



**Angelo State University  
Freshman College  
LEARNING COMMUNITIES (LC) ACTION PLAN**

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## 1. Learning Community Defined—

**Main organizing construct:** Our Learning Community (LC) ownership or organizational construct is in the Freshman College (FC) and overseen by the First Year Experience (FYE) executive director who reports to the FC dean and supports a healthy partnership between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs & Enrollment Management. The FYE executive director is the point of contact for LC questions as well as the development of a LC website and FAQ for parents and students. Included in the FAQ will be a description/definition of learning communities/freshman interest groups (FIGs), benefits, and procedures as well as roles and responsibilities. The executive director also coordinates the freshman seminar course schedule and oversees the peer mentor program. The dean is responsible for communicating procedure and purpose to administration and broader institutional constituents (admissions recruiters, academic advisors, orientation staff). The dean also coordinates the Freshman College Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC) to oversee the freshman seminar (LC anchor course) and LC proposal submissions. Together, the dean and executive director will conduct an annual program evaluation and communicate/publish the results. The LC website will document all programming information regarding policy and procedure, benefits, collaborative efforts, and evaluations as well as LC proposal submission information.

At the micro level, our freshman seminars (currently USTD 1201: Critical Thinking) are the anchor to a learning community that consists of two linked classes. A group of 20 new full-time (NFT) students with mutual academic interests elect to join a particular learning community by taking the same linked courses together. Each learning community features the support of an upper-class student, a peer mentor whose purpose is to help first-year students interact with faculty and engage fully with the campus while taking the classroom discussion outside the confines of standard 2x4 learning (2 pages of a book, 4 walls of the classroom). Regularly scheduled mentor sessions that allow students to clarify course content while translating material to the real world, set the stage for a collaborative learning environment where students actively participate in higher-order thinking. By Fall 2014 the freshman seminar will be part of the core and required of all NFT students. On a larger scale, by enrolling in the seminar and engaging in activities and campus events with the mentors, the entire first-year cohort will be part of the Freshman College learning community.

**Research-based principles essential in the design process:** Taking a cue from ASU's mission, our learning communities emphasize a learner-centered environment that prepares students to be responsible citizens and have productive careers. To meet this challenge and ensure success, we rely on the TRPP Model by Sharon Silverman and Martha Casazza (<http://trppassociates.com/>) to ground our LC arrangement in theory and research that leads to best practices within a framework of guiding principles. See Appendix which 1 illustrates a brief index of applicable learning theories, in particular constructivism and social constructivism—theories that describe how people learn, mainly college students in a social setting such as the classroom. Well-developed learning communities conscript students to active learning and pedagogy that relies on flipping the class, while the mentors take the community approach one step further, engaging the students in activities outside the classroom.

**Stakeholders, Roles & Responsibilities:** Table 1 (next page) details the stakeholders, their roles and responsibilities, and related planning questions.

**Table 1: Stakeholders' Needs and Related Planning Questions**

STAKEHOLDER	Roles/Responsibilities	PLANNING QUESTIONS
Dean, Freshman College —Dr Andy Wallace	Communicates program purpose/procedure to administration and constituent groups; coordinates Faculty Advisory Committee	<i>* How can we show a meaningful Return on Investment (ROI) with LC's?</i>
First Year Experience —Sara Weertz	Programming/general coordination; course scheduling;; marketing ( program literature and advertising); bridge or connection to SAEM and co-curricular activities; program evaluation	<i>*How best to measure program goal? *What are student requirements?</i>
Center for Innovative Teaching & Research (CITR)—Dr John Wegner	LC mentor service; integrated assignments; facilitates instructor training/certification	
Learning Community <b>FACULTY</b>	Attend CITR training; assess SLOs	<i>What do I have to do above and beyond my normal coursework?</i>
—Faculty Advisory Committee	Oversee freshman seminar content and development; review LC proposals	
—College Advisors	Advise new students regarding LC options	<i>What is the advisor's role in the LC?</i>
Student Affairs & Enrollment Management (SAEM) —New Student Orientation		<i>* What are co-curricular activities conducive to learning? * What's different about LC students?</i>
Learning Community <b>STUDENTS</b>		<i>WIIFM? (What's in it for me?)</i>
Learning Community <b>MENTORS</b>	Embedded in freshman seminar (LC anchor course ); assists with program outcomes	<i>How best to encourage self-advocacy and help students develop interdependency?</i>
Admissions	Advertises LC program and options	<i>What are the LC admissions standards?</i>
Registrar		<i>Are there Banner notations for LC's?</i>
Residence Life		<i>Who are LC students and where will they be housed? Move in day or early arrival? Does meal plan affect LC students?</i>

