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Learning Communities and Community Colleges

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The community college has been buffeted throughout its history by the contradictory pressures of capitalism and democracy, efficiency and equality, and diversion and democratization, and it continues to be an area of conflicting forces today.

—Brint and Karabel

Introduction

When the first junior college opened its doors in Joliet, Illinois, in 1901, its long-term future was by no means certain. Since then the two-year school has proven to be remarkably adaptable. Today, it is an integral part of American higher education, perhaps the part that is most American, serving as a portal to higher education for students of all races and classes, for both terminal and non-terminal students, for those continuing on to four-year institutions, and for those pursuing an associate's degree or occupational certificate. The community college's adaptability, its successful juggling of contradictory pressures, can be traced to many of its unique characteristics, among them its relative youthfulness and flexible structure, its focus on teaching rather than research, and its close ties to local communities.

As more and more students enter higher education, the community college continues to adapt. Fifty-one percent of students now entering higher education enroll first in a community college, and the contradictory pressures of democracy and capitalism are being felt more acutely than ever. Increasing numbers of students are entering open-access, two-year colleges underprepared and in need of remediation. In an increasingly fragmented, commuter environment, community colleges often find it difficult to cultivate the sense of community and deep engagement that can motivate students to stay enrolled. Because of the wide diversity in the academic backgrounds, abilities, and intentions of their students, community colleges face special challenges in terms of attrition and transfer. Educators are concerned that too many students who enter college drop out before attaining their academic goals. Some community college teachers are also concerned about the kind of education their students are receiving. They question whether students are adequately prepared for the more complex problem-solving and critical reflection that both the workplace and participation in a democratic society now demand of them. As social, economic, and technological changes around the world have called into question traditional educational practices, teachers have moved to more learner-centered approaches with an emphasis on clear learning outcomes. But at the same time, these teachers are subject to continued pressure from local employers to focus more resources on specialized occupational training. Meanwhile, all of higher education is coming under increasing pressure to contain costs and to document its effectiveness.

As a response to these challenges, many community colleges now offer learning communities. A purposeful restructuring of the curriculum to create clusters of courses, learning communities bring disciplines into relationship with each other to provide greater curricular coherence and more opportunities for active intellectual engagement. Learning communities are also associated with

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collaborative learning practices and foster a strong sense of academic belonging, which can be especially important for student success. Because learning communities promote rich academic communities, they have also been shown to increase student retention and persistence, among both transfer students and those seeking a terminal degree. Based on their observations of 275 classrooms at thirty-two community colleges around the nation, W. Norton Grubb and his colleagues at the University of California-Berkeley recently concluded that learning communities are among the most effective means by which community colleges can successfully continue their role as high-quality, comprehensive teaching institutions (Grubb et al. 1999).

In this monograph, after defining our use of the term “learning communities” and briefly sketching a context-setting history of community colleges, we explore three critical areas of tension in the educational mandates of community colleges and propose ways that learning communities enable community colleges to accommodate them while also improving undergraduate education. The three areas we explore are the pressure to fulfill both general education and vocational missions; the pressure to provide equal education for a diverse student population; and the pressure to offer quality education that is cost effective. The monograph concludes with short case studies depicting how learning community programs in a variety of community colleges have addressed these issues, key considerations for getting started, and a list of resources.

Defining Learning Communities

The term “learning community” has become a buzzword for a whole host of initiatives and activities. In the corporate world, it has been used to refer to less hierarchical, more team-based organizational structures. In economic development and community activist circles, local neighborhoods and development zones have been deemed “learning communities.” In academic settings, “learning community” is used to mean everything from a collaborative classroom environment to an entire institution.

Our use of the term “learning communities,” however, is very specific and intentional, denoting as it does a well-orchestrated and documented national education reform movement. (See Smith 2001 for a history of this movement.) Rooted in a Deweyan commitment to active, student-centered, integrated learning, the movement traces its origins to Alexander Meiklejohn’s Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in the 1920s, followed by Joseph Tussman’s experiment at Berkeley in the 1960s, and similar learning community experiments at San Jose State University. Comparable curricular innovations were introduced later in the 1970s at the State University of New York at Old Westbury, State University of New York at Stony Brook, LaGuardia Community College, Daytona Beach Community College, and The Evergreen State College (TESC). In the 1980s and 1990s learning communities expanded exponentially as a result of the leadership of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at TESC, the growing national emphasis on reforming undergraduate education, and the increasing visibility of learning communities. The prestigious National Institute of

Education's 1984 report, *Involvement in Learning*, for example, recommended that all colleges establish learning communities. Community colleges were among the first to step up to this challenge with the initial statewide effort occurring in the State of Washington. Today, more than 500 colleges and universities, among them 25 percent of all community colleges in the nation, offer learning communities (*Second National Survey of First Year Practices* 2002).

