

SUPPORTING FIRST-YEAR TRANSITIONS

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

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Learning communities at Temple University began in 1993 with about two hundred students. In recent years, the program has enrolled over one thousand students each fall in linked course learning communities that satisfy core, college, and major requirements. Students enroll as a cohort in two courses; the strength of the link between the paired courses depends on how deeply the faculty integrate the curriculum. Initially the role of student affairs professionals in the program was as a partner in the planning process—a process that included faculty, administrators and student affairs professionals from across campus in a variety of ways.

There have been many changes and new initiatives at the University since the introduction of learning communities in 1993: higher admissions standards, a new overnight freshman orientation program, the opening of the TECH (Teaching, Education, Collaboration, Help) Center, and a new general education program, as well as changes in leadership in both academic and student affairs.

The program was intentionally reduced in size for fall 2006 as learning communities experimented with smaller, more closely integrated pairings in preparation for introducing a new model to coincide with Temple's implementation of a new general education program in fall 2008. Bricks-and-mortar improvements—including three new residence halls, a new Learning Center, and the conversion of many traditional classrooms to “smart” classrooms—have also expanded the possibilities open to learning communities. As a result, there are many opportunities for further successes related to the program's long-standing goals: to promote interdisciplinary learning, build community and support students in the transition to college. These goals are not only central to the success of learning communities; they are a key to the success of all entering students.

Building a Program and a Partnership

The learning communities program, initiated within academic affairs by the provost's office—has always been a collaborative effort of faculty,

academic affairs, and student affairs. All of these stakeholders share a commitment to student success. Student affairs professionals, as well as faculty and administrators, from across campus were involved as partners in planning from the outset. A commitment to collaboration by all parties has made it possible to forge a true partnership.

Today, the learning communities program is housed in First-Year Programs, a recently formed office that also includes the Freshman Seminar and a summer reading initiative.

The Anatomy of Our Partnership

The following characteristics describe our collaborative effort and the priorities that have guided our practice:

1. Shared values
2. Sustained over time
3. Support of senior leadership
4. Dedicated resources
5. Record of successful collaborations
6. Mutual support and involvement
7. Recognition of strengths

Shared Values

Academic and student affairs staff share a common commitment to enhancing student learning, building community, and increasing student satisfaction. These goals are the primary reasons Temple implemented learning communities. The two divisions also share the belief that community-building occurs both inside and outside the classroom.

A shared commitment to these goals is evident in the planning and execution of the learning communities programs. For example, student affairs staff members often visit learning communities (many of which are designed for incoming freshmen) and freshman seminars to talk about student organizations and available services. The offices that present to first-year learning programs include Tuttleman Counseling Services, Career Development Services, SACE (Sexual Assault Counseling and Education), Judicial Affairs, and THEO (Temple Health Empowerment Office).

Access to this information within academic programs provides an extension of the summer orientation program, assists in creating a relationship between students and administration, and reminds students of the resources on campus to help them navigate their freshman year.

In addition, since many of the learning communities courses are part of an electronic classroom (Blackboard), learning communities routinely place student affairs announcements on Blackboard to remind students of upcoming programs and activities. For example, Freshman Focus Week, a series of free workshops designed by the Division of University Studies to help new students with the transition to university life, and student affairs-sponsored sexual assault prevention programs are posted on the Blackboard site. Many learning community classes also attend student events and activities as part of their class requirements; some participate in intramural sports as a way to build community among students and their instructors.

Sustained Over Time

Student affairs representatives have been involved in Temple's learning communities initiative since shortly after its inception. After a faculty fellow and an administrative coordinator were appointed to lead the effort, a learning communities advisory council was formed that included student affairs staff members. As the program took shape, student affairs professionals became increasingly involved with the implementation of the program. In the years since the program was started, these collaborative efforts have flourished and expanded.

The initial collaboration focused on marketing and recruitment. The admissions office, formerly in Student Affairs, provided marketing opportunities through publications and new student recruitment events that introduced prospective students and their parents to the learning communities program. The coordinator of the program participated in many of these events and developed targeted learning community publications for use in admissions recruitment. The coordinator also provided training about learning communities to student orientation leaders. As a result, the orientation leaders were able to communicate the benefits of learning communities and encourage new students to register for the programs.