### **3. Rationale and Purpose, Goals, Objectives, and Desired Outcomes for our LCs—**

**Rational and Purpose:** Designed as a retention initiative, the overarching goal of our LCs is to assist new students with a successful transition to ASU while enhancing the first year experience. Across the nation, more than 50% of freshmen are academically unprepared for the challenges of college, arriving on campus dependent on someone to tell them what to study, when to study, and how to study. More than a third of ASU's new first-time students are placed in developmental education. This paradigm affects not just time to degree but overall withdrawal with ASU's one-year retention rates at 60%. Reasons for withdrawal run the gamut: lack of motivation to succeed, frustration with coursework, and an overwhelming inability to handle the personal and social complexities involved with time management and academic priorities. Because of these factors, we lose a majority of students between the first and second year. For every ten freshmen admitted, four do not return for their sophomore year. A key LC program objective is to stem this tide with not only improved retention rates but a significant increase in student persistence toward graduation.

Another LC program objective is to develop interdisciplinary course structures that increase faculty-to-student and student-to-student interaction. As a participating member of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), we get a glimpse of the student perspective and a sense of how our students feel about Angelo State. The 2011 NSSE results highlight below average scores in higher order reasoning, faculty interaction, student participation, and communication. Basically, our students are telling us that they don't talk to each other, they don't talk to their instructors, they don't get involved on campus, and they don't use critical thinking skills. By providing learning environments that include active learning pedagogy, integrated assignments, out-of-class experiences, and enriching discussion, our LCs will foster greater intellectual and social interaction.

Learning community faculty and academic support staff share a common purpose and collective responsibility to promote student learning, academic success, and persistence toward a degree.

The Freshman College (FC) was established in fall 2012 to improve students' undergraduate experience with particular emphasis on their first year. The FC mission is to assist new students with a successful transition to ASU and enhance the first year experience through academic support, peer mentoring, learning communities, and signature first year seminars. The FC is committed to helping students achieve academic success and persist to graduation. Objectives of the Freshman College are as follows:

- Design/develop learning experiences that engage first-year students and enhance faculty-student interaction.
- Facilitate academic achievement with development of study skills strategies, behaviors, and characteristics necessary for success.
- Conduct continuous program assessment that identifies and responds to student needs and academic support services during the first year.

**Goals & Objectives of the Freshman College:**

Goal 1: To enhance first-year student engagement at Angelo State.

*Objectives—Students will:*

- 1.1: Develop a connection with faculty members and peer leaders.
- 1.2: Explore and become involved on campus (e.g., student clubs or student organization membership).

Goal 2: To support ASU undergraduate learning goals.

*Objectives—Students will:*

- 2.1: Engage in self-advocacy through use of academic and student support services.
- 2.2: Work collaboratively with fellow students, staff, and faculty—in and out of the classroom.
- 2.3: Practice effective library research skills, applying critical analysis to sources.

Goal 3: To develop essential academic skills of first-year students.

*Objectives—Students will:*

- 3.1: Examine and develop study skills and academic success strategies (i.e., note-taking, critical thinking and problem solving, critical reading, test preparation and test-taking).
- 3.2: Identify and target academic self-management and monitoring strategies regarding time-management, goal setting, motivation, and concentration.
- 3.3: Explore their strengths and learning styles and relate them to college tasks and courses.

