

# LIU BROOKLYN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

## A FIVE-YEAR PLAN OF DEVELOPMENT

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LIU Brooklyn serves a student population whose academic preparedness (average combined SAT score is 890) and economic disadvantage (54% qualify for low income assistance) place them at high risk of failure to complete college. According to data compiled by LIU's Office of Institutional Research in 2012, approximately 20% of students who entered the University in 2003, 2004, or 2005 graduated within six years,

while 48% had neither graduated nor were attending college elsewhere. LIU's mission historically has been to provide excellence and access to students from diverse ethnic, national, and economic backgrounds. At a time when access to higher education is in jeopardy for low income and academically less well prepared students, LIU has stayed true to this mission, augmenting policies as needed to provide financial, academic, and interpersonal support.

To that end, LIU Brooklyn is developing a broad, integrated approach to student engagement and persistence connected to overall student learning and student life. Increased coordination between faculty and the offices of Admissions, Student Development and Retention, Academic Support Services, and Student Life & Leadership Development has helped reinforce genuine learning in and out of the classroom. Now entering its third year as a faculty-driven initiative, LIU Brooklyn Learning Communities (LIUBLC) is modeled on existing, highly successful programs like HEOP and Honors that create a strong sense of community among students and demonstrate impressive completion rates. LIUBLC is also helping to implement high impact educational practices including linked courses, integrative learning, collaborative assignments, and common intellectual experiences across the core curriculum (Kuh 2008). In a concerted effort to improve teaching and learning at the Brooklyn campus and to increase student

persistence and completion rates, the following five-year plan—which builds on two previous plans submitted in 2012-13 and a Title III grant application submitted on June 3, 2013—lays out a trajectory for LIUBLC’s development that will:

- 1) Create a Division of Experimental Learning, including a Center for the Public Humanities and Social Sciences (CPHSS)<sup>1</sup>
- 2) Continue to build the intellectual structures and capacity of the first-year learning community program
- 3) Scale up to the sophomore year through supplemental instruction in gateway science courses and linked core requirements
- 4) Implement at least one residential learning community, and
- 5) Integrate digital portfolios into teaching, learning, assessment, and career readiness.

## **LIU BROOKLYN LEARNING COMMUNITY HISTORY**

Starting in 2008, a modest, learning community program called Academic Community Exploration (ACE), sponsored by the Office of Student Development and Retention (OSDR), showed promising results. Students who participated in ACE (about 18 each year from fall 2008-spring 2011) demonstrated improvements in fall-to-spring retention rates of 72% in 2008-2009 and 89% in 2009-2010. Encouraged by these results and concerned about persistently low retention and completion rates, Brooklyn faculty—authorized by the Faculty Senate and supported by a generous \$25,000 planning grant from the Board of Trustees—joined forces with First Year Program staff to introduce LIU Brooklyn Learning Communities (LIUBLC). Launched in Fall 2011, LIUBLC served 128 students who participated in seven learning communities taught by 24 faculty members from across the disciplines. In AY 2012-13, the number of students expanded to 165. The fall-to-spring retention rate for 128 LIUBLC students in 2011-12 was 90.63%; the fall-to-fall retention rate for 2011-2012 was 62.50%; and the fall-to-spring rate for 165 students entering in fall 2012 was 78.78%. While these figures are promising and represent a substantial improvement over retention rates for non-LC students, a central objective over the next five years is to increase persistence and completion rates substantially by improving, scaling up, and expanding the LIUBLC program.

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<sup>1</sup> The title for this initiative is subject to change; one alternative might be Center for Experimental Learning.

To date, the program has galvanized a collective effort across the campus, linked themed courses in English, Philosophy, Sociology, History, and Psychology, and begun to improve persistence rates. Past and current themes include Pathways to Freedom, a study of African American history in Brooklyn culminating in oral history interviews of local civil rights activists (Composition and History); the Startups, an introduction to entrepreneurialism (Composition, Business, and Marketing); the EcoProject, a consideration of urban sustainability (Composition and Anthropology); The Artful Eye: Ways of Seeing, an investigation of the role of art in our lives (Composition, Art History, and Philosophy); and The World of Childhood, an examination of conceptions of the child in literature and psychology (Composition and Psychology). Learning communities are enriched through field trips, joint sessions, and community partnerships.