We use the term “learning communities” to refer to “the purposeful restructuring of the curriculum by linking or clustering courses that enroll a common cohort of students. This represents an intentional structuring of students’ time, credit, and learning experiences to build community and foster more explicit connections among students, faculty and disciplines” (Gabelnick et al. 1990). Students register for a cluster of courses, often team-taught or team planned by faculty from different disciplines who integrate course content around a centralizing theme. This clustering is designed to foster deep engagement, more opportunity for community-building in the classroom, and greater student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction. Effective learning communities are also based upon active learning and are a natural arena for implementing various other reforms such as collaborative learning, service-learning, and inquiry-based approaches to learning in general. The degree of course integration can vary in learning communities from quite minimal to total integration. In a film and history learning community, for instance, faculty members’ selection of films that reflect historical themes or periods considered in the history course might be the sole link. On the other hand, faculty members teaching speech, writing, and political science in a developmental education learning community may completely integrate their course content, assignments, and activities around a central theme such as “Defining Democracy.” Students might prepare a speech about how they see democracy defined in their daily experiences and then use it as the basis for an essay in which they compare or contrast their own experiences with other conceptions of democracy described in their political science readings.

While the degree of integration varies, any improvement in curricular coherence provides students with a more effective, contextualized arena for learning. Clustering professional or technical with general or liberal education courses can enhance students’ engagement in general studies, thus broadening their intellectual horizons and better preparing them for the responsibilities they will face as both employees and citizens. Similarly, combining introductory courses in diverse disciplines can help students understand both the interconnections and the conflicting paradigms among fields of study while meeting their general education requirements or prerequisites for majors. For developmental students and English as a Second Language (ESL) students, clustering developmental and language courses with “mainstream” offerings can ease the transition to college-level work. Finally, thematically organized courses tied to community-based projects can give students opportunities to examine how course content and lived experience connect and diverge.

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Community College History: Multiple Missions and Innovation

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The “contradictory pressures of capitalism and democracy, efficiency and equality, and diversion and democratization” faced by community colleges today are, as we noted above, reflected in three areas of tension inherent in their missions: the pressure to fulfill both general education and occupational goals; the pressure to provide equal education to a diverse student body; and the pressure to offer quality education at a reasonable cost. As we will argue, learning communities can help the community college continue to successfully accommodate these conflicting pressures that have long characterized it as an institution. Much more than a mere accommodation, however, learning communities can deepen and enrich student learning in seminal ways. To fully understand the role learning communities play in helping community colleges fulfill their complex role and at the same time improve undergraduate education, it is important to understand how these tensions came about.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, with the rise of corporations and the closing of the frontier, the image of the self-made individual with access to property and economic success through hard work and perseverance became increasingly chimerical. If the American ideology of individual advancement and equal opportunity were to be maintained, new avenues to success would have to be found. For Andrew Carnegie and other influential social philanthropists, the solution was not the redistribution of wealth but the creation of “ladders” upon which those without capital could climb to economic and social advancement (Brint and Karabel 1989, 3-4).

Up until 1890, education was not a requirement for success, partly because no education system per se existed. By 1920, however, the loose configuration of schools that constituted American education was beginning to form into a more stratified system, one that reflected its increasing ties to a hierarchical labor market. Thus, education provided a new means of advancement and revitalized the American ideology of equal opportunity (Brint and Karabel, 5).

The development of the two-year school during this period reflected tensions that are evident today. At about this time, several prominent university professors became interested in reforming the American university along more European lines. They came to see the general education of freshmen and sophomores as a drag on their ability to become highly specialized research institutions capable of advancing American industrial power. Separating those students from the rest of the university would also serve a useful gatekeeping function, discouraging less able students from continuing on. William Rainey Harper at the University of Chicago helped make this vision a reality when he separated instruction into the “Junior College” and the “Senior College” (Cohen and Brawer 1991; Zwerling 1976; Brint and Karabel 1989). According to Witt et al. (1994), Harper’s vision of a six-year high school—four years of secondary education merged with the first two years of college education—would provide a means to enter higher education while reinforcing the separation of general education and citizenship development from the research and specialization functions of the last two years of university studies. In arguing that Harper’s plan mediated between elitist and democratizing forces, Witt et al. note that Harper predicted that 40 percent of students who completed four years of high school would continue for an

additional two years. Zwerling points out, however, that Harper was quite clear about his motive for awarding an Associate in Arts degree at the end of the second year, that it was “not so much to reward students for work well done but rather to encourage them” to “give up college work at the end of the sophomore year” (as cited in Zwerling, 47). Thus, only the most gifted students would move on to the Senior College.

By 1920, the institution of the two-year college was fairly well-established. For roughly the next thirty years, in order to substantiate their claim to be genuine colleges, community colleges provided a curriculum focused on liberal arts transfer courses. Recognizing, however, that less than half of their students would ever actually matriculate to a four-year institution, early leaders in the junior college movement conceded that some other type of education was needed for those students. However, none believed in a narrowly-conceived, purely vocational education; rather they saw general education as a vital part of any skill-based program. Moreover, they insisted that the two-year college must maintain its transfer function (Brint and Karabel, 10, 36).

The late 1960s and 1970s were the decades of dramatic transformation for higher education in the United States as the community college system expanded to accommodate a doubling of the number of students going to college. Educators and politicians believed the community college to be an advantageous entry point into higher education for this new influx of students because it could provide local access and an emphasis on teaching at less cost than traditional universities. It also helped to reinforce the American ideology of equal access (Brint and Karabel, 5).

Since the 1960s, the separate occupational track in the two-year college has expanded rapidly, both in terms of course offerings and numbers of students opting for professional and technical degrees. Because many community college students come from lower socioeconomic groups, this phenomenon has been widely commented on by education critics. Zwