Swinton comments on the struggle at her institution to sustain the quality of their original program yet “to try to reshape things in order to create additional needed offerings for little or no extra costs.” Lynn West contends that “the weaknesses of the learning community movement have been exacerbated by the shortfalls in funding, pointing to the tendency to underfund professional development, which is especially crucial at a time of substantial faculty turnover. To create a strong learning community and to extend the theories and planning to new teams and new individuals requires preparation. Unfortunately, in recent years, too often this process has been slipshod.”

8. Sustainability entails vigilance about logistical considerations. Internal implementation logistics continue to loom large. Bruce Koller quips, “Whatever can go wrong (in your school’s systems) will go wrong when you attempt to do learning communities. How successful are you at making each mistake only once? That will make or break your learning community effort.” Connie Kubo Della-Piana points out, “The administrative and logistical issues are the most unthankful side of starting learning communities, but they make the dream of learning communities and the scale-up

possible. Skillful and artful administration and logistics are elements of a persuasive argument for learning communities.”

9. Sustainable learning communities require a larger vision. A number of fellows state that the larger vision on which an institution’s learning community initiative rests plays a key role in how the initiative is seen, how it unfolds, and how it sustains itself over time. Lynn Dunlap notes, “There is a continued need for those who see learning communities as a quick (that is, technical) fix to learn what learning communities can be and should be and to implement them as a part of a strategy to deepen educational possibilities and institutional reform.” In the same vein, Frankie Minor counsels, “We need to ask why are we doing this. Too many institutions are motivated to implement these programs primarily to address issues related to retention or because of a notion of ‘keeping up with the Joneses.’ Successful initiatives require more visionary leadership and motivation, particularly when inevitably faced with the myriad logistical challenges and institutional resistance to changes in practice and procedures that these programs often entail.”

Rob Cole goes even further, arguing that the “structural revision of the academy and of the curriculum it fosters is central in order for higher education to deal with the real issues in the world that we all face. This structural revision,” he contends, “ought to challenge the fundamental role that faculty play, the nature of the motivating questions the curriculum asks, and the nature of problem-solving skills students are asked to learn.”

10. Successful learning communities depend on leaders drawn from across campus. Many fellows agree that healthy learning community programs depend on strong leadership teams. Michaelann Jundt notes, “While learning communities can be led from the level of ‘middle management’ for a while, extensive growth or deepened impact must include the buy-in of many across different administrative levels.” Frankie Minor warns of the danger of programs resting on the efforts of a single individual: “The loss of that individual can cripple and sometimes even eliminate successful programs.” Jim Harnish notes that learning community leadership is often paradoxical: “Learning communities are dependent on strong, committed faculty personalities, but when they are too personality-driven, it is often difficult to cultivate new responsible institutional leaders.”

Developing and supporting leadership that can hold the vision may be critical to a program’s survival, notes Marie Eaton. “These programs are all too easily whacked off in times of budget downsizing, especially if they remain on the margins. The Law and Diversity

learning community program at Western Washington University (WWU) is a great example of a success in cultivating the leadership support. We've created a very public face for this program, making sure that the students, the program, and their accomplishments are well known, and that WWU receives appropriate credit. Making clear to the institution why the program benefits (as well as costs) WWU as a whole has not only meant that this expensive program is still here eleven years later but that we were able to argue for a new faculty line and bring in a new cohort every year, effectively doubling the size of the program."

Cheryl Lynn Roberts advises that "leadership in the development of learning communities be monitored so that it is an open, inclusive process." She notes that "if this process is not handled well and faculty feel an in-group and an out-group or new faculty don't feel comfortable joining an established program, it can cripple the development and ultimately the health of the learning communities." Connie Kubo Della-Piana maintains that "learning community leadership is more than people, it is the capacity of the movement to create opportunities that foster the growth of leadership roles or positions for a diverse set of new people."

11. Successful learning communities invest in faculty and staff development.

Connie Kubo Della-Piana argues that "faculty must have access to professional development so that they can develop the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind necessary for effective learning communities. In many ways, pedagogy is the infrastructure of the learning communities. The curriculum and the pedagogy must be compatible. At the same time, faculty development must expose faculty members to multiple strategies and not create one pedagogy for all." John O'Connor notes that "learning communities can profoundly change how faculty and staff members view their work and their relationships with colleagues. How I connect with the members of my learning community program, despite our disciplinary differences, is profoundly different (and better) than how I connected with my departmental peers." Through professional development, "the faculty role [is] reshaped to encourage collaboration and community."