For example, Pathways to Freedom is funded in part by a FIPSE grant awarded to the Brooklyn Historical Society, which brings first-year-college students from three nearby colleges into the archives to conduct primary research. Pathways is also supported by an NEH Digital Humanities Startup Grant for the



Pathways fieldtrip to Weeksville Heritage Center

creation of a mobile application mapping the oral histories in time and space using GIS, crowdsourcing, and other digital technologies. In fall 2013, the EcoProject will partner with the Brooklyn Collection of the Brooklyn Public Library to study its archive on the oyster industry. These learning community partnerships with local institutions and distinct research goals suggest a model for further development of LC curricula. Starting in Fall 2014, the program will expand to include themes in health science and science anchored in Orientation Seminar, a required one-credit course for all LIU Brooklyn students.

## **FIVE-YEAR DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

### The Division of Experimental Learning

In 1932, philosopher and educator Alexander Meikeljohn described the central aim of the experimental college he founded at University of Wisconsin-Madison as achieving a “unity of understanding as against the unrelatedness of scattered bits of knowledge” (xvii). Anticipating

the advent of learning communities in U.S. higher education in the 1980s, Meikeljohn concludes his book by proposing to UW-Madison the creation of several smaller colleges for lower division students that would not only create a unified, socially and intellectually integrated curriculum for students but also provide opportunities for teachers to work together in small groups giving “every member ... in some measure, intellectual as well as personal acquaintance with his colleagues” (250). He describes what this approach to education would mean as follows:

Each has known what teaching the others were doing and has shared in the planning and doing of it. The teacher of literature has discussed with the teacher of science how science shall be taught, what books shall be read, what talks shall be given. He has attended the lectures of his colleagues, and has discussed them with his students ... The effect of this has been to make of the teaching program not a collection of separate activities, but a concerted attempt at definite and unified action. And its effect upon the teacher has been to demand of him that he be not merely a specialized scholar, attending to his own field without regard to what is ongoing on in any other, but a liberally-minded man who is concerned with the making and administering of the total education which the students are receiving. (250-251)

UW-Madison’s forward-looking experimental college addressed precisely the same issues that gave rise to a variety of types of college learning communities in the 1980s. Since then, the movement has gained wide recognition for improving student learning through the creation of more unified, coherent academic programs.



**Learning community student taking notes**

At LIU Brooklyn, the learning community initiative has had positive results. However, no single response can solve the complex set of problems of academic unpreparedness, financial stress, and curricular disunity that the initiative is intended to ameliorate. For example, academic success in gateway

science courses is a key to persistence for the high percentage of students who enter LIU Brooklyn seeking a degree in Pharmacy, Nursing, or Health Science. But the required science courses have a specific curriculum that makes incorporation into a learning community difficult. The Division of Experimental Learning would provide a locus for other forms of intervention such as Supplemental Instruction for gateway science courses with peer tutors, academic coaches

(graduate students) and faculty mentors. In the Humanities and Social Sciences, which do lend themselves to learning community collaboration, the Division of Experimental Learning might sponsor a Center for the Public Humanities and Social Sciences, a vision of the campus as a learning community writ large that has drawn a great deal of interest from both faculty and administrators. The importance of such an endeavor was recently affirmed by the June 2013 report issued by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences entitled, “The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation.”