To enhance the learning community initiative, a one credit-hour course—the Freshman Seminar—was introduced to help students in learning communities make connections between the subjects they study and become familiar with the university's resources. It also provides opportunities to further integrate students to the university and college life. Student affairs professionals, as well as faculty and academic administrators, serve as instructors for this class. There is also a peer instructor assigned to each section. The class typically includes group discussions and study groups, with student affairs professionals

frequently visiting the seminar to talk about programs and services available outside of the classroom.

Currently, New Student Orientation, a student affairs unit, relies on First-Year Programs staff, the recently formed office that includes the learning communities program, to participate in over twenty orientation programs to promote the Freshman Seminar, summer reading initiative, and learning communities. The presentation is tailored to the newest group of students entering the university and gives them the information they need to make an informed decision regarding their first-year experience and participation in learning communities. The involvement of First-Year Programs ensures that new students receive correct and complete information regarding the programs—a goal of both First-Year Programs and New Student Orientation.

Support of Senior Leadership

Senior academic and student affairs administrators have shown their support for this partnership by devoting resources, both human and fiscal, to collaborative initiatives. During the past ten years, there have been significant changes in senior leadership—including two new presidents, a new provost, and a new vice president for student affairs, as well as changes in vice provosts and associate vice presidents. Despite these changes, senior administrators' commitment to the partnership between the learning communities program and student affairs has continued to grow. In each case, the personnel in the trenches—the program directors and individuals responsible for daily administration of academic and student affairs programs—reiterated to new leadership their commitment to this collaboration. Meetings were held to discuss goals and objectives, past accomplishments, and new opportunities. For example, when a new Associate Vice President for Student Affairs arrived on campus he met with the Associate Vice Provost, who is responsible for first-year programming to discuss learning outcomes and assessment and to explore ways that student affairs programs could become more integrated with first-year programs.

At times the arrival of a new administrator has led to further innovations and expansion of the learning communities program. For instance, when the new Director of Residence Life arrived he contacted learning communities leaders to talk about opportunities for developing residential learning communities. As a result of these meetings, several living-learning communities were established.

One example is the Deciding Student Wing (DSW)—a collaboration between the Division of University Studies (DUS) and University

Housing/Residence Life. DUS professionals, who are in academic affairs, teach the required Freshman Seminar, provide and train a peer instructor/mentor, and sponsor off-campus career exploration activities. The University Housing/Residence Life office publicizes the program, assigns DSW students to the residential wing, and covers the housing costs of the peer instructor/mentor, who lives on the wing with the DSW students. Recently, University Housing/Residence Life dedicated classroom space for an honors living-learning community in one of the new residence halls.

Dedicated Resources

Learning communities are one of the key programs for entering students. Although the initiative was originally funded by a grant, the university has funded the operation, through its First-Year Programs office, for the past ten years. Both academic and student affairs have made a significant investment in academic programs, student support services, and student activities related to learning communities. Both recognize that by partnering on activities such as recruitment and new student orientations, the university can offer students more in the way of programming without taxing the resources of any one office. One example is cross-promotion of programs. Descriptions of the living-learning communities are included in a section of the Residence Life promotional information, as well as in New Student Orientation mailings. Student activities are promoted through the Freshman Seminar and other classroom opportunities. Residence Life purchases the summer reading book selection for all resident assistants, so they can help promote the program and participate in discussion sessions in the residence halls.

Record of Successful Collaborations

In 1994 and 1995, the learning communities program conducted focus groups to learn about students' experiences in learning communities and at Temple in general. Students were very satisfied with many aspects of their learning community experiences, but revealed some dissatisfaction with other areas of their university experience, including new student orientation. As a result of these focus groups as well as survey data that had been collected, the Division of Student Affairs formed a task force to study new student orientation. The then-director of the learning communities program was asked to sit on this taskforce and lead a workgroup to recommend ways of involving full-time faculty. As a result, a lecture series that relied heavily on learning community faculty

was added to the new overnight freshman orientation program. These short lectures introduced students to current events or topics of interest and gave them an opportunity to meet the teachers many of them would work with in their fall semester learning communities.

Success Breeds Success

As student interest and satisfaction with the programs offered by academic and student affairs increased, and as first-year student retention improved, both departments recognized that what they were doing was working and that working together was more effective than working alone. This success created a culture in which each group looked to the other at the start of a new initiative. The learning communities' successes spilled over into other areas of both divisions' work. When Welcome Week, a new initiative, was instituted in fall 2006, representatives from both academic and student affairs were included in its leadership and organizing committee. As a result of the initiative, academic affairs, as a whole, played a more prominent role in new students' activities prior to the beginning of classes.

