

# Quality Assurance in Education

## **Learning communities and the quest for quality**

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*Quality Assurance in Education* aims to examine critically quality and related issues in post-compulsory education, bridging the gap between theory and practice, and to examine perceptions and opinions of quality by a number of stakeholders. Each article is submitted to a double-blind review process to ensure that academic integrity is ensured.

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# Learning communities and the quest for quality

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – In the USA, as elsewhere, there is an ongoing need to improve quality in higher education. Quality improvement models from business have not been widely embraced, and many other approaches to accountability seem to induce minimal compliance. This paper aims to contend that learning communities represent a viable alternative in the quest for quality. By restructuring the curriculum and promoting creative collaboration, learning communities have become a major reform effort in US colleges.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper provides an overview of learning community theory and core practices and four original case studies of institutions that have made learning communities a long-term focus of their quality improvement efforts.

**Findings** – Findings include: effective learning communities are clearly positioned, aimed at large arenas and issues and are central to the organization's mission; learner-centered leadership is a key component of effective programs; learning communities offer a high leverage point for pursuing quality; effective learning communities meet faculty where they are; successful initiatives create new organizational structures, roles and processes; successful programs attract and reward competent people and build arenas for learning from one another; and successful programs have a living mission and a lived educational philosophy reaching constantly toward more effective practices.

**Originality/value** – Educators will draw rich lessons from this concise overview of learning community theory and practice and the story of these successful institutions.

**Keywords** Learning, Quality improvement, Higher education, United States of America

**Paper type** Research paper

Can quality be dramatically enhanced in higher education? In the USA, as elsewhere, there is now a constant drumbeat for improving educational performance. While the USA has led the world in access to higher education, it is increasingly clear that access is not the same as academic success or educational effectiveness. The range of criticism points to many concerns – a growing ethnic and socio-economic divide in college attendance rates, a widespread lack of college readiness, disappointing rates of student retention and graduation, unsatisfactory skill attainment levels of college graduates, and spiraling costs.

At the same time, American higher education is at a critical juncture. Between now and 2030, the school-age population will be at its most diverse in US history; however, the rate at which these students are participating in higher education has remained relatively flat (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006). Critics warn that unless participation and success rates climb significantly, there will be a widening economic gap between those with postsecondary education and those left behind, a trend that threatens future economic, social and cultural development (Davies, 2006). Comparisons show the USA, once the clear leader, is falling behind on numerous international comparisons of access, cost, and student learning (Wagner, 2006).



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Higher education is widely seen as unresponsive and resistant to the needs of a changing world, and many approaches to quality enhancement have yet to realize measurable success. Quality-improvement models prevalent in the business world have not been widely embraced in American higher education. Some argue that other approaches, closer to home, such as program review and accreditation are not more successful, and often received as intrusions on faculty and institutional autonomy that lead to minimal compliance rather than stimuli for institutional change[1].

At the same time, the past 20 years have produced important research on what fosters effective teaching and learning (Bransford *et al.*, 1999; Boyer, 1990; Ewell, 2002; Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991) and a variety of promising pedagogical approaches – sometimes called “powerful pedagogies” – have become more widespread (Tagg, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 2004, pp. 3-23). These pedagogies have a common focus on student engagement and active learning, often in real world settings. Service learning, cooperative and collaborative learning and various forms of problem-based and inquiry-based learning are examples of these powerful pedagogies.

Curricular learning communities represent one of the larger scale approaches to improving higher education. They are an effort to reform both the structure of the curriculum and the pedagogy in the classroom. Carried out with a strong commitment to faculty and staff collaboration, learning communities can become a highly effective approach to improving quality that is both scaleable and congruent with the culture of higher education. While learning communities will not necessarily become a broad-based quality initiative, they have become that in a number of institutions, and useful lessons can be drawn from these success stories. In the following pages, we explain what curricular learning communities are and the theory behind this approach. We will describe what they look like in practice in several different institutions that have made them a centerpiece of their quality enhancement efforts. Finally, we will identify key elements that can make them an enduring stimulant for institutional improvement.

### **Learning communities – a structural intervention**

In postsecondary education, improvement, and reform efforts have variously focused on faculty development, graduate education and the preparation of future faculty, discipline-based course or curriculum enhancement initiatives, or the identification and assessment of student learning outcomes. However, few initiatives have tackled the educational structure itself, that is, the reality that a student’s academic life is divided among collections of courses that compete for attention and often bear little to no relationship to one another. The dividing of teaching and learning experiences into multiple small packages of learning called “courses” may have been effective in the paradigm of the last century when most students lived in residence halls and few had other demands on their time. But today, most students commute to campus from time-consuming jobs or family obligations. Large numbers attend college part-time and a growing number take courses at multiple institutions and stop in and out of college.

The curricular learning community approach is a structural attempt to address this immense fragmentation and increase both learning and community for students. Because the term “learning community” is now broadly used with reference a variety of learning environments, such as single classrooms, residence halls, online course

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offerings, and workplaces, it is important to clarify what we mean by this term. As we define them, “curricular learning communities” refer to a variety of curricular approaches that intentionally link two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or question, and enroll a common cohort of students. By restructuring a student’s time, credit, and learning experiences, learning communities aim to bring more coherence to the curriculum, increase student engagement, and help build social and academic community (Smith *et al.*, 2004, p. 67). Learning communities rearrange students’ otherwise piecemeal academic experiences to bring focus, coherence, and community to their learning.

Learning community program structures vary greatly, from a simple pairing of two courses to highly complex learning communities involving a constellation of courses that compose a year or more of student work. Institutions often give their learning community programs special names, such as “Freshman Interest Groups,” “First-Year Communities,” or “Coordinated Studies Programs”. Individual learning community offerings usually have their own titles that present the theme or question around which the coursework is organized. The following examples provide a glimpse of the disciplines and courses that might be brought together around a learning community theme.

“What is the American Character?” English Composition; American History from the Civil War to the Present; Introduction to Film.

