

New Mexico Highlands University

Freshman Experience Program Fall 2015

Guidelines for Preparing the Learning Community

Learning communities are founded on the belief that a more engaged learning environment is created when instructors work together to purposefully create an interdisciplinary and active learning environment. Such an environment helps students make connections, fosters meaningful learning, and encourages more purposeful interaction between students and teachers and between peers.

While the nature of the learning community can often result in exciting and unanticipated deviations from an instructor's intended direction, a well-thought-out plan is essential to the success of the community. Preparing to teach in a learning community requires advanced planning, organization, and attention to detail. Teaching in a learning community requires flexibility as well as focus on goals. The creation of a *Community Development Plan* is intended to encourage an ongoing collaborative approach to planning and development of the learning community. Please submit a copy of your plans to the Academic Enrichment Programs office.

Suggestions:

1. Develop a teaching team that will collaborate well together, and meet to discuss your learning community title, theme, description, and schedule. Note that everyone teaching in an LC should have availability to attend the LC faculty development events so we are able to present a unified program and common experience to our students (events scheduled throughout the prior spring and summer for LC development and throughout the implementation year for support).
2. Schedule and attend a Community Development Workshop together as a team. Working as a team alongside other teams will be helpful for generating ideas and planning the learning community. Contact Casey Applegate-Aguilar (caseyaguilar@nmhu.edu), Coordinator of Academic Enrichment Programs, to reserve your team's spot at a workshop.
3. Complete one *Community Development Plan* for the learning community. As part of the Community Development Plan, determine how involved personnel will collaborate. Keep in mind that "To be effective, learning communities require their [team members] to collaborate on both the *content and pedagogy* of the linked courses. They have to work together, as equal partners, to ensure that the linked courses provide a coherent shared experience" (Tinto, 2013).
4. Submit your plan to the Academic Enrichment Programs office.
5. Retain a copy of the plan for each team member.
6. Meet regularly during the implementation year to reflect on the experience and adapt plans as necessary.

The Community Development Plan

Learning community courses can be integrated on a variety of levels. Effective learning communities have a high level of integration. Below are six sections designed to foster such course integration.

Part I. Goals and Expectations: include description

In this section you are asked to consider your intentions for the courses involved in your planned learning community. You might choose to include individual statements from each team member or one that you prepare collectively. Activities completed during the Community Development Workshop should help you prepare this section. Discuss your individual results and answers with each other.

Consider these questions:

- What teaching methods do you regularly use?
- In what ways are your methods similar? Different?
- What do you want students to be able to do as consequence of particular lessons?
- What is most important for students to know as consequence of particular lessons?
- What are your expectations for behavior and how are they communicated to students?
- How do you expect students to participate?

Types of methods you might use

- Lecture
- Invited speakers
- Discussion
- Small groups
- Other group techniques (partners, teams)
- Questions & answer
- Case studies
- Simulation & games
- Panels
- Team teaching/peer teaching
- Demonstrations
- On-site observations/field study
- Laboratories

Part II. Syllabi & Course Outlines: include copy

This section asks you to create a syllabus and course outline for distribution to students. This syllabus should be different than a typical syllabus for this course, as a learning community focuses on a theme and interdisciplinary knowing. The LC can have a joint syllabus or each class can have a separate syllabus. Instructors should consider how policy in one class may affect student behavior in the other classes. The goal is that students view the LC courses as complimentary. A syllabus should include:

- Course names and numbers and Learning Community title
- LC description (for separate syllabi: learning community description and related course focus)
- Statement of goals and objectives for course that include reference to the LC
- Faculty names and contact information (including regular office hours and locations)
- Textbooks and materials and indication of those shared between classes

- Attendance (including LC events) & grading practices and policies
- Requirements and assignments, with indication of those that are shared between courses
- A weekly outline of topics and important dates and deadlines, including events

Consider these questions:

- In what ways are your policies similar? Is there any room for negotiation among you?
- What topics are covered in your courses and when? How can they be aligned?
- What do you require your students to submit?
- When are major assignments due and tests given?
- Do you accept late work or give make-ups? Is there a penalty?
- Do attendance and/or participation impact students' grades?
- How do you evaluate students? What are the components involved in your grading policy? Do you grade by letters, points, and percentages?
- Are grades weighted?
- Are there any joint projects you can create? When would these be due?