#### Years 1-5: Building First-Year Learning Communities

To double the number of students LIUBLC serves by fall 2018 will require a commensurate increase in the number of prepared, engaged faculty who teach in learning communities. Faculty engagement and expert teaching skills are crucial components of successful learning communities. But several factors discourage such engagement. First, faculty development opportunities at LIU Brooklyn tend to be departmentally based and occasional rather than systematic, coherent efforts to deepen and connect teaching approaches and methods across disciplines. Second, faculty at LIU Brooklyn, like their counterparts elsewhere, have been shaped by disciplinary perspectives that tend to foster a “silo” approach to education that discourages interdisciplinary collaborations. And third, even though faculty typically know about and support the idea of learning communities, they may not be familiar with key pedagogical and curricular best practices such as how to design and assess integrative learning assignments. The LIU Brooklyn faculty is not alone in this regard. Washington Center Co-Directors Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich (2008) state:

Fewer faculty than we expected are knowledgeable about how people learn best and what this suggests for teaching practice. But faculty can hardly be faulted for the problems inherent in a system where not enough value is assigned to the intellectual work of teaching and where too many enrichment programs are underfunded.

In order to teach in a learning community cohort, faculty must be able to apply the principles of integrative learning, methods for increasing student engagement, and approaches to collaborating with colleagues across the disciplines.

Designing and implementing integrative assignments is “... foundational to learning-community work” (Lardner and Malnarich 2008). Among the most significant benefits of learning communities is the impact of integrative assignments on student learning across the

disciplines and the application of classroom knowledge and skills across the curriculum and to “real world” issues and experiences. Such work becomes increasingly important in light of the degree to which 21<sup>st</sup> century students are experiencing not only a “fragmentation of knowledge” but also a “knowledge explosion in the world around [them]” (Schneider, qtd. in Huber, Hutchings et al. 2007).

Understanding the larger problem of fragmentation of knowledge helps explain the difficulty students have in the transfer of knowledge and skills across core courses and from the core curriculum to the major. LIUBLC’s focus on integrative learning aligns it to current pedagogical theory aimed at helping undergraduate students develop academic knowledge and skills by



**Political Science and Speech professors conferring**

connecting ideas and experiences within and across the disciplines and by synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus. This endeavor requires “... finding strategic points of connection, threading attention to integrative learning throughout (and between) an institution's various programs, and encouraging and scaffolding students' own efforts to connect the parts” (Huber, Hutchings, et al. 2007). They must also rethink the tension between breadth and depth in core survey courses. Given the emphasis in the literature on learning communities on depth of learning, broad survey courses do not always lend themselves to LIUBLC goals. As Bielaczyc and Collins (1999) point out,

In order for students to develop expertise, they must develop an in-depth understanding about the topics that they investigate. Rich subject matter is important. The topics are not randomly chosen, but rather the depth centers on key principles or ideas in a domain that are generative for understanding a broad array of topics. There is also a circular growth of knowledge, wherein discussion within the community about what individuals have learned leads individuals to seek out further knowledge that they then share with the community. Thus, there is an interplay between the growth of collective knowledge and of individual knowledge, with each supporting the other.

For this sort of learning to take place, however, faculty must have opportunities to experiment with new approaches to teaching core courses, such as “intentional reading” strategies (see, e.g.,

Mokhtari and Reichard 2002) and experiential learning, and the campus as a whole must be involved in a conversation about how best to link integrative learning and in-depth understanding of subject matter across disciplines and from first year programs and gateway courses into the major all the way through capstone seminars. As Huber, Hutchings et al. (2007) point out,

... [S]erious commitment to integrative learning for students requires something that goes beyond what is usually meant by faculty development, and involves efforts to create a campus culture where a larger part of the academic community (faculty, staff, and students) are engaged in common integrative work.

As Lardner and Malnarich (2008) note, “Learning-community work done well thus requires a skillful balancing of two moves: one structural, the other pedagogical and cross-disciplinary. When a campus gets it right, enriched integrative learning is the result.” Even when retention rates improve, Lardner and Malnarich argue, if the program lacks a strong intellectual focus, “the substantive, multi-faceted, and deep learning that learning communities can engender too often remains under developed.” The LIUBLC program aims to engage students in “substantive, multi-faceted, and deep learning” *in order to improve* their chances of academic success and to apply their knowledge and skills to personal, workplace, and civic experience. In other words, we see the objective of increased persistence rates *as a welcome consequence* of a deeper transformation of teaching and learning emphasizing the development of habits of mind as well as the acquisition of new skills and knowledge.