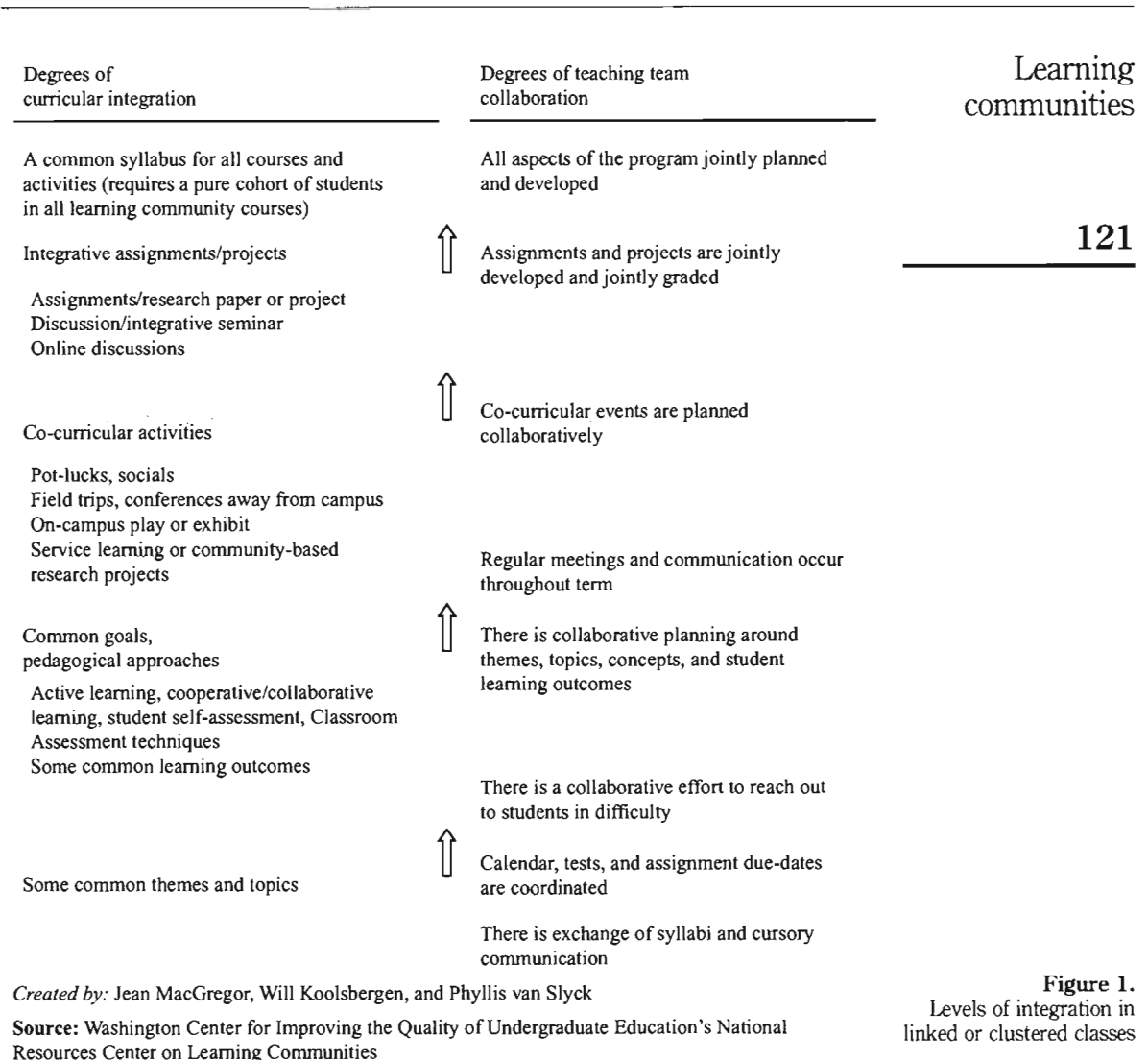
“Greening the Business World.” Microeconomics; Introduction to Environmental Science; Business Writing; Internet Research.

“CheMath.” A developmental learning community linking Introduction to Chemistry and Intermediate Algebra. This program improves student course-completion and success in first-year college chemistry.

“The US Minority Experience.” English – Multicultural Literature in America; History of Minorities in America; Sociology of Race and Ethnicity; Integrative Seminar.

How the curriculum and learning activities are brought together in learning communities varies. Figure 1, “Levels of Integration in Linked or Clustered Classes,” portrays the degrees to which faculty members might collaborate to create linkages, curriculum integration, and community in their learning community classes. For example, the “The US Minority Experience” might be taught at the lower end of Figure 1, with the courses entirely unmodified, but with an integrative seminar in which one faculty member presents integrative assignments. Or, the teaching faculty might work at the upper end of Figure 1, to align their syllabi around several key concepts and joint assignments. The choice of curricular architecture and the degrees of curriculum integration are a function of the goals for the learning community initiative, the individuals teaching in the program, and the campus’s mission, culture, and structures.

In the past 25 years, learning communities have become widespread in colleges and universities in the USA. Growing from a small-scale effort at a few colleges and universities in the early 1980s, these initiatives are now found in more than 800 American colleges and universities, at both two- and four-year institutions and in both public and private colleges. The learning community movement continues to grow and evolve, but the scale and focus of specific learning community programs varies considerably. In some universities, learning communities enroll a majority of first-year students; in other institutions, they are a small endeavor organized by a few faculty



**Figure 1.**  
Levels of integration in linked or clustered classes

members for a small-targeted audience, such as an Honors Program or an intake port for a specific major. Some institutions, described in this paper, have made learning communities a centerpiece of their drive for educational excellence.

Because learning community courses can be put together in many different ways, these programs have been adopted and adapted at hundreds of institutions. Colleges can offer learning communities at relatively low cost. Teaching teams can be comprised only of faculty members, or they might include a librarian, an instructional technology professional, an academic advisor or residence hall advisor, or a specialist in reading or writing. Learning communities can also provide a larger platform for implementing other reforms such as service learning and community-based research,

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the use of electronic technology, writing or speaking across-the-curriculum, diversity, and interdisciplinary studies.

Learning communities can be situated in almost any part of the curriculum but they are most frequently designed for first year students. Many efforts focus on the first year because this is such a critical transition point for students, and attrition rates are generally high. The first college year is also the most formative for acculturating students to college life and for accelerating student intellectual development. Furthermore, study habits and academic expectations established in the first year of college tend to endure for subsequent years (Schilling and Schilling, 1999). Thus, learning community initiatives meet both important needs and opportunities. Other generative curricular arenas for learning communities include:

- *Basic studies and developmental education* – to foster student progress through developmental classes; to reduce attrition in courses with high rates of withdrawal and failure; to teach reading, mathematics, and writing in the context of a disciplinary class with stimulating subject matter.
- *General education* – to provide interdisciplinary coherence and connections among general education classes; to provide a disciplinary context for the teaching of writing, speech communications, or critical thinking.
- *The major* – to provide an introduction to the major with two or three linked classes that act as platforms and important community-building moments; to provide an integrated capstone or capstone/service learning experience.
- *Programs for special populations (honors students, provisionally admitted students, student athletes, students of color, returning women students, etc.)* – to provide special academic support, academic enrichment, or specialized content.