Part III. Content and Assignments: include description

In this section you are asked to specify the ways in which you will facilitate the connections students make between the courses in the learning community. Think about the key learning concepts and outcomes you have for each course, how these connect, and what your key learning concepts and outcomes can be for the LC as a whole. Another consideration for integration is assignments. Consider the following suggestions:

1. Some ways to integrate courses include joint assignments, group projects, combined class activities, and shared texts. Any type of assessment (diagnostic, formal, informal, formative, summative, etc.) can be integrated. Examples of integrated content, content presentation, and assessment include:
 - A text read in one course and discussed or responded to in writing in another
 - A report written for one course and presented orally in another
 - Reading, marking, outlining and summarizing a textbook chapter of one course in another
 - Use block of time if courses are back-to-back to do things you can't do in a smaller block – simulations, relevant movie, guest presentation, etc.
 - Small group projects carried between courses
 - Occasional participation of one instructor in the other classes (it is important for students to see you working as a team)
 - Test questions that ask students to synthesize content from both or all courses
 - Use of other courses contents in Freshman Forum study skills plans

Some types of assignments you might consider

- Readings
- Writings (essays, journals/logs, book reviews, reports, short papers, literature reviews, creative writing, research papers)
- Drill & practice sessions
- Problem analysis
- Interviews
- Experiments
- Computer-assisted learning

- Films, videotapes, slides (viewing or creation of)
 - Case studies (reading, analysis of)
 - Multi-part projects
 - Question creation
 - Role play or classroom theater
 - Other ideas can be found online, such as at <http://library.clark.edu/?q=faculty-ideas-assignments>
2. Communication between teachers can occur in regularly-scheduled meetings, through e-mail, by phone, even chance encounters in the hallways between classes. Suggestion: meet in person at least every other week and sit in on each other's classes if possible. Communication between students and teachers will occur informally in a learning community (before or after class, in passing on campus), but a formally set time and place for student-teacher contact should also be established. Student-teacher conferences at mid-term and at the end of the course are a good idea.

Part IV. Supporting Active Learning: include description

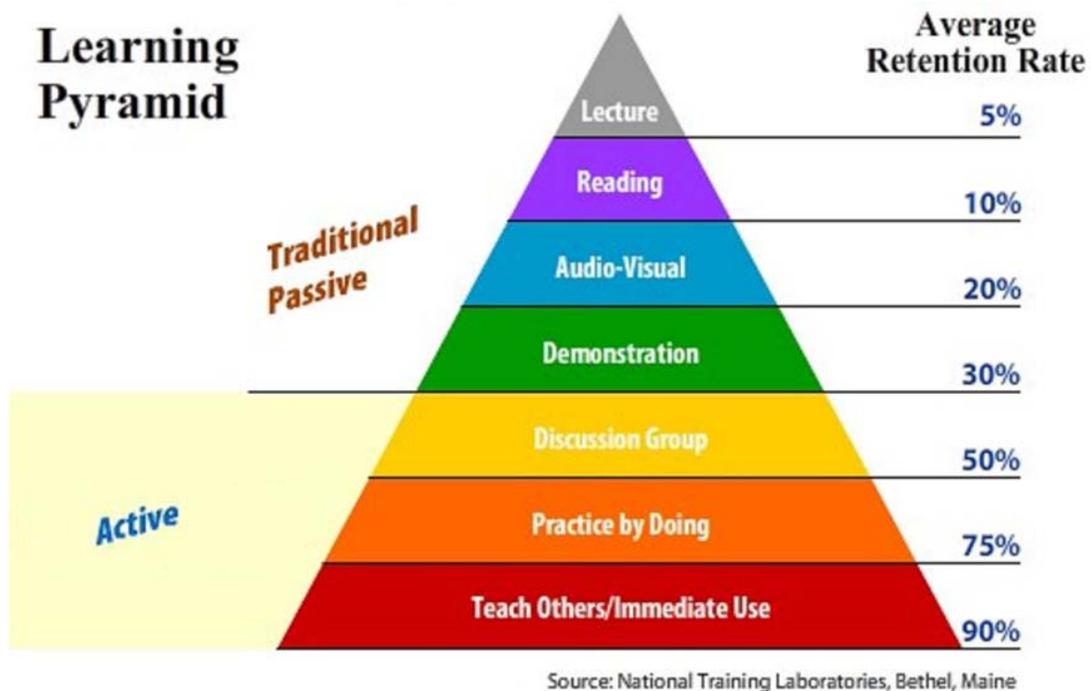
In this section, you are asked to consider the ways you will support active learning in the classroom. Active Learning is a core principal of LCs. In the Freshman Forum course, students will be exploring ways to become active learners. Instructors can support this in various ways:

- Creating activities that activate students' prior learning
- Creating activities and assignments that help students deeply process information in various ways.
- Creating activities and assignments that give students frequent practice and opportunity to use higher-order thinking.

Many active learning instructional strategies can be found online. At <http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/active/strategies/> you can find a nice list of active learning strategies.

If certain types of activities can be taught early on in the semester in one class, students will understand the steps and be able to do the activities much more quickly in the future in all classes. Choosing which activities might be used often in all classes dividing up the initial instruction on how to do the activity will save everyone time in the future.

Consider the learning pyramid (and share with your students to explain why **they** will be doing most of the work in class, not you. Sometimes it takes a while to get students out of their passive learning habits. Do not be discouraged!):



Part V. Integrated Support Services

Research shows that effective learning communities integrate student support into the classroom. We have structured our learning communities to support this integration by linking Freshman Forum within the LC. Consider how Freshman Forum and its curriculum can be used to the benefit of student success in all courses. For instance, instructors of all courses can reinforce (even casually) the explicit instruction of success strategies in FF. Other integrations are also possible

Some possible examples:

- If FF teaches students the importance of reviewing notes each week instead of “cramming,” the other professors can explain the reason for X assignment is to help them study as they go.
- Because students have learned about the importance of taking personal responsibility in FF, if a student isn’t doing so in another class, the instructor can simply ask them if they feel they are taking personal responsibility.
- In LC instructor meetings, the FF instructor can give perspective on students’ struggles based on the students’ self-identified strengths and weaknesses in regard to the 8 choices of successful students.
- Students will be required to attend a tutoring session at one of the centers on campus.

- Instructors will invite an advisor to an LC instructor’s meeting to gain another perspective and/or to discuss the follow up to submitted early attendance alert and/or early alert.
- Instructors will arrange for Career Services to talk with students about the career possibilities for the majors involved in the LC and take students to the Career Fair.
- Instructors will arrange for an advisor to co-teach in the FF class once a month.

Part VI. Experiential Learning

In this part, you are asked to identify ways that you will build community and support experiential learning. Some ways to integrate the courses as well as support group interaction are service-learning initiatives, field work, and social activities. Examples of these include:

- Museum trips or other related field trips
- Reading to elementary school students
- Guest speaker and special luncheon
- Attend campus activity or event as a group
- Study groups
- Group projects – research, interviews, presentation in class

LC Faculty-led Events

We ask each team to lead a minimum of two different events per semester that are exclusive to the LC. These may be on-campus or in another city, free or not. Faculty may utilize existing departmental/campus events such as a guest speaker and add an exclusive experience for the LC students, such as a “meet and greet” with a visiting speaker. The LC may adopt a service-learning project or attend a conference, etc.

a. On-Campus Events

Please identify at least two potential on-campus faculty-led events for the LC.

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b. Field Trip

Going beyond the classroom is a significant component of the LC experience. Ideally, each LC will have an out-of-Vegas field trip that allows students to experience their academic focus in a “real world” setting, often by touring a relevant organization. Please suggest a possible field trip event.

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c. Signature Event

A signature event helps define the community. This event will be used to advertise the LC and should be something students look forward to participating in and will remember for years to come. Please identify which of the events already listed will be the signature event, or suggest an additional possibility.

Note: Because Academic Enrichment will support the team financially as well as by assisting in coordinating the event, please communicate regularly with the Coordinator of Academic Enrichment in regard to your plans. Approval will be granted dependent upon available budget and sufficient time to make arrangements.