**Draft Mission Statement:**

*The mission of the Freshman College Learning Community Program is to cultivate a learner-centered environment and advance collective knowledge through collaborative work, while supporting the first-year transition to college and advocating the growth of individual student strengths in critical thinking, communication, information literacy, and community engagement/social responsibility. Learning Communities facilitate holistic student growth through integrated courses, active learning, and intentional out-of-class activities that foster enduring connections among students, faculty, and staff.*

**Learning Community Tenets—**

In “Learning Communities in Classrooms: A Reconceptualization of Educational Practice,” Bielaczyc and Allan offer four must-have characteristics for successful learning communities:

- 1) Diversity of expertise among its members, who are valued for their contributions and given support to develop
- 2) A shared objective of continually advancing the collective knowledge and skills
- 3) An emphasis on “learning how to learn” (meta-cognitive skills)
- 4) Mechanisms for sharing what is learned. If a learning community is presented with a problem, then the learning community can bring its collective knowledge to bear on the problem. It is not necessary that each member assimilate everything that the community knows, but each should know who within the community has relevant expertise to address any problem. This is a radical departure from the traditional view of schooling, with its emphasis on individual knowledge and performance, and the expectation that students will acquire the same body of knowledge at the same time.

**Sample Desired Learning Outcomes—**

*Students will:*

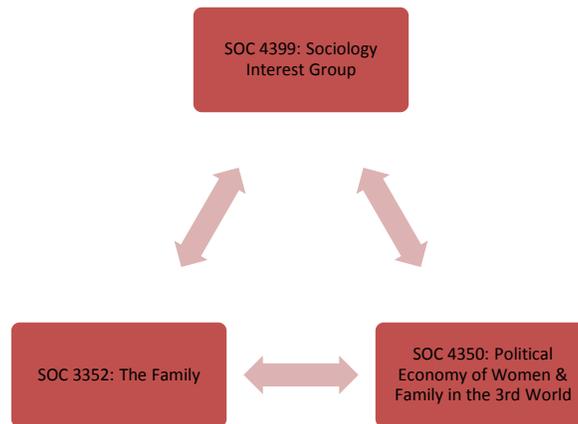
- ❖ Develop personal support network of peers
- ❖ Identify and demonstrate awareness of available academic support services at ASU
- ❖ Participate in curricular and co-curricular activities/events with peers
- ❖ Develop stock study skills strategies (note-taking, critical reading, test prep, etc.)
- ❖ Transfer study skills strategies to courses outside the learning community
- ❖ Interact with faculty from across disciplines
- ❖ Apply effective time management skills to personal and academic life
- ❖ Have an appreciation for diversity in people and experiences
- ❖ Develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning
- ❖ Accept civic responsibility as a way of life
- ❖ Have confidence in their academic abilities
- ❖ Demonstrate increased professional skills and identify career paths

### 3. What LC Model is Most Suitable for Implementation?

- ❖ **Freshman Interest Group Work (FIGs)**—includes at least one course, discussion group, and course material designed to integrate students' learning, intellectual connection, and community-building with the idea that these students will see each other on a scheduled basis to share learning and social experiences. A cohort of freshmen co-register for topically related courses. Faculty co-planning is not a component of this model, although faculty may participate in FIG student orientation. FIGs meet regularly with an undergraduate peer mentor who is connected to the LC group to improve vocational skill development and enriched social life. FIGs also participate in social events as a group (see Model 1: Freshman Interest Group).