While learning communities have now become widespread, the crucial step in making this a scaleable reform effort is to move beyond a few early adopters and courses to thinking about mobilizing larger numbers of people and areas of the curriculum. Tying them to the larger institutional agendas around quality improvement is an essential step for this to occur.

### **Learning communities and the quest for quality**

Learning community leaders, like other higher education leaders, define quality and indicators of educational effectiveness in multi-dimensional ways. In our several decades of learning community work and through hundreds of conversations with learning community leaders, we have assembled a list of outcomes and indicators of success for learning community initiatives, which are portrayed in Figure 2, dimensions of quality and learning community goals.

These outcomes, specified as goals for students, faculty members and other learning community teachers, and the institution, could relate to the intentions of many quality initiatives on a campus. Although these outcomes are depicted as steps on a staircase, we are not suggesting that one outcome leads to another. Rather, the more concrete and easily measured goals are shown as the first stairs, and more ambitious and more ineffable goals are presented on the higher steps. We present all these goals to demonstrate that institutions have multiple and often ambitious goals for their learning community programs, and that multiple outcomes are in play



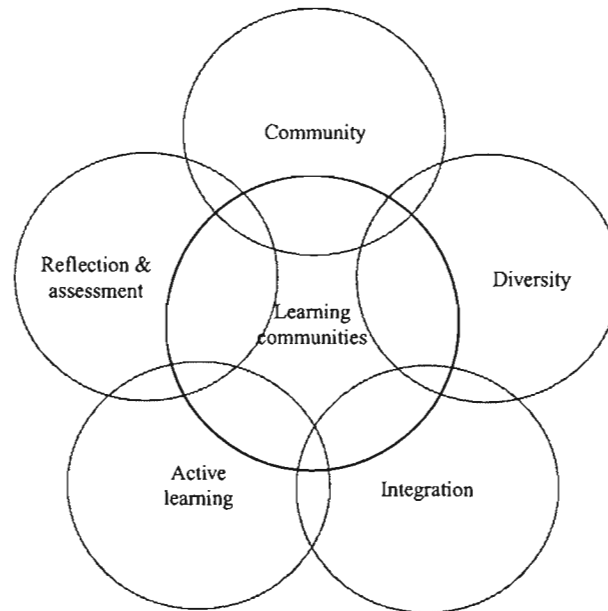
**Source:** Adapted from a similar chart in Smith *et al.* (2004, p. 70).  
Adapted by permission of Jossey-Bass

**Figure 2.**  
Dimensions of quality and learning community goals

simultaneously – for students, faculty members and others in teaching roles, and for the institution as a whole.

With these kinds of ambitious goals in mind, strong learning community initiatives restructure the curriculum and the learning experience of students and the teaching lives of faculty members. Not only do they reconfigure classes to invite linkages among topics, ideas, and skills. They also create a synergistic opportunity for teachers to collaboratively create a different kind of learning environment that can embody the best practices in college teaching and learning. Figure 3, core practices in learning





**Figure 3.**  
Core practices in learning  
communities

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communities, presents an intertwined set of practices that characterize effective learning community teaching and learning.

We portray these practices as interlocking circles because we believe these key learning community elements are interrelated and complementary. In the past three decades, the theory and practice of higher education has recognized these practices as important to quality in learning. Learning community teaching faculty – and students – repeatedly mention these elements as critical to learning community quality and success (Engstrom and Tinto, 2007). These core practices are essential for realizing the full potential of learning communities. As Lardner and Malnarich point out in their recent research, “learning – community work done well thus requires the skillful balancing of two moves: one structural, the other pedagogical and cross disciplinary” to yield maximal results (Lardner and Malnarich, 2008, p. 32).

An abundance of findings from educational researchers and cognitive scientists support the value of these practices for student engagement, learning, and intellectual development. These practices often appear on lists of best practices or menus of promising pedagogies but they are seldom applied systematically. Deep competence with these practices across a wide range of faculty is still the exception in most institutions. Making a collective commitment to these core practices requires a clear educational philosophy reinforced by the hiring and reward systems, and a long-term commitment to faculty and staff development.

What distinguishes learning communities as a quality initiative is that shared curriculum planning for a common cohort of students in connected courses puts the quest for quality directly into faculty members’ hands and into daily classroom practice. Quality is not an abstract exercise of outcomes definition by a committee or reporting of measures of achievement to a distant authority, but rather a lived reality of

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shared purposes and pedagogical strategies, shared students, shared syllabi, and shared problem-solving. A very different kind of accountability emerges when faculty members take collective responsibility for the learning and the success of a group of students they hold in common. Teaching teams share responsibility for integrated learning. They alert one another when a student is missing class or in academic difficulty. They reorient the syllabus or assignments to take advantage of teachable moments. They collaborate on standards for what constitutes good work and on providing feedback to students. They share their teaching strategies and help each hone them or reinforce them. These kinds of relationships add up to a dramatically different teaching reality than what is typical of college and university teaching – the solo teacher in his or her classroom. The quest for quality emerges in each teaching team’s planning discussions and in the classroom, laboratory, and community where the teaching and learning unfold.

Some might respond, accurately, that all of this is well and good: effective teaching practices are happening already in many classrooms. Good teachers have already embraced these practices. At every institution, small groups of faculty members and enterprising departments lead the way. But what is different with what the learning communities have done as an institutional improvement effort is how the effort to pursue quality through learning communities is framed and carried out. It is no longer simply an issue of finding more good teachers, doing good things. It is the purposeful building of the collective capacity that matters. It moves beyond the individualism of exemplary teachers and random curriculum tinkering that has characterized so many of the past efforts at educational reform.

