

# Preface

In the spring of 2002, Barbara Leigh Smith, co-director with Jean MacGregor of the National Learning Communities Project, funded in part by The Pew Charitable Trusts, founding director of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, and recently retired provost and vice-president of The Evergreen State College, contacted her library faculty colleagues at Evergreen to interview us about our instructional program. Smith was preparing for a keynote speech for the American College and Research Libraries (ACRL) President's Program at the annual American Library Association (ALA) conference to be given in June of that year. ACRL President Mary Reichel had declared that the presidential theme for her year in office was "the learning community for excellence in academic libraries" (2001, 818). Smith's speech explored the learning communities movement, its prospects for the transformation of undergraduate education in the United States, and the libraries' potential role in that effort. After ALA, Smith honored me by asking if I would care to expand her work into a small monograph, directed to an audience of both general educational reformers and academic librarians, with more thorough discussion of how instructional librarians and their teaching colleagues are working together in learning communities throughout the nation.

The result has been a collaboration. Two major sections are largely Smith's work. The section on definitions and the history of the learning communities movement is closely adapted from Smith's keynote speech. Additionally, Smith contributed the overview of assessment in the learning communities movement. The overall conception of the work was hers, as well as the idea to expand the work into a monograph. I want to thank Barbara Smith for her confidence in me and for her support as this work has proceeded.

This has been a challenging and fascinating task for two reasons. First, there is so much going on and second, there is so little. There are enough interesting, distinctive, and successful programs to make their description a daunting task in itself. The structures and the language describing them within each institution are somewhat idiosyncratic. Figuring out the nature of rapidly evolving and often quite experimental initiatives and trying to describe those in clear and organized terms has not been simple. FIGs, freshman seminars, first-year experiences, gateway courses, college experience courses, residential programs, living/learning programs, learning communities, linked courses, coordinated studies, information literacy, information fluency . . . It's worse than trying to have a casual professional chat with a post-structuralist.

On the other hand, despite prevalent discussions of learning communities at the level of academic library conferences, the circle of programs cited is small and the same institutions tend to be mentioned repeatedly. The reader who has been following the literature of information literacy and learning communities will find some of those familiar programs named and described here. Literature searches, networking in the learning communities and in the academic library circles, reviewing web pages, and scanning conference proceedings generated a fairly short list of programs that were systemically linking information literacy instruction into learning communities. The list was further winnowed as I decided to describe only one or two institutions typifying each general strategy.

There may be many more programs evolving without fanfare and without participation in the conference circuit or professional literature. Perhaps those librarians are busy teaching.

The examples included, however, do portray variety. More significantly, in some ways, there is much to be learned from those very leaders who have appeared in the literature and on the conference circuit, as we see that some are rapidly evolving and changing in creative and responsive ways. For example, where once it seemed that librarians were fighting for their “own” curriculum, many are now developing significant experience and wisdom as they practice linking information literacy to more of the content of the curriculum. Where librarians were once satisfied with any kind of extended or consistent classroom contact, these libraries are now developing a strong experience base, assessing and evaluating their programs and expanding in new, more deliberate, and thoughtful directions. Readers interested in initiating, revising, or evaluating an instructional program that links libraries and learning will find models here that will be instructive, and, possibly, inspiring.

Which brings me to some important additional acknowledgements. This work describes, at its center, how collaboration in teams can work to the benefit of the whole. As a fine example, the generous collegial support and tolerance of the reference and instruction team at Evergreen gave me the flexibility to direct my focus to this project for most of an entire quarter. I hope, indeed I expect, as has been our practice over the years, to return this gift of time to them in the future. Many thanks are also due to the library interns who shared our work this year and thus lightened the load. Lastly, the work itself is based upon the kind, prompt, and detailed responses of many instructional and administrative colleagues from many academic libraries throughout higher education. To the informants who answered last minute flurries of inquiries and pleas for review and explanation: your tolerance, intelligence, and good will were magnificent and deeply appreciated.