The State of Our Practice: Are LC's An Educational Reform Yet?

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Key ideas

❖ Overview of recent research

❖ Challenges of scaling initiatives

❖ Learning communities as an education reform strategy

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Establishing A Shared Definition

Essential features of "learning communities"

- A common cohort of students who attend two or more classes together

- Robust partnerships between academic affairs and student support services

- Explicitly designed opportunities for integrative learning

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Update on national research

First major empirical study of learning communities

A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshman Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College, MDRC, 2008

- Student cohorts matter in terms of persistence.
- The quality of learning communities varies depending on what happens in the classroom.

~ MDRC, Sue Scrivener et al, March 2008

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Update on national research

Longitudinal study of thirteen community colleges

"Learning Better Together: The Impact of Learning Communities on the Persistence of Low-Income Students." *Opportunity Matters*, Volume One, 2008.

- Research continues to show that learning communities can make a difference in student persistence and achievement rates.

"The findings from this study enable us to relearn an important lesson, namely that access without support is not an opportunity. As this study shows, providing meaningful support requires more than the mere provision of tutoring, basic skills courses, and learning centers."

~ Cathy McHugh Engstrom and Vincent Tinto, Syracuse University

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Update on national research

Features of learning communities that engage students

Experiences That Matter: Enhancing Student Learning and Success. National Survey of Student Engagement, (NSSE) Annual Report 2007.

- A cohort—two courses are sufficient—the learning community doesn't have to be full time.

- Explicit opportunities—through assignments or discussions or both—to integrate learning across courses.

- Connections to out-of-class experiences.

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Update on national research
## Learning communities as a "high impact educational practice"

High Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter. George D. Kuh. AAC&U, 2008.

Shared features
- students devote considerable time and effort to purposeful tasks
- students interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters
- students are more likely to experience diversity through contact with people different from themselves
- students get ongoing feedback about their performance
- students see how what they are learning works in different settings, on and off campus

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Update on national research
Comprehensive literature review on high impact practices
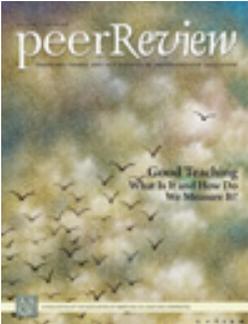
peerReview

"High-Impact Practices: Applying the Learning Outcomes Literature to the Development of Successful Campus Programs." *Peer Review*, Spring 2009.
~ Jayne Brownell and Lynn Swaner

- Drawn from an extensive report prepared for AAC&U in 2008, "Outcomes of High Impact Practices for Underserved Students: A Review of the Literature." (pp. 15-56 on learning communities)

http://www.aacu.org/inclusive_excellence/documents/DRAFTProjectUSALiteratureReview.pdf

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Update on national research
# The roles of student affairs in learning communities

Promoting Partnerships for Student Success: Lessons from the SSPIRE* Initiative. MDRC, July 2009.

See chapter two:
Reports on the experiences of five community colleges in California (American River College, College of Alameda, De Anza College, Mt. San Antonio College, and Santa Ana College) who have infused student services into their learning community programs using one of two models.

(* Student Support Partnerships Integrating Resources and Education)

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Update on national research
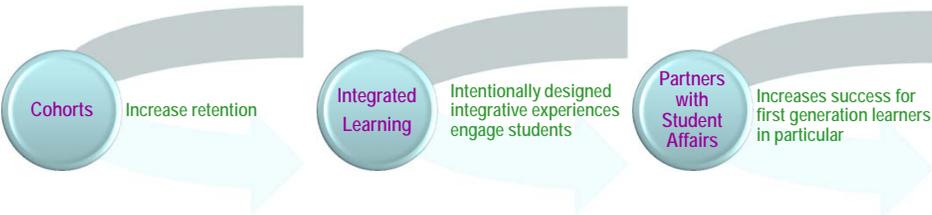
Cohorts — Increase retention

Integrated Learning — Intentionally designed integrative experiences engage students

Partners with Student Affairs — Increases success for first generation learners in particular

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Predictable Tensions As "Practices" Or Fields Become Popular

"A challenge for the scholarship of teaching and learning community is to be sure what's presented for evaluation is truly worthy work.

...Many commented on the *relationship between rigor and reach* in the scholarship of teaching and learning. ...For some, accessibility is the bigger issue, especially for faculty in the humanities and fine arts, who are put off by the dominant 'social science models.' For others, struck by the 'uneven quality' of conference presentations, rigor is the more urgent issue if the work is to gain respect."

~ *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reconsidered: Institutional Integration and Impact.* 2011. (Appendix A – "Issues for the Movement's Future.")

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MDRC's LC Demonstration Study

⇨ What have we learned about learning communities at community colleges?

- Six campuses (170 learning communities; one developmental course linked with another course at five campuses)
- "Random assignment"
- Studied over three terms
- Results modest for 5 of 6 campuses (implementation varied from only partial cohorts to "advanced implementation")

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| MDRC definition	Learning Communities Done Well
• Linked courses & student cohorts • Faculty collaboration • Instructional practices (curricular integration, active and collaborative learning, student engagement) • Student support	• A strategically-defined cohort of students based on campus data • Alignment with institutional mission & goals • A broad base of support across divisions (including key administrators) • Robust partnerships between academic affairs & student support services • Infrastructure & leadership that promotes collaboration • A focus on integrative, applied & interdisciplinary learning • Established ongoing faculty development & professional learning • Assessment at several levels (classroom, program, campus --using quantitative & qualitative methods)

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From curricular to educational reform

❖ Shift from models to *purposeful learning*

What are you trying to do for students with your learning community program?
What kind of learning do you want students to experience?

❖ Learning communities as an intervention strategy

- Identify where students are "at risk" in the curriculum using institutional data, i.e. curricular trouble spots
- Design integrative assignments that intentionally develop students' understanding and abilities based on contemporary issues
- Make connections with student affairs

~ "A New Era in Learning Community Work." Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich, *Change*, July/August 2008.

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LC's as an educational reform:
Using data to design cohorts
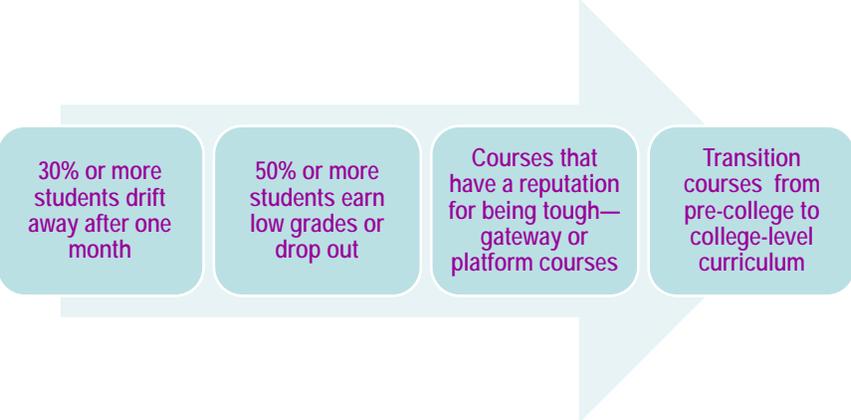
| 30% or more students drift away after one month | 50% or more students earn low grades or drop out | Courses that have a reputation for being tough—gateway or platform courses | Transition courses from pre-college to college-level curriculum |

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LC's as an educational reform:
Designing cohorts—which courses to link?

Which course success rates do you want to improve?

Where do students get stuck in terms of curricular pathways?

Which groups of students are you most concerned about?

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LC's as an educational reform:
What "problem" you are trying to solve?

- More students will pass first year science courses?
- More students will report feeling connected to campus services?
- More students will be engaged in their core courses?

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Examples at this CPR:

Accelerated courses (math, English) with credit based on outcomes rather than placement, linked to a second course (academic IBEST an example of this)

Precollege courses linked with college-level courses

First year courses grouped, integrated by theme and/or learning outcomes

A learning community designed for transfer students

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LC's as an educational reform:
Focus on integrative learning

❖ **Knowledge of human cultures and the natural and physical world**
- focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

❖ **Intellectual & practical skills**
- practiced extensively, across the curriculum--progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards of performance

❖ **Personal & social responsibility**
- anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

❖ **Integrative learning**
Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies
- demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

~ AAC&U Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) Report,
College Learning for the New Global Century, 2007

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Focus on integrative learning
Findings from the National Project

Co-researchers from Washington State

Everett Community College, North Seattle Community College, Skagit Valley College, Yakima Valley Community College, The Evergreen State College, and the University of Washington-Bothell

- Journal of Learning Communities Research, December 2008/January 2009

- "When Faculty Assess Integrative Learning: Faculty Inquiry to Improve Learning Community Practice."

~ Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich, *Change,* September/October 2009

- website: http://wacenter.evergreen.edu/

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Focus on integrative learning
Findings from the National Project

Learning communities can promote integrative learning (that's not surprising)—but only if we design the right kinds of assignments.

Journal of Research on Learning Communities,
Dec 2008/Jan 2009

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LC's as an educational reform:
Integrative learning as a shared focus

Teaching — From "coverage" to key ideas, skills and habits of mind: overarching learning objectives; educating for unknown

Learning — From "quantity" to quality of learning: depth of understanding and integrative thinking

Assessing — From "possessing" to using knowledge: student work as evidence of learning; novice to expert performance

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LC's as an educational reform:

Connecting cohorts with student affairs

Integrating programs like "early alert" and intrusive advising into learning communities

Including counselors as part of teaching teams

Designing assignments that explicitly connect students with campus resources (part of coaching for college readiness)

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Emerging questions:

Learning Communities Research and Practice—online journal

What is the actual intervention—what are the features, and how do they map onto the existing literature (cohort, integrative learning as an outcome, connections with student services)?

When interventions get scaled up, what features remain present?

What is the theory of change behind the intervention—what results are we hoping for, and have we thought broadly enough about them (for students, for faculty/staff, for the institution)?