### **Using learning communities as levers for change: exemplary programs**

The past 20 years clearly demonstrate that learning communities are effective and can be substantial levers for institutional change and improvement (Taylor *et al.*, 2003). However, while many learning community programs are of very high quality, they are not always framed as a critical element of large-scale institutional effectiveness endeavors. Making learning communities the center of an ambitious institutional quality initiative requires strategic thinking and planning, a long-term commitment to faculty involvement and faculty development, and the creation of organizational structures and processes to sustain and scale up the effort to the entire institution. In this section we describe a number of institutions that have made learning communities a focus for quality over the long-term, and the factors that contribute to their success.

#### *The Evergreen State College*

The Evergreen State College was one of the most radical new institutions founded in the USA in the late 1960s. A state funded, predominantly undergraduate four-year college, Evergreen’s founders took advantage of a state legislator’s brief but liberating admonition to not duplicate what already existed, but rather to be a “college that can be as modern 50 years from now as at the present.” In various studies and on national surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, Evergreen is frequently cited as a high performing institution (Kuh *et al.*, 2005). The college has also become a national resource center for the successful ongoing movement to adapt its central structural innovation – learning communities – to traditional institutions. An Evergreen public service center, the Washington Center for Improving the Quality

of Undergraduate Education ([www.evergreen.edu/washcenter](http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter)), supports the national learning community movement.

Evergreen's organizational and curriculum design drew its inspiration from the work of Alexander Meiklejohn, an educational pioneer at the University of Wisconsin in the early part of the twentieth century[2]. Meiklejohn was concerned about the growing dominance of the research university and its academic departments. He believed that the division of the curriculum into small discipline-based courses would undermine coherence and the larger purposes of the college experience. For Meiklejohn, education was all about building the skills and habits of mind to support democratic citizenship. His alternative to the social and intellectual fragmentation of unrelated courses was a fully integrated year-long curriculum: it would be team taught, interdisciplinary, and organized around important issues in the modern world. This approach, he contended, would do what no bureaucratic curriculum committee could do: it would support deep engagement of students and faculty and empower the faculty to re-imagine the curriculum and continue to learn from one another. This curricular vision took shape as Meiklejohn's Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin: it was offered as an alternative first two years of college. For a variety of political and financial reasons, the Experimental College was short-lived, but many years later, Meiklejohn's ideas have gained traction.

The Evergreen State College resurrected the Meiklejohn legacy. Taken with his structural insight about the power of restructuring the curriculum around programs rather than courses, Evergreen's founders organized the institution's curriculum around team-taught, interdisciplinary coordinated studies programs which could deeply engage faculty and students in sustained study over extended periods of time. The first year learning community programs, called "core programs," generally involve three faculty members teaching an interdisciplinary theme-based program that lasts two quarters. Recent core program titles include "Columbia River: Origins, Salmon and Culture," "The History and Evolution of Disease," and "Seeds of Change: Food, Culture and Work." More advanced offerings are also team taught and usually run for two quarters or a full year. These advanced offerings are organized through interdisciplinary planning units which include Environmental Studies; Culture Text and Language; Scientific Inquiry; and the Expressive Arts. In general, Evergreen's faculty members teach with different teaching partners every year. While some of the curriculum (especially in high sequence disciplines) remains the same from year to year, a large number of programs are invented afresh.

When Evergreen began, its curricular philosophy represented a different path than what was being pursued by other alternative colleges more oriented to individualized approaches to education. Evergreen's approach has proven to be cost effective, scalable, and adaptable to a wide range of academic topics and disciplines and the faculty continue to believe that the expansive curricular space is a key element in supporting robust learning experiences.

Unlike most institutions, Evergreen has built organizational processes and structures closely aligned with its educational philosophy with has made its innovations and learning community structure effective and sustainable. The explicitly stated principles that guide Evergreen's programs are:

- interdisciplinary study;
- collaborative learning;

- the linking of theory and practice;
- personal authority and engagement; and
- learning across significant differences and diversity.

Various structures and practices support and give life to these values, and many years of research indicate that faculty alignment around these key values remains high.

Faculty are hired for their promise and fit with Evergreen's educational approach. An imaginative hiring process asks candidates to write an educational philosophy, teach an actual class, and describe an imaginary, ideal interdisciplinary program. Evergreen's faculty handbook and reappointment criteria make it clear that teaching is the number one priority and that team-teaching and interdisciplinary curriculum development is required of all members of the faculty.

Contending that team teaching required faculty equity, the college's founders created only one faculty rank and a uniform salary system based on years of experience. To underscore the primacy of teaching, teaching portfolios became a formal part of the faculty evaluation process. Instead of grades for student work, the founders instituted narrative student evaluations as a more nuanced way to describe and assess student learning and promote collaboration rather than competition. Further, the student's own self-evaluation is part of their transcript. These practices represented substantial departures from conventional practices. While other "experimental" institutions established in the 1960s and 1970s toyed with some of these reform practices, Evergreen was relatively unique in adopting these innovations wholesale. The result was a coherent set of structures and practices supportive of interdisciplinary education and team teaching.

Evergreen's Provost Don Bantz has an almost paradoxical view of the quest for quality:

At the same time that we have been working internally, external bodies have also been pushing quality since Washington State became one of the first states to embrace assessment and accountability. Policymakers have oscillated between approaches – with periods of well funded experimentation and then forays into standardized testing, performance-based budgeting, system-wide learning outcomes and efficiency measures, national scorecards, and, more recently, performance contracts and total quality management. Higher education is sometimes swept into efforts to improve state government and certain fads tend to come up. It is very hard to interest faculty in this. Many of the indicators are not useful since we have no control over many of the variables. So while we certainly must meet state requirements, we've acted on the premise that the quest for quality really needs to occur at home and in ways that support what we do.

Clearly, the quest for quality is a long-term, ongoing process of experimentation and accommodation that is both internal and external. It is a process influenced by many different factors. Evergreen has had to continually navigate the critical tension between freedom and structure as it has greatly diversified its student body and curriculum and grown from a college of 1,000 students to 5,000. Any visitor will note that the institution is more fluid in its structures and expectations than most colleges, but the overall faculty culture is definitely still tilted towards innovation and change. Low boundaries and fluid structures such as the tradition of faculty members rotating into administrative roles as deans, the practice of recreating much of the curriculum each year, the hiring of broadly trained faculty, and the presence of curricular planning

units that have no budgetary or hiring authority ensure that the institution will not revert to traditional forms. The fact that the curriculum changes frequently and is team taught creates a yeasty environment for ongoing innovation and learning. The daily practice of team teaching creates an environment of continuous learning for everyone and for acculturating new members of the community.