#### Model 1: Freshman Interest Group

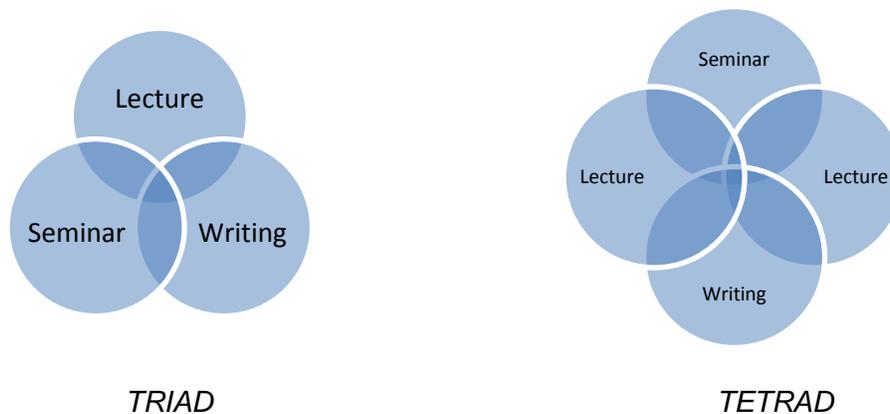
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- ❖ A more extensive formation of FIGs is Texas A&M University's (Corpus Christi) Triad/Tetrad approach which consists of enrollment in a First Year Seminar (FYS) for two or more semesters. All freshmen enrolled in 12 or more hours are required to take at least two semesters of the First Year Seminar as part of a Triad or Tetrad (Model 2). All of the Triads or Tetrads include a First Year Seminar and a First Year Writing course. These classes are small—25 students or less. The Triad includes one large lecture class (50 students or more) and Tetrads include two large lecture classes. The Triad/Tetrad classes are linked to help students co-enroll as a package deal. An interesting element of the Triad/Tetrad approach is the addition of graduate assistants who attend the Triad/Tetrad classes, acting as peer mentors who help the students explore the interconnection between/among the courses and develop their ability to learn through collaborative study and discussion.

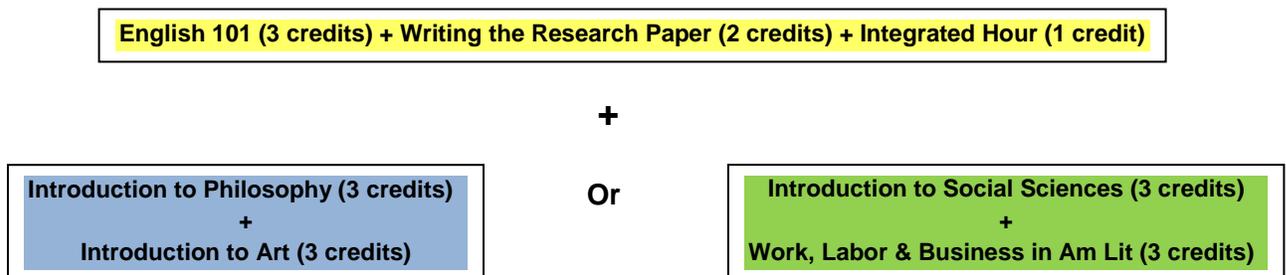
#### Model 2: First Year Seminar Triad and Tetrad

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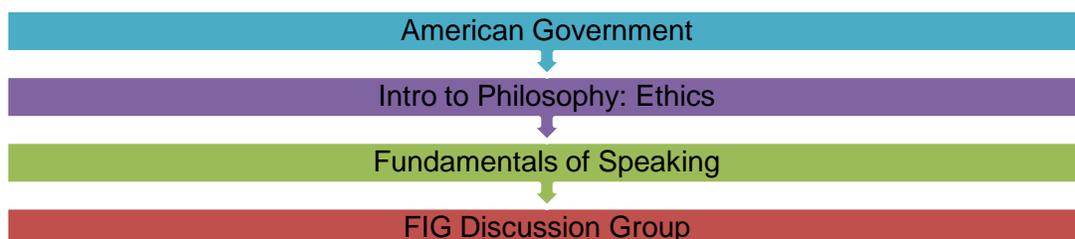
- **Course Clustering (Linked or Paired Courses)**—two courses linked by theme or topic that a cohort of students enroll in together. Often a writing or speech course is linked to a lecture-centered course, or a mathematics course is linked to a science course. The goal is to design a formative, integrative academic experience. Generally, faculty work to coordinate syllabi and assignments but teach classes separately. Faculty also facilitate peer teaching and learning by arranging classrooms for student interaction. Institutional research indicates course clustering encourages students to study more, make friends more easily, form study groups, work closely with faculty, and connect ideas across campus (see Model 3: Linked Course Model).