LIU team at the Washington Center's National Summer Institute on Learning Communities, Summer 2012

Learning communities are ideally suited to support learning through more sharply focused, theme-based curricula that help students make connections across disciplines and to everyday life through integrative assignments. Such learning is also fostered through closer relationships among students and faculty who engage in activities outside the classroom such as field trips and projects that connect

classroom learning to extracurricular experience and problems. While LIUBLC has data to demonstrate that LC students have begun to attain these higher-order skills and to report higher levels of engagement in the campus community, the faculty must articulate for itself the theories, methods, and pedagogies that enable such learning to take place, and they must do so in response

to specific local conditions at LIU Brooklyn. To increase the effectiveness of integrative learning and “scaffold students own efforts to connect the parts” (Huber, Hutchings, et al. 2007) will require a campus-wide dialogue among faculty, chairs, deans, and staff across disciplines, programs. Thus the second key component of this five-year development plan is two-pronged: a) to increase the capacity for integrative, collaborative teaching across the campus and the awareness of these important trends in higher education among chairs, division coordinators, and deans in order to foster a campus culture committed to “common integrative work”; and b) to double the number of LC students participating in first-year learning communities from 200 to 400 and a corresponding number of the faculty who teach them across disciplines and schools who can and will experiment with new pedagogical approaches and teaching methods in order to enhance educational effectiveness.

#### Years 2-5: Scaling up to the Sophomore Year

Based on the effectiveness of the LIUBLIC program in the first year, we plan to scale up to the sophomore year by Fall 2014 in order to address the problem of the “sophomore cliff.” Two major areas of concern in the sophomore year at LIU Brooklyn are 1) the difficulty of gateway courses for science and pre-professional students and 2) intertwining academic, financial, and social problems that often intensify for sophomores across the disciplines. Given existing institutional and curricular structures at LIU Brooklyn, it is unlikely that gateway science courses will be incorporated into learning communities in the near future. In order to provide science students in these gateway courses with the benefits of learning communities—both academically and socially—we propose to pilot a program of Supplemental Instruction (SI) for 4 courses each semester in Chemistry and Biology.

Peer Leaders selected from LIU students who have recently completed the targeted course and earned a B+ grade or higher will work collaboratively with faculty to develop materials to support student learning in the class during supplemental instruction sessions. The Peer Leaders will be a critical part of Project Student Achievement and Success in the Sciences (SASS), and their development will be two-fold: first, a consultant will be hired to assist Science Division faculty who are teaching the previously identified gateway courses; second, the consultant will work with Project SASS Co-Directors and the Project Coordinator to develop curricula in science courses that integrate e-portfolios and supplemental instruction. To that end, the Project Coordinator, participating faculty, and Peer Leaders will meet prior to the beginning

of the semester to outline course objectives and learning outcomes, develop course materials, and define learning session objectives. As a crucial part of the learning community, Peer Leaders will lead two one-hour sessions a week with the students and will be expected to attend class lectures and at least one lab a month. The purpose of these required sessions is to strengthen learning in an interactive environment in which Peer Leader(s) can respond to immediate needs by strategically tailoring sessions to ensure student engagement in and comprehension of course material. Students will be expected to post their interactions with the Peer Leaders in their individual course e-portfolios (Peer Leaders will also record attendance for analysis after submission of final grades). During the semester, science professors and Peer Leaders will meet every two weeks to discuss the students' progress and any concerns.



**Brooklyn Historical Society staff addressing LIU students**

Each student participating in SASS will be assigned a Student Success Coach—a graduate student at LIU Brooklyn—who will promote retention, academic and career education, and personal growth; moreover, the coach will work with students on time management, note taking, general reading, and study skills and provide information on and refer students to additional campus resources.