The institution has become more sophisticated in the ways it builds and supports its culture, a necessary step as the institution has become larger. With the retirement of the founding faculty, a much more comprehensive faculty hiring and faculty development process became essential for community – and capacity-building. Since the mid-1990s, summer faculty institutes have become an important venue for faculty to plan and share their approaches. At the same time, various structures and processes for continuity and quality enhancement have been established to maintain a culture which is collaborative and student-centered.

Evergreen is the easiest example of an institution restructured for quality around learning communities because critical decisions were made at the outset about the curricular architecture that results in a strong culture with a clear educational philosophy and coherent organizational structures and practices. Other established institutions have had to build their restructuring around existing, often traditional, structures, and processes. Yet, as the following examples show, their success demonstrates that the idea of learning communities has broad applicability.

#### *Wagner College*

Wagner College, a liberal arts college at the mouth of New York's Hudson River, embraced learning communities as the structural mainstay of its general education program, inaugurating a new general education program called the Wagner Plan in 1998. This program not only reconfigured liberal arts courses in creative ways to enhance student learning, it also publicly embraced core practices of interdisciplinary studies, collaborative work, experiential learning, civic engagement, and reflection as defining features of a Wagner education. These bold moves propelled Wagner from relatively unknown status beyond its New York regional locale to a nationally recognized innovator in higher education.

In 1997, when Richard Guarasci was being recruited for the position of academic vice president, the college was in the doldrums, searching for a new identity and a fresh approach to undergraduate education. Plans for reinventing the curriculum with a service-learning focus were already in play. Guarasci brought critical experience from leadership positions at Hobart William Smith College and Saint Lawrence University, where he had helped create a strong, interdisciplinary learning community program for freshman. After serving as academic vice president for six years, Guarasci became Wagner's President in 2003. Guarasci observes:

When I arrived it was immediately apparent to me that this was a beautiful college with a spectacular view of Manhattan. From here, we can see not only the city but sense its importance, the sweep of its human history, all that has shaped this region. It was obvious that this need not be just a view – but a viewpoint, a mission. Learning and location had to be linked; this location and its distinctive liberal arts mission in this place could become Wagner's institutional signature. The college was poised to do something significant. We had all the resources right here, all we needed to do was sew it together more tightly and explain to the outside what an exciting and relevant approach we had.

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What emerged was the Wagner Plan for the Practical Liberal Arts, a comprehensive reorganization of the undergraduate curriculum that put interdisciplinary and experiential learning at the center. The Plan draws on the educational values of Meiklejohn and John Dewey in striving to prepare students for responsible civic engagement through carefully sequenced encounters that integrate disciplinary classroom learning with experiential encounters and reflective discussion and writing. The program is designed to put students into their surrounding environment and to understand the practical applications of their learning throughout their Wagner experience.

The required general education program features learning communities at three levels – first year, intermediate level and senior level. All entering students choose a first year program, a small learning community of 24-28 students taught by two faculty members in different disciplines. For example, the “Politics, Literature, and Citizenship” program links a Politics and Government class with a World Literature class. The learning community includes a 30-h service-learning component and a reflective tutorial (team-taught by the faculty of the courses) that uses reflection, writing, and discussion to bring together the students’ coursework and field experiences. The intermediate level learning community can be taken any time between freshman and senior year. This learning community offering is either an interdisciplinary class team taught by faculty from different disciplines or two classes linked by a theme. The intention is to enable students to identify social and intellectual linkages among diverse perspectives. Examples include “Economics and the Environment” (biology and economics classes), Asian History, Politics and Film (politics/history and film), and “Marketing and Advertising Campaigns” (marketing and graphic design). The Senior Program, the students’ final general education experience at Wagner, is directed by each student’s major department. The equivalent of two or three classes, this experience involves an integrative field-based research or practicum experience of at least 100 h, linked to a senior seminar or reflective tutorial, which results in a written thesis and thesis presentation. Again, experiential learning, practical experience, reflection and synthesis are hallmarks.

In a fashion that parallels Evergreen, Wagner’s faculty hiring and faculty development programs underpin the ongoing development of the Wagner Plan. Expectations of teaching in learning communities are part of the faculty recruitment process, and almost every new faculty member teaches in the Freshman Year Program the year they start teaching. Wagner asks the faculty members teaching in the Freshman Year Program to make a three-year commitment to ensure continuity and strengthen the quality of offerings. Tenure and promotion decisions now relate both to teaching in the Wagner Plan and producing scholarly work about those experiences. All faculty members teaching in The Freshman Year Program meet monthly as a group to reflect on their work, celebrate their successes, and talk through difficulties. They also meet for a two-day retreat each spring.

Over time, committees have been established to oversee each component of the Wagner Plan, so there are faculty teams working on the Freshman Year Program, the Intermediate Level offerings, and the Senior Program. These faculty groups elect their own chair; the committees with a learning community program director to help with overall curriculum planning, set standards, plan program assessment, and address problems. Julie Barchitta, Dean of Learning Communities and Experiential

Education, and Anne Love, the Dean of Academic and Career Development, both agree that the teamwork involved in learning community curriculum planning and teaching and in these committees are essential contributors to quality at Wagner. As Julie puts it:

At this point we are ten years into this initiative. Over 90 percent of the Wagner faculty have taught in the learning communities. The meetings and the collaborative work have broken down departmental silos that were substantial here even though we are a small college. The atmosphere of collaborative learning on the part of the faculty has begun to create a common language and shared understandings, and a sense that "We are all in it together." Team-teaching makes faculty members much more accountable to each other and to the students.

Anne Love adds, "This intensive faculty collaboration fosters the same thing for faculty that it does for students: collegial relationships and community, together with high standards and aspirations."

Devorah Lieberman, academic vice president, observes that faculty members are "creating their own language to discuss their teaching and their aspirations for the curriculum. This work continues to be remarkably generative." Lieberman explains that scholarship of teaching and learning is now emerging from faculty members' experiences, and in the process, Wagner faculty are becoming even more intentional and reflective in their teaching.

By all accounts, the Wagner Plan has been immensely successful with dramatic improvements in student enrollment and retention as well as its financial health. In recent years, faculty salaries have been increased and faculty course workloads reduced to encourage more flexibility for scholarship and for time-intensive teaching approaches. This institutional transformation is especially notable because it was undertaken without external grant money through the redeployment of existing funds and the reinvestment of savings realized when student retention began to increase. Absolutely key to the process was faculty engagement and ownership at every step. Looking back, Richard Guarasci recently wrote, "Real reform is rooted in reestablishing the integrity and mutuality of academic work, that is, our shared obligations for teaching and learning founded on inquiry, discovery, and creativity in intellectual work" (Guarasci, 2006).

