

MDRC’s Learning Communities Demonstration Project Evaluation Draft Report Washington Center’s Response: March 1, 2012

We appreciate the opportunity to review a draft of this report. Within the context of the Learning Communities Demonstration Project, several areas need to be clarified so your findings can be well understood by educators who work with students historically underserved in post-secondary and higher education. Our comments are focused on four areas.

1. Lack of clarity about what “learning communities” are

In *Scaling Up Learning Communities* (2010), MDRC asserts that learning communities have five key elements:

1. curricular integration;
2. active, collaborative learning;
3. faculty collaboration;
4. student engagement; and
5. integration of student support services.

In the 2012 report, MDRC asserts that learning communities have four components:

1. linked courses and student cohorts;
2. faculty collaboration;
3. instructional practices; and
4. student support.¹

The most recent report adds linked courses and student cohorts as an element, and merges curricular integration with active and collaborative learning and student engagement under instructional practices. Table 1.1 in the new report describes three versions of learning community implementation (basic, midrange, and advanced), but the definition of a “basic” learning community is problematic. A basic learning community has only one of the four components in place,² which would affect subsequent impact findings. All learning communities will not produce the same impacts.

2. Need for accurate descriptions of the learning community programs in this study

The impact of Kingsborough Community College’s (KCC) Opening Doors Learning Communities program was markedly different from the other five schools. The draft report speculates this is likely because it is a more “advanced” model in that it includes student support, has “unusually strong support” from college administrators, and involves a higher number of credits.

Regarding the other five campuses, the claim is made that the learning community programs were implemented with “reasonable fidelity” to the model (p. 32), yet “reasonable fidelity” is not defined. Clearly some of the programs described met the basic criteria, and a few might be categorized as “mid-range.” More discussion is needed here, to get at the variations in learning community programs and the effects of those variations:

- How significant is the lack of student support in five of the six campuses?
- How significant is the finding that in relation to curricular integration “many of the observed learning communities fell short of the program model”?

¹ February 2012 draft report, Table 1.1, Components of Learning Community Model.

² In Table 1.1, “basic” learning communities are described as having these components:

1. mixed cohorts—some students are in linked courses and some are not
2. no faculty collaboration
3. no change in instructional practices
4. no extra student support

- What does it mean to say that “faculty collaboration generally occurred to the extent it was expected” —what was expected?
- What level of administrative support was present for this initiative?

Understanding the results of this study depends on disentangling these components. By making this information on variations in implementation public, campuses will be able to decide whether they ought to aim for a more robust implementation agenda from the onset. Assessing the impact of a partial cohort is not the same as assessing the impact of a cohort plus integrative assignments plus strong support from student affairs.

3. Differentiating the impacts of different course pairings

In the key findings (p.32), one component common to all the learning community programs studied is identified: “all six sites were able to successfully link a targeted developmental course with one or two other courses and enroll a group of students in these linked courses.” The pooled analysis of impact on credits earned in the targeted course sequence shows a 23% increase (p. 22). However, the actual impact of learning communities likely varied across campuses and within a single campus. Given that a critical question in the field focuses on which courses to pair (developmental to college level within a single discipline—the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) model; developmental to college level across disciplines—a more typical learning community model; developmental and college level student success—a popular model; or two or more developmental courses), the results of this study—if disaggregated by discipline, courses paired, and levels of pairing (i.e. lowest level of math with college level success vs. highest level of math with college level success) would be extremely useful.³

As a related point, it appears that linking developmental English with college level courses is likely to lead to greater student success in both courses. Is this the case?

4. Impact findings in context: problematic comparisons

The version of learning communities which produced the half credit gain appears to be the basic version on five of the six campuses, with some specific learning community program offerings rising to the midrange level.⁴ These learning communities involved linked courses, some co-enrollment, some faculty collaboration eventually, and some (uneven) attempts at integration. There is *no* mention of the presence of student support.

Yet in the section on impact findings, this stripped down version of learning communities is compared with interventions that intentionally include strong integrated student support—Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST), Accelerated Study in Associate programs (ASAP), and The Academy for College Excellence (ACE). In effect, at this point, the report compares interventions with student supports built into them with an intervention without student support. A more sensible comparison would be between KCC’s Opening Doors program and these other programs—because all involve multifaceted support for students and they have administrative support.

For the ALP comparison to become useful, readers would need to know which colleges in the demonstration project linked developmental English to college-level English, and what the results of those particular learning communities were.

³ In the early research on I-BEST, for instance, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges determined that only the highest levels of ESL and ABE should be linked with professional/technical courses.

⁴ In Table 1.1, midrange learning communities are described as having these four components:

1. Most, but not all, of the students in the linked courses are in the learning community.
2. Teacher teams communicate periodically throughout the semester.
3. Teachers assign at least one joint project during the semester.
4. Some extra support is offered but it is not integrated into the classroom.

Moreover, participation rates ranged from a low of 54% to a high of 85% (p.32) – what are the efficacy of findings where a “substantial number of non-participating students are included in estimates, diluting whatever impact the program may have had on participating students”?

Conclusion

A more precise interpretation of the data you report here is that learning communities fully implemented, including receiving administrative support, make a significant difference on student progress and degree completion. That’s what the study of Kingsborough’s Opening Doors program shows.

The demonstration study shows that learning communities which are only partially implemented, i.e. only involving a cohort and at that not even a “pure” cohort, make a small difference when the linked courses are strategically placed. As you report, when the learning community courses require students to enroll in developmental education courses, they do enroll, and once enrolled, they earn half a credit more than non-learning community students. The implications of this are significant—students have to pass developmental courses to move forward into the college curriculum. An additional half credit earned is the difference between passing and failing a course.

The Learning Community Demonstration Project could make a significant contribution to the field if it helped practitioners understand a more nuanced account of the impact of this intervention: first, that learning communities have multiple components which if implemented fully have a significant impact on course completion and graduation; and second, that the impact of learning communities varies widely based on the degree to which these components are actually implemented. In short, all learning communities are not the same, and campuses interested in using learning communities as an intervention strategy would do well to pay attention to the results of this study.

One last comment: The report’s title, *Findings from a Decade of Rigorous Evaluations of Learning Communities in Developmental Education*, overstates the scope of your research; it really is about the implementation of learning communities at six community colleges.

Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich, Co-Directors
Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education
The Evergreen State College