Finally, the coach will keep a record of student attendance and log of student progress based on informal conversations with professors and Peer Leaders. Supplemental Instruction in SASS will also serve as a model for the development of similar forms of peer-assisted learning across the curriculum (see, e.g., Martin and Burmeister 1996; Tinto 2003; Kuh 2007)

Along with science students struggling in gateway courses, sophomores in general encounter a unique set of challenges as they come to terms with their academic performance as freshmen and the financial pressures of college, issues that are compounded for those who may also feel less socially connected to the campus. Moreover, students in pre-professional health programs are often motivated by extrinsic reasons that fail to match their true interests and area-specific aptitudes. In many cases, this incongruence leads to poor performance and inability to advance toward a chosen degree. Instead of leaving LIU and in some cases college altogether, students attached to an interdisciplinary learning community can discover alternative fields of study and careers as well as ways of thinking about themselves. Through working closely with

professors and staff and participating in activities on and off campus, students develop tangible skills and the know-how to apply those skills to careers. If they do change their majors, the process can be positively spun as an exciting new venture in their lives rather than fraught with anxiety and disappointment because their previous major essentially said “no” to them.

In sum, despite the fact that students continue to leave the institution after the first and second year, data collected since 2008 suggests that they are somewhat more likely to remain at LIU Brooklyn if they are in a learning community. While the gains so far have been modest, they indicate that expanding the LIUBLC program to the second year would engage students more fully in the life of the campus while providing them with stronger academic support and better faculty and staff advisement. We see this endeavor as critical to improving academic success and completion rates and to facilitating students’ transition from core courses to the major.

The first step for increasing LIUBLC’s effectiveness in the sophomore year will be to launch SASS in 2014. That same year, a series of dialogues to assess the impact of various strategies of scaling up learning communities to the second year will be held with all stakeholders. Sophomore LCs might include a campus-wide service learning component linked to first year learning communities or other academic programs; a common read across several disciplines; and/or linked courses such as Sophomore Literature and Core Seminar, Psychology, Sociology, or Philosophy. The objective for the sophomore year is therefore multi-pronged—Supplemental Instruction in Project SASS, service learning, a sophomore read, and linked courses—moving from a year of exploratory discussions year one of the plan to partial implementation in the second year and full implementation and assessment by the third.

#### Years 2-5: Implementing a Residential Learning Community

Although LIU Brooklyn is primarily a commuter campus, 765 undergraduate students currently live in residence halls. According to Gary R. Pike (1997), “Students in residential learning communities have ... higher levels of academic achievement, cognitive development, and persistence than do students in traditional residence halls” (5). While some populations such as athletes in the LIU Brooklyn dormitories form natural communities, others who are not affiliated with an already existing community on



LIUBLC celebration of student learning in fall 2012

campus report feeling isolated, homesick, or otherwise uncomfortable in their new surroundings. Eventually, the undergraduate residence halls could support two to three learning communities, probably with a health science theme, with the first one to be piloted in Fall 2014. In addition to academic support, students in a residential learning community will benefit by connecting socially with peers who not only live together in the dorms but also study together in the classroom. Moreover, linking LIUBLC to Residential Life will help promote a campus culture of engaged, integrative learning. The fifth objective for LIUBLC is thus to build on academic support already offered by the athletics program to add one LC Residential Life cohort by the second year of the plan, and then to assess its effectiveness to determine the basis for further growth in this area.

#### Years 2-5 Integrating Digital Portfolios

EPortfolios—electronic portfolios—both support and document a student’s development from freshman to senior year and beyond. By making learning visible, ePortfolios provide a window for faculty into the student’s learning while enabling students to make connections between courses across disciplines, course work and co-curricular activities, and their college experience and their lives beyond the academy. More critically, students use them to reflect on that work. As one step toward increasing student persistence and pass rates, especially in gateway science courses, ePortfolios will be integrated into the Division of Experimental Learning, which will serve as a testing ground for faculty development and student engagement. EPortfolios will be introduced in 2015-16 to 500 first- and second-year students in these learning communities; 1,800 will be using them by 2018. Student engagement will be assessed via NSSE in years two and five of the grant with particular attention to scores in participating in learning communities, writing longer papers, and participating in a culminating academic experience.

Key elements of the digital portfolio initiative include faculty development in best practices of incorporating digital portfolios into teaching and learning, a mentor program in which students are trained to assist their peers in learning the technology, and the use of electronic media to develop more robust assessment practices at the course, program, and campus levels, especially of the core curriculum.