### **Community colleges and the quest for quality**

Community colleges were greatly expanded in the late 1960s and 1970s and have now become widespread feature of the American higher educational landscape. A substantial majority of all students now attend a community college as part of their path toward a baccalaureate degree. Community colleges are therefore important players in any effort to improve higher education. In his important book *Honored but Invisible: An Inside Look at Teaching in Community Colleges* Grubb (1999) paints a vivid portrait of highly uneven teaching and improvement practices in American community colleges and suggests a pressing need for more focus on quality enhancement. Inter-institutional articulation efforts between community colleges and baccalaureate institutions have probably gone further in the USA than anywhere else but articulation is still hampered by a long history of institutional autonomy and status differences among two- and four-year institutions.

Many community colleges have embraced learning communities to increase course completion and retention for commuting students, to foster curricular coherence and

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integration, and to provide strong entry-pathways to certain majors. Some of the most energetic learning community development in community colleges has focused on the under-prepared college learner: an impressive variety of learning community programs link developmental skill classes with introductory classes in the disciplines and involve teaching partnerships of faculty, reading and writing specialists, and academic advisors. Substantial research, funded by the Hewlett and Lumina Foundations, has provided substantial validation for the learning community approach for developmental students. According to the research team, Catherine Engstrom and Vincent Tinto, "Learning communities and use of collaborative pedagogies that require students to learn together in a coherent interdependent manner leads to higher levels of academic and social engagement, greater rates of course completion, and higher rates of persistence" (Engstrom and Tinto, 2007).

LaGuardia Community College in New York City and Skagit Valley College in rural Washington State provide examples of institutions using learning communities as a key strategy of their quality improvement endeavors.

### **LaGuardia Community College**

Created in the early 1970s as the part of the massive expansion of American community colleges, LaGuardia Community College immediately attracted an ethnically diverse student body which is a defining feature of the college. In 2007, over 60 percent of the student body was foreign born; these students represent 163 countries of origin and speak 119 native languages. The majority of students are first generation college students. In its start-up years, LaGuardia also attracted an energetic young faculty. The first president, Joseph Shenker, encouraged a climate of experimentation and excitement about both curriculum and teaching. LaGuardia also became distinguished as a "coop school," where students could build work experiences into their degree programs. Over the years, the college has grown to over 14,000 students and a full-time teaching faculty of 275, and the culture of innovation has been sustained.

In LaGuardia's first decade, Roberta Matthews, an English instructor (later a dean) introduced the idea of creating course clusters as a strategy to develop students' writing skills and to bring coherence to the liberal arts course offerings. Fully team-taught learning community models were not financially viable, so Matthews and her colleagues developed clusters of three liberal arts courses that would enroll about 26 students and would provide a learning experience integrated around central themes, shared readings, and shared assignments. Many of the Liberal Arts Cluster themes spoke to the college's immigrant population and its work-related mission by addressing issues of freedom, work, and diversity. Equivalent to a full-time course load for students, the cluster offered a unique immersion experience in writing and speaking about liberal arts ideas in the context of contemporary issues.

Faculty teaching in these clusters immediately noticed two promising outcomes: course completion rates in the clusters were consistently high and student writing was strong, generally better than writing achievement in discrete classes. For many writing teachers at LaGuardia, it simply made sense to situate required writing classes in the larger interplay of ideas that course clusters offered. Since 1978, all full-time daytime-enrolled liberal arts students at LaGuardia have been required to take their writing and research paper classes in what is now called a "Liberal Arts and



Sciences Cluster.” Each semester, students have several clusters to choose from, whose themes embrace such topics as city history, the media and the internet, moral thinking, the world of work, the opportunities and challenges of immigration, international studies, and gender issues.

LaGuardia’s 30-year experience with learning communities includes additional learning community programs that have been developed to meet other student needs. For over a decade, the New Student House learning community offered a cluster of classes of developmental coursework and an advising component linked to one college transfer course. This program was recently reorganized into a set of first year academies, which cluster developmental skills classes in writing or oral communication, a freshman seminar class and an introductory course in a field of study such as Allied Health, Business and Technology, or Liberal Arts. Shortly after the New Student House program was established, LaGuardia added an English-as-a-Second-Language New Student House and began offering ESL classes linked to college reading, business, computers, accounting. These ESL learning communities have demonstrated consistently strong retention data and have become a substantial mainstay of LaGuardia’s overall ESL program.

The faculty members who have made a deep commitment to teaching in learning communities repeatedly say that the quality of student learning is dramatically different in these programs. As faculty member Phyllis van Slyck put it in an interview about how La Guardia has pursued quality:

I would say the single most important qualitative different that learning communities make is that they change students’ ideas about learning, about themselves, about their goals. In some case, goals become transformed into much more sophisticated aspirations. This happens because the learning community experience opens so many intellectual doors for students. It stimulates students to reconceptualize what learning is about. Now presumably this could happen with any stand-alone course that was well taught and influenced student thinking. However, I think the added component of the learning community enhances the quality of this response because it occurs in community.

Van Slyck’s LaGuardia colleagues agree with this perspective. They believe that the multidisciplinary learning setting, with its expectations that student analyze material and formulate their own ideas, inherently fosters greater student development. They also notice that, for urban commuter students who are pulled in many directions by competing obligations, the learning community offers a highly focused experience where community, intellectual connection-making, and citizenship are taken seriously. Faculty members also observed that the learning communities has a more enduring impact: for many students, their relationship to the college deepens, and they become active in student government and service projects (Personal interview, December 2007).

At LaGuardia, a longstanding commitment to faculty and staff development co-evolved with learning community development. About a decade into the institution’s learning community work, Roberta Matthews organized a set of professional development workshops for faculty members, counselors, and advisors in the coop program. These seminars immersed faculty and staff from different sectors of the college in theories of student development and learning styles, pedagogies of active and collaborative learning, learning community theory and practice, and other

innovative approaches. Faculty and student affairs professionals began to acquire a common vocabulary about issues of teaching and learning and student development.