### Model 3: Linked Course Model



- ❖ **Living Learning Community** — residential component is key factor and based on shared intellectual experiences and balanced by social interaction outside of class, as well as strong partnership between student and academic affairs. Students with common interest enroll in at least one class together and live in the same residential hall. Students are expected to study in groups within the residence—the idea being that these students are more likely to be actively involved in the course than if they simply attended class. Programming aspects include connection to FYE; link between Residential Advisor and first-year course; introduction to learning community at Orientation; free access to tutors, peer advisors, and student mentors; and support of experiential activities as well as co-curricular events such as the Common Read.
- ❖ **Team Teaching (also called Coordinated Study or Integrated Learning)**—interdisciplinary faculty structure two to four courses so they are arranged together with common themes, materials, and content and fully team-teach as an integrated program. Model is based on shared activities and experiential learning. First-year course is often integrated with English, math, or other core curriculum, offering a type of Structured Learning Assistance (SLA) where students learn study skills strategies in the first-year course and practice applying these strategies in the arranged course (see Model 4 as example of integrated learning community). Variations of integrated learning include 1) a cohort of students enrolled in 12-credit cluster and traveling from class to class as self-contained group or 2) students co-enrolled in structured courses with other students in the same courses who are not co-enrolled.

### Model 4: Pre-law/Integrated Learning LC Example



#### **4. Cohort Size and Composition—**

Best practices suggest the formation or development of learning communities remain open to all interested students. Self-selection and open enrollment helps to create a more heterogeneous mix of students within the course grouping. Additionally, this practice reflects a commitment to ASU's Institutional Learning Goal #5: Cultural Identity: Gaining insight into the ways cultural identities and experiences shape individual perspectives of the world.

Learning community participation, however, can and should be established for a specific class, most often freshmen who are compelled to register at New Student Orientation. Best practices also dictate that learning community enrollment not be optional, because students don't do optional. Offering a selection of theme-based learning communities as well as major-specific, college-specific, or program-specific learning communities from which to choose, provides fixed options. Residential or living-learning communities must include an academic course element.

NOTE: Approximately 80% of our first-year cohort fit the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) definition of at-risk students—

*At-Risk includes students who received a Pell grant, graduated with a GED, were 20 years or older when they first entered college, started as a part-time student taking less than 12 hours, or had an SAT/ACT score less than the national average.*

National data on first-year students points to an overwhelming number being underprepared for the rigors of college. We know what underprepared students typically maintained a C average in high school and received a total of 750 to 800 on the SAT or 15 to 18 on the ACT. They often lack the necessary study skills, direction, and maturity it takes to get a college degree. Many struggle with time management, goal setting, and academic priorities. Many first-time students enter college dependent on someone to tell them what to study, when to study, and how to study. Furthermore, living away from home for the first time on a campus filled with strangers can be intimidating, making it difficult to navigate the system or ask for help. Add to this mix that half of ASU's freshmen are first-generation students, who may lack the personal support network that is helpful to succeed in the post-secondary environment.

Aside from linked courses or course groupings, we have all of the LC program elements in place for Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs); this includes strategically-defined cohort (freshman with <18 credit hours), freshman seminar as anchor course, peer mentor, and discussion group. Freshman seminars are currently capped at 20 students with one peer mentor. Increased seminar enrollment would constitute additional peer mentors (one mentor for every 20 students). We are, however, concerned with issues arising from mandatory LC placement and large first-year enrollment—approximately 1500 students. Of paramount concern is the recruitment of faculty to teach the freshman seminar.

#### **5. Characteristics & LC Design Parameters—**

Our learning community characteristics target a well-defined cohort of students who we feel are most likely to benefit from this initiative: freshmen with <18 credit hours.\* Key players are the instructors, students, and peer mentors with the latter embedded in the anchor classroom (freshman seminar), facilitating weekly discussion groups while promoting student engagement. Fall 2013 we will pilot 14 academic learning communities — eight of these associated with various disciplines (agriculture, history, psychology, etc.) and six connected to theme-based freshman seminars such as sports and literature, freshmen health/well being, and U.S. history on film. Two theme-based seminars will be linked or paired with an additional course.

\* With regard to registration, we cannot strictly limit the LC enrollment to this strategically-defined cohort of students.