12. Sustainability requires continual rethinking and reinvention. Sustaining innovations like learning communities is an ongoing challenge, and the work of sustaining often calls for the work of *changing*. What brought this lesson home to many fellows was encountering institutions participating in the project at very different points of learning community development. While most were in program start-up, a number of colleges and universities had long-established

programs that they were ready to rethink. "Even institutions with veteran learning communities need to think about change and growth and student need," Phyllis van Slyck notes. Karen Spear points out, "The administrative churn keeps colleges destabilized and plays its part in an organization's failure to come together. This is particularly problematic for fringe programs that must have central senior administrative support for their continued existence."

13. Educators must be willing to change as they ask students to change.

Judy Patton notes that "The leadership of learning community programs, faculty, and staff need to walk the talk to really understand what we are asking our students to do as we work to intentionally build community. If we aren't working to change the faculty culture, it's unlikely the student culture will change. If we want students to take risks, use reflective practice, work in groups and so on, faculty members and others in teaching roles need to do the same. If we are validating the student voice, administrators need to validate the faculty voice, the staff voice—including the university service staff. We need to work also on the social equality of higher education (growth of adjunct faculty, treatment of clerical and other service positions) if we want to educate students for social justice."

14. The emotional side of change matters.

Many fellows describe the emotional ups and downs of working on educational reform and note that the National Learning Communities Project helped sustain their courage and sense of hope. They spoke in heartfelt terms about learning the value of patience, resilience, and optimism and about the necessity of commitment over the long haul. Gary Brown notes, "Our institution has had eight provosts in ten years, and our learning community coordinator in the Freshman Seminar is turning over again, the third time since the program began six years ago. It is an extremely difficult task to launch a learning community, especially in a 'wanna-be' research institution enduring more and more budget cuts. It is not any easier working to sustain one. This work, change, faculty development is hard work. And, surprise, change for students is also hard. There is much that is comforting in the sheer predictability of the lecture/test pitter-patter. But, as Brecht said, my cigar has not gone out. We have new leadership in a new Office of Undergraduate Education, a renewed commitment to undergraduate research and learning communities. The two wellsprings of reform that matter most to the viability of learning communities are leaders at the top who get it and will suffer the slings of faculty wailing misfortune even as they tap the good will, energy, and intellect of those who are open to that

vision, and students who, given the opportunity, will prevail and tell the tale.”

15. Change agents need the perspective and support of allies and mentors.

The national project has provided the fellows with needed allies and larger perspectives about their work and the work of higher education as well. Lynn Dunlap reflects, “One of the important lessons I learned about leadership is the necessity of stepping outside one’s own program. I don’t think I would have learned as much as I have about my programs and limitations if I had just stayed ‘working the problem’ on campus.” In turn, the fellows gave us, the project directors, important perspectives. Jean Henscheid points out that internal institutional allies can be extremely valuable: “In terms of next steps, I think a really promising thing I’ve seen are the connections being made between learning communities and centers for teaching excellence. Both entities need to log some real reform successes and can rely on each other to achieve those.”

Higher education can do better at cultivating leadership, particularly among younger generations of staff and faculty. There are many highly capable potential leaders waiting to be asked. Many of the fellows said they never thought of themselves as leaders before joining this project. Developing collaborative structures, providing leadership occasions, and engaging in meaningful work can fuel lasting learning, personal development, and deep friendships.

FINAL THOUGHTS

OUT HERE in Puget Sound, once the winter snows give way to the avalanche lilies, mountain hikes beckon. Whether your aim is to scale a peak or stroll in mountain meadows, there is such satisfaction when you get out above the forest line and can take in the panoramic views. Yet there is always a paradoxical moment when you look back at your distant starting point below and relish how far you’ve come but then look up to discover that the mountain summit still looms above you. And now, up close, it seems larger than you ever imagined.

So it is with our learning community work. We mark the extraordinary progress we all have made to articulate a reform idea and situate it in our institutions. Yet as we’ve done it, the summit—our ideals for lasting curriculum reform, deep student learning, and institutional change—has become more clear and well defined. These ideals are inspiring, but they loom large.

In the years to come, they could be within our reach. But we have significant climbing ahead.

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