When senior faculty members look back on LaGuardia's three decades of innovative initiatives, they remark that the different types of innovative work have grown organically from preceding ones. At the outset, LaGuardia's first leaders established a climate of curricular and pedagogical innovation. In the years that followed, even with turnover of leadership at the top, the early-established values and collaborative practices continued to develop and evolve. The learning community initiative and the faculty development projects that closely followed it brought together faculty from different college units and disciplines to reflect and learn together and to help shape each new initiative. Evelyn Burg, a communications skills teacher observes, "LaGuardia has a faculty that is hungry for conversations about teaching and learning."

LaGuardia's present leaders agree. Paul Arcario, Dean for Academic Affairs, said:

We want to give faculty room to be creative, to give them space to take risk, try new things, and literally shape the effort. Conversations across departmental lines are absolutely essential to quality and to faculty learning. They enable faculty to establish broader perspectives, learn from one another, and feel that they are part of a larger community. This kind of important work cannot be carried out as another "add-on" to faculty members' already busy lives. We need to create ways for faculty to work together within the regular time and space of their work.

Gail Mellow, LaGuardia's president adds, "We knew the broad directions we wanted to head in. We could sketch out the rationale and the frame for an initiative but we know that any initiative is, in the end, successful to the degree that it is owned by the faculty."

### **Skagit Valley College**

Skagit Valley College was an early adopter of learning communities in 1986. Located in a rural agricultural community in Northwest Washington, the college enrolls about 7,000 students (4,000 FTE). About 42 percent of the Skagit Valley students report that their goal is to obtain a degree for transfer to a four-year institution. The initial results of learning community offerings were positive, especially with regard to faculty engagement and creative curricular ideas in general education offerings. In 1993, the college made learning communities a centerpiece of their general education program by requiring that both of the college-level composition courses and at least one course from each of the general education course distribution areas be taken in a learning community. The institution's goal for the learning community requirement was to increase support for the development of students' academic writing skills and to help students understand connections among disciplines (Dunlap and Pettitt, 2008, p. 138).

Learning communities quickly became an important lever for change at the personal level for faculty, according to Lynn Dunlap, an early faculty leader of the learning community initiative:

Teaching in learning communities had a significant impact on faculty in terms of the recommitment they fostered among faculty to their discipline and for working at the college. They also really changed the way we teach. Learning communities created a sharing culture among faculty that goes over decades. We became very clear about what we wanted. Since so many faculty members teach in learning communities now, the spillover effect is also large

even when faculty members teach their stand-alone courses. Learning communities also dramatically changed the classroom and student expectations. Now when I say I will assign a paper, students respond very differently and the college has become known among the students for certain things. For instance, they point out that they can't avoid doing group work in numerous classes, and as one transfer student said, "You run into critical thinking everywhere." (Personal interview, March 2007).

For nearly two decades now, Skagit Valley has used learning communities as an incubator for institutional improvement. The institution has invested heavily in both ongoing assessment and faculty development to support the initiative. After learning communities became a required part of the general education program, the initiative also produced change at the institutional level, with a growing commitment made to hire new faculty with interest and skill in learning community teaching.

Over the years, the assessment and organizational development efforts have produced an ongoing institutional change effort rich in information that can be and is utilized. A key factor has been locating organizational sites for the work, providing ongoing cycles of information and feedback, and ensuring accountability. The decision to establish a committee to oversee the ongoing assessment of General Education outcomes has been crucial. Faculty members report "great presidential leadership" with extensive work on alignment to ensure that the institution stays on track with its goals. A recent "monitoring report" on student satisfaction and success to the Board of Trustees is just one example of powerful assessment and feedback systems to the community about strategic institutional goals. The Office of Institutional Research is often cited as a major positive factor in supporting change. As one faculty member observed, "the institutional research office is always reinforcing the work and communicating to others. Its director is a real asset" (Personal interview, March 2007).

The assessment effort has moved from small studies and simple measures of effectiveness (i.e. retention, participation, and satisfaction measures) to large-scale, complex studies aimed at understanding the impact of learning communities on college learning outcomes. The college has increasingly used this information to make decisions about where to situate learning communities in new areas such as developmental education. The college is also increasingly looking at the long-term effects of learning communities by studying, among others things, the performance of their students after they transfer to a four-year university. One recent study of transfer students concluded that students who had taken two or more learning communities had higher grade point averages than students from other transfer institutions. Other recent assessment work probes the differences between learning communities and stand alone courses in terms of satisfaction, persistence and completion rates.

An important aspect of Skagit's continuing commitment to quality improvement through learning communities has been through its participation in external studies. Skagit was an early participant in the work of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education which has led the learning community effort in Washington state and nationally. That strong relationship continues as both the Washington Center and Skagit Valley (along with 22 other colleges and universities) are now involved in a complex assessment project aimed at developing a rigorous methodology for assessing integrative learning in both stand-alone courses and learning communities.

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Skagit Valley has also participated in the National Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) in 2003, 2005, and 2007 with relatively consistent results:

The most dramatic results are those that indicate that students who took learning communities were significantly more likely to engage in activities that increase their time on task [...] as well as to assume responsibility for their learning [...] Of particular interest to the General Education Task Force was the pervasiveness and impact of the active and collaborative learning activities that characterize the Learning Community Program at Skagit (Dunlap and Pettitt, 2008, p. 143).

As a result of its high scores for Active and Collaborative Learning and Student/Faculty Interaction, Skagit has been designated as a CCSSE benchmark school.

Like other institutions committed to quality, Skagit Valley has developed a faculty culture that continues to ask questions and push harder. In 2002-2003 Skagit Valley reviewed its general education outcomes and developed a new learning outcome called Integration and Application which focused on enabling students to attain higher levels of intellectual development. In addition, new, clearer definitions of learning communities were developed that stress the level of integration. Over the years, Dunlap, says "we've come to see more meaningful and deeper ways of promoting student learning and institutional change" (personal interview, 2007).

#### **How learning communities work as levers for change**

The Evergreen State College, Wagner College, La Guardia Community College and Skagit Valley College are examples of institutions that have made learning communities a central part of their long-term pursuit of quality. Recognizing the potential, they made a series of decisions to make the effort strong and central to their institution's overall quest for quality. What do they have in common that can be generalized to other quality efforts through learning communities? Why does a learning community initiative seem to work as an effective lever for change? There are a number of factors that appear to make a difference.