Most recently, the Leadership Studies Academy, an important initiative for student affairs, contacted the learning community program to get advice about how to select a book for a new reading initiative within the program and how to engage faculty in the book selection process. As a result of that initial meeting, faculty are now members of the advisory committee, assisting not only with the selection of the book, but also with the development of the leadership program.

Mutual Support and Involvement

Academic and student affairs routinely invite each other to participate on their respective work groups and committees. Academic affairs representatives recently participated in the search process for a new dean of students, and learning communities leaders are regularly included in orientation planning groups. A student affairs staff member was on the search committee for the First-Year Programs coordinator. Student affairs representatives are standing members of the summer reading committee and, as mentioned before, student affairs professionals teach sections of the Freshman Seminar, several of which are part of a learning community. Recently, the Program Director of the Office of Orientation and New Student Programs instructed a Freshman Seminar section that was part of a three-course learning community for education majors (English composition, core history course, and Freshman Seminar). As part of this seminar, the class read *The Leadership*

Challenge (Kouzes and Posner 2002). The instructor, a student affairs administrator, introduced students to aspects of the Emerging Leaders Seminar, a student affairs initiative geared toward creating, promoting, and supporting student leaders on campus. Student Affairs purchased the text for all students in the learning community.

Again, the spirit and practice of collaboration has spread far beyond the learning communities program. Representatives of First-Year Programs now sit on a campus-wide Code of Conduct Committee to ensure that academic perspectives are considered when determining sanctions that affect academic progress in cases of student discipline violations; they are also members of Student Affairs' Alcohol Task Force Implementation Team.

Recognition of Strengths

The learning communities program regularly holds faculty development workshops for its teachers. Given limited resources, the program has not always been able to bring in outside speakers. When this happens, faculty and staff have filled the gap. The value and respect that individuals place on their peers across divisions makes it possible for the program to continue to provide workshops on important teaching and learning topics without depleting institutional resources.

For example, the staff of Tuttleman Counseling Services (a unit within Student Affairs) are recognized for their expertise in group dynamics and group behavior. The staff of the counseling center have worked with the learning communities' faculty on strategies for positively directing the group personality, which often forms in learning communities, towards the goals of building community and promoting learning. In addition they give advice on ice breakers and other ways to build community in the classroom. Recognizing each other's strengths and taking advantage of resources each unit can provide helps both units avoid reinventing the wheel or being stretched too thin to provide something that another office already does well.

Conclusion

Over the last fourteen years at Temple University, there are many examples of collaboration that have improved the learning communities program. Academic and student affairs groups regularly find ways to work together to support each other's efforts to achieve the common goals of enhancing student learning, building community, and increasing student satisfaction with their college experience.

The success of this collaborative environment has extended beyond the learning communities program. This culture of cooperation, and of valuing the contributions of peers in other departments, has had a dramatic impact, particularly on the First-Year programs, which learning communities are a part of. The most visible example is the growth of Temple's summer reading program, started in the summer of 2000. This program, which began with learning communities students reading a common book over the summer, has expanded over time to become a campus-wide, first-year student initiative supported financially and administratively by both academic and student affairs.

Academic affairs leads the book selection committee, funds the author visit, develops resource materials, and plans faculty discussion sessions. Student affairs funds a related campus-wide film series, sponsors at least one student trip to an off-campus restaurant or site related to the themes in the book, and supports student-led discussions in the residence halls. Staff members from both areas are members of the summer reading book committee, along with representatives from several student organizations. The selected text, often interdisciplinary in nature, is a wonderful first assignment for learning community students. Many former or present learning community faculty members volunteer to lead discussion sessions for students and many faculty incorporate the selected book into their learning communities courses.

In the fall 2003 edition of *U.S. News and World Report's America's Best Colleges*, Temple's learning communities program was ranked fifth in the country as an exemplary academic program that leads to student success. Well into its second decade, the program continues to grow and change, adjusting to new challenges and opportunities; student affairs remains a key partner in the planning process. As Temple continues its efforts to sustain and improve its learning communities, a commitment to collaboration remains central to the work at hand.

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