The learning community instructors will participate in collaborative and cooperate workshops through the Center for Innovative Teaching and Research (CITR) to develop integrative and interdisciplinary assignments and interdisciplinary learning. The First Year Experience office will act as the bridge between the two divisions and inclusion of co-curricular activities within the learning community. The average faculty/peer mentor/student ratio is 1:1:20.

Intended program outcomes are twofold:

- 1) Cultivated collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs and
- 2) Improved student/student engagement and faculty/student interaction.

Both outcomes complement our institution's commitment to social responsibility and community engagement while exploring ASU's core values: intellectual inquiry, engagement, collegiality, participation, and service.

By fall 2014 when the freshman seminar is part of the core curriculum, first-year students will have four semesters to complete. CITR instructor training and certification will be mandatory for all freshman seminar, hence learning community, instructors. While the Freshman College dean is responsible for recruiting seminar instructors, faculty are welcome to submit proposals to design/develop additional learning communities and paired courses provided there is a freshman seminar as the anchor course. The Freshman College Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC) will be responsible for reviewing LC proposals to ensure adherence to design parameters (see below) that serve as review criteria. Concrete proposals will demonstrate consideration of learning community parameters and thoughtful application of interdisciplinary efforts. Regular proposal review will ensure projected implementation to be scheduled for the following long term. FAC may request additional materials or clarifying information. Once a proposal has been approved and accepted, represented faculty must attend CITR training and certification. FYE peer mentors will be assigned to all new learning communities.

### LC Design Parameters:

- **Academic Component** — LC must have an academic component. At least two courses are recommended in the cluster with one course being the freshman seminar and/or anchor. The seminar instructor is identified as the lead or main connection in the learning community.
- **Eligible Students** — LC must have an identifiable eligible population defined specifically by major or generally as open to all colleges/programs/majors.
- **Peer Mentor**—each LC must have peer mentor embedded in the freshman seminar/anchor. Peer mentor offers regularly schedule mentor sessions that are structured to emphasize time management, study strategies, and campus resources as well as student engagement and faculty interaction.
- **Size** — LC is groups of 20 to 30 students. If an LC is envisioned to be larger, it may be possible to create two or more sections of the interest group or add additional peer mentors. The enrollment capacity of the linked courses also has an impact on the LC design.
- **Faculty Involvement** — LC instructors are involved, active participants, planning/facilitating as a team. Program success is dependent upon dedicated faculty involvement in two areas:
  - Interact with the students in class as well as plan and execute out-of-class events and activities. While LC instructors rely on peer mentors to engage students outside of class, they are expected to participate in those out-of-class efforts connected to their assignments.

- Develop integrative and interdisciplinary assignments, which provide opportunities for both students and faculty to engage, interact, and communicate. Connectivity happens through out-of-class events, common assignments, and syllabus integration.
- **Events & Activities** — the LC is expected to provide opportunities for student engagement and faculty interaction. Multiple events/activities should balance curricular and co-curricular activities related to LC themes or interest groups and need to be planned well in advance. The Freshman College will consider a per-student budget for events and activities. Highly encouraged events and activities are as follows:
  - Common Read activities
  - Community Engagement/Social Responsibility components
  - Faculty interaction elements
  - Student engagement events
  - Time management/goal setting elements
  - Critical Thinking components
- **Recruitment Plan** — The Freshman College dean is and will continue to aggressively recruit for LCs—students, faculty, and sponsors. Details of how sponsors or respective colleges/schools/programs intend to augment, complement, and collaboratively support the efforts of the learning communities, especially during New Student Orientation are required.
- **Stipulations**—All LCs will follow programming stipulations:
  - There will be no residential requirement that excludes freshman living off campus.
  - NFT students with >16 credit hours are considered transfer students and therefore will not be considered for a LC.
  - Transfer students are not required to enroll in LCs.
  - If a student drops one of the linked/paired courses in the learning community/freshman interest group, the student will have to drop both linked/paired courses.
  - FYE will hire, place, and supervise all peer mentors.
  - CITR training and certification required for all LC teaching teams.

*Future Considerations:* By Fall 2014 the Freshman Seminar (GS 1381) will be a 3-credit hour, 16-week course and part of the core. Seminars will be theme-based with four essential components (Critical Thinking, Communication, Information Literacy, and Community Engagement/Social Responsibility). Both divisions will share responsibility to ensure all NFT students register for a freshman seminar and, in essence, a learning community/freshman interest group. FYE in partnership with Student Affairs & Enrollment Management will collaborate on the design and development of a parent program that includes general learning community information and the benefits of participating, as well as tips on how to help first-year students select a specific learning community/interest. Special consideration should be given to freshmen pre-registration and advisory help in selecting a seminar of interest. Students will learn of their learning community assignment when they receive their fall schedule of classes during Orientation. Additional programming elements to consider:

- Full-year (2 long semesters) learning community effort—what do these look like and how do they work?
- LC-specific orientation includes sufficient time devoted to an introduction to learning communities or Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) and associated freshman seminars. Peer-led “SI” session facilitated by peer mentors to daily planners, academic support, the common read, and transition discussion
- All NFT students must register for a learning community
- No additional workload for LC faculty who will run their classes as normal

*Future Considerations (Cont'd):*

- Freshman College per student budget allowing for events and activities
- Sophomore/second year learning communities
- Summer Bridge program maintaining its own LC or FIG
- Learning community orientation
- Learning community application and placement process—design flowchart
- Should paired course be only core course or top 10 (see Table 2)

**Table 2. Top 10 Most Popular Freshman Courses by Enrollment**

Course	COURSE TITLE	N=
HIST 1301	U S History to 1865	650
ENG 1301	English Composition	580
COMM 2301	Public Speaking	493
POLS 2301	Fed & State Govt	395
BCIS 1305	Business Computer Applications	279
PSY 2301	Gen Psychology	257
USTD 1201	Critical Thinking	245
BIO 1410	Human Biology	243
ART 1301	Introduction to Art	189
MUS 1341	Introduction to Music	180

**6. Evaluation and Assessment Plan—**

Establish assessment criteria prior to initiating the learning community program, using formative and summative evaluation types to improve future practice and continued program improvement. Also consider use of the following:

- Minimal use of grade point average (controlling for entering ability levels), retention, satisfaction and general education outcomes, and institute a longitudinal study, tracking participants throughout their college careers
- Qualitative and quantitative methodologies at the student level (learning, satisfaction, engagement, persistence/retention, time to degree, and involvement in campus and community activities)
- Assessment of pedagogical approaches as well as faculty satisfaction, learning, and other professional development factors.

**Key planning principles:**

- ❖ *What gets measured gets done.*
- ❖ *Measurement without feedback is just data...feedback without measurement is just opinion.*
- ❖ *If you can't measure it, it doesn't exist*

ASU academic departments follow six stages to develop and evaluate learning goals for their programs and majors. Courses therefore selected for the learning community should already have an assessment plan in place. To design a sustainable learning community assessment plan, course syllabi might include some of the following:

- Interactive assignments
- Out-of-class activities/events
- Study sessions/meetings with mentors
- ePortfolios

A review of the learning community objectives will confirm alignment with the curriculum assessment process and learning outcomes at the course level; however, assessment of an academic support program follows a different route, beginning with answers to fundamental program questions.

**LC Program Assessment Questions:**

- 1) How are your stated goals/objectives appropriate to the University mission, program mission, and students?
- 2) What evidence do you have that students are learning/benefiting from the program?
- 3) In what ways do you analyze and use evidence of student learning and your program?
- 4) How do you ensure shared responsibility for student learning and for assessment of student learning?
- 5) In what ways do you inform the public and stakeholders of your program successes and what students are learning?

Below is a list of measures for a learning community program evaluation:

- Authentic assessment of student learning (matches learning goals & desired outcomes)
  - Source of documentation regarding developing skills
  - Aids development of instruction/teaching pedagogy
- IDEA student ratings of instruction
- First Year Student Survey—specific questions related to learning communities
- Grade Check (weekly assessment, midterm check, final exam comparison, etc.)
- Focus Group (student)
- Faculty Survey (Program, Mentor, Faculty Training)
- Mentor Survey (Program, Mentor Training)
- Mentor evaluation (OTJ, self-assessment, observations, activity/event review)

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