*Learning communities are clearly positioned, aimed at large arenas and issues, and are central to the organization's mission.* All of these institutions have made learning communities a scaleable and stable part of their academic programs. At The Evergreen State College, learning communities are the primary way of organizing the curriculum, and the entire organization has been configured to support them. At Wagner, La Guardia, and Skagit Valley, learning communities play a foundational role in the curricular architecture through their placement in critical, required parts of the curriculum, i.e. the general education program. As a result of their critical placement in these institutions, the approach is not peripheral. Instead, it has a large impact on many faculty members and students.

*Learner-centered leadership is a key component of effective learning communities.* With a clear focus on the learner, these four institutions have purposely created an ongoing grass-roots revolution. Effective practices such as team teaching and collaborative planning support the on-going process of learning. There is synergistic collaboration at the learning interfaces, which breaks barriers and transcends the usual power relations (i.e. teacher-student, teacher-teacher, teacher-administrator, between academic units, with the external community, academic-student affairs, within

the institution). Leadership roles focus on building and supporting a learning-centered culture and that overcomes the usual two evils of managerialism and cloisterism.

*While not the only "quality strategy," learning community initiatives offer a high leverage point for the pursuit of quality.* For faculty members, learning communities can make the pursuit of quality a lived daily reality of which they have ownership, rather than an academic exercise imposed from the outside. In addition, learning community initiatives offer a broad platform – a kind of convergence zone – for bringing together many other approaches to quality. In learning communities, faculty are often collaborating on integrative assignments, collaborative learning, writing and speaking across the curriculum, service-learning, problem-based learning, intensive assessment occasions, and other strategies related to curricular improvement. Narrower reform efforts in discrete classes or majors often fail to scale up and become significant interventions simply because their audience and reach is small and too specialized.

*Learning communities meet faculty where they are.* Learning community initiatives immerse faculty members and student affairs professionals in the joy of teaching, and many programs engage teaching teams with more expansive notions of what that can be, engendering new and exciting conversations about curriculum, teaching and learning, and students. As a result of meeting faculty members where they are and asking them to invent a program together, learning communities are more compatible with the collegiate culture than many other approaches to quality. These kinds of team-planning and team-teaching approaches both allow and support faculty members to shape the learning community offerings and the overall enterprise that goes considerably beyond redesigning an individual course alone. The overall result is to promote change by deeply engaging faculty members' imagination and creative energy. Learning community initiatives are not based on a deficit models of quality improvement which too often begin with what is the matter or what should be fixed, making people defensive. Instead, they engage faculty and administrators alike in the exciting work of creating something new and building a vibrant sense of community and invention within the workplace. They bring people together who love to learn – that is why they were drawn to college teaching in the first place – but are often lonely and cut off from the stimulation that can come from co-planning and co-teaching with colleagues.

*Successful institutions have created new organizational structures, roles, and processes and appropriate resource investments to support their learning community programs.* Each of these institutions has developed new organizational roles and processes and made appropriate resource investments to support their learning community initiatives. They have invested in formal positions or released time for learning community directors or coordinators, faculty hiring procedures, reward systems, faculty/staff development, curriculum planning, and program assessment. These institutions' leaders think of their program in terms of long-term and continuous improvement rather than simply as an interesting short-term innovation. Learning community leaders report that this front-end investment in quality pays off in the long run. At La Guardia some learning community programs were initially run with slightly lower class sizes than regular discrete classes, but student course completion and persistence improved to such an extent that this shift of resources paid off. Similarly, Evergreen invests front-end financial resources to run first year programs with lower student-faculty ratios, since the first year is so critical to student completion of a degree.

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*Successful programs attract and reward competent people and create a context to build a sense of community and learn from each other.* In recent years, all of these institutions have been facing major turnover in personnel with the large-scale faculty retirements. Nonetheless, the focus on continuous improvement and building a learning organization is firmly grounded in the institution's practices and culture and survives despite substantial turnover in administrative and faculty leadership. All of the institutions have a variety of cultural practices and traditions for welcoming new faculty and for encouraging, acknowledging, and sharing good work. All strive to build a professional community of practice within their institutions.

*Successful programs have a living mission and a lived educational philosophy of reaching toward more effective practices.* Successful learning communities have created a living mission that is well aligned with their educational philosophy, but this is constantly being revisited. In his recent book, *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter*, George Kuh and his colleagues noted that highly effective institutions create and actively nurture an ethic of positive restlessness which orients their faculty and staff toward continuous improvement. While leaders at these institutions describe this kind of striving to do better in different words, it is clear that each institution has a coherent educational philosophy and works hard to "walk the talk." Self-reflection and continuous improvement are lived realities in learning community teaching and in the committees and task forces supporting these programs.

### **The future of learning communities**

Our experience indicates that learning communities can serve as an exciting and enduring vehicle for large-scale institutional improvement and sustained organizational learning. These initiatives can also help address a number of the dilemmas within higher education by providing a platform for other reforms, by bringing coherence to institutions increasingly beset by student mobility and seemingly endless choice, and by serving as a cornerstone for ongoing invention and curricular problem-solving. Learning communities can engage faculty, other academic staff, and student affairs professionals in reinvesting their energies and imaginations in general education, the first year of college and the basic skills curriculum, critical curricular arenas that need ongoing attention and improvement.

Hundreds of campuses across North America have created learning community programs to strengthen these curricular arenas, but only a small number have invested deeply in learning community teaching-and-learning in the ways that Evergreen, Wagner, LaGuardia, and Skagit Valley have. It remains to be seen whether learning communities will be taken to scale, involving large segments of the curriculum and large numbers of students. It also remains to be seen whether institutions will recognize the transformative potential of investing in learning community-teaching teams. Yet, the lessons of these learning community leaders indicate that the ongoing quest for quality is within reach, if we put it directly into teachers' hands while simultaneously building the collective capacity of the institution to be a true learning community.

### **Notes**

1. It should be noted that accreditation approaches in the USA have changed substantially in the last decade, allowing for much more creative, forwarding-looking ways of working

on institutional improvement. While regional accreditation associations have become increasingly adamant about assessment of student learning, they are also focusing more on institutional plans to increase effectiveness and continuous improvement rather than simply compliance with standards. This has empowered many institutions to think more broadly and to search for new and different solutions.

2. Smith *et al.* (2004), *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education*, chapter 2 for a history of the idea of learning communities and the connection to Alexander Meiklejohn.

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