

A PRIMER FOR LEARNING COMMUNITY PROGRAM COORDINATORS

by Ana Torres-Bower

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Coordinating an institutional program such as a learning communities program requires knowledge about best practices in the field and your campus institutional data as well as imagination, leadership, and passion. It also calls for a deep understanding of the institutional culture that will allow a program to thrive, evolve, and provide support in meaningful ways.

Below you will find a series of elements that can be used as a guide to think about important programmatic components. No formula is applicable to all programs, and this primer is not comprehensive. Indeed, each learning community program coordinator and his or her leadership team should design and implement a program that responds to the specific needs of their students and the culture and conditions of their institution.

PROGRAM

The learning communities program should be in agreement with institutional goals and values. It should align with other academic programs and student pathways, and be fully integrated into student service programs and activities. When institutional conditions permit, the program should collaborate with other programs on campus. Program isolationism is detrimental and inconsistent with the very nature of learning communities.

The learning communities program should have a presence in all relevant activities across the campus community. It should exhibit its support and services in effective ways and it should be accountable for all services it provides to its stakeholders.

The following components are important for a well-managed learning communities program:

- *Institutional mission:* The learning community program should align with and support the institutional culture and the campus mission.
- *Funding:* For sustainability after initial startup, the budget should not depend exclusively on grant funds.
- *Program and student learning outcomes:* The learning communities program should develop clear and specific outcomes for the program and for students enrolled in learning communities.
- *Strategic planning:* The program should develop a strategic plan or course of action that extends for two or more years and is in accordance with the needs of the institution.
- *Program review:* The learning communities program should be included in the institutional program review practices. In addition to assessing and addressing the strengths and challenges of the program, this formal program review provides an opportunity for other campus stakeholders to learn, understand, and appreciate the learning community program's services and benefits to the institution.
- *Staff and administrative support:* The learning communities program should have strong support from all functional groups, including key administrators.

Additional elements that are useful include a program center or office, an outreach and marketing policy, a program website, and involvement with professional organizations such as regional consortiums.

STUDENTS

The program coordinator and the leadership team will achieve successful student recruitment, support, and services by maintaining consistent practices with the selected student population. Some critical elements for program effectiveness are:

- *Recruitment:* Strong collaboration with institutional research, campus counseling and advising services is fundamental for identifying students that will benefit from learning communities. The institutional research office can help identify critical courses for student success—an important component to include in any learning community offering. Counseling staff often provide the most effective orientation and support to learning community students. The coordinator must work with relevant student service areas to facilitate an effective transition of incoming first-year students to campus life.
- *Registration:* The coordinator should work with the registrar and counseling staff to ensure that students are aware of learning community options and can easily register for them.
- *Orientation:* The coordinator needs to work with faculty and student services to provide students with program orientation.
- *Counseling support:* Academic counselors are a fundamental component of learning communities, providing professional guidance for students' educational plans. Counselors are often the instructors for college guidance and academic success courses.
- *Assessment:* The coordinator should learn about students who will qualify to enroll in the program from the assessment office. The coordinator should also work with faculty and the assessment office to develop tools to assess how effectively learning communities are addressing identified program objectives and student learning objectives.

FACULTY

Having talented and committed faculty is fundamental for a successful learning communities program. The coordinator must be mindful of the dynamics of the faculty and the culture of their institution.

- *Recruitment:* Effective outreach for faculty recruitment is one of the major activities of the coordinator; faculty recruit faculty. The coordinator should recruit carefully and purposefully for successful teams of learning community instructors.
- *Professional development:* New and experienced learning community instructors must be engaged regularly in professional development relevant to learning communities. Work sessions, trade books, samples of integrated assignments (which are the heart of learning community endeavors), discussions of student work, and links to sources (i.e., The Washington Center, regional consortiums) should be available to all learning community instructors.
- *Compensation:* Nurturing and supporting faculty by means of a variety activities and services is critical. Developing learning communities and new instruction models can be time-consuming; faculty who team-teach may also spend significantly more time in class and in planning than their peers. Ideally, faculty should be compensated for the added workload—an option that is not always possible with constrained budgets. Other forms of compensation, such as release time and stipends for professional development should be considered.
- *Collaborative work sessions:* One of the benefits faculty discover when they work in learning communities are the renewed sense of purpose and professional growth they find in working collaboratively with their peers. The learning communities coordinator should arrange regular meetings and work sessions of learning community instructors. Collaboratively reviewing and assessing student work, through the Collaborative Assessment Protocol has provided faculty at many institutions with tools for assessing the effectiveness of their assignments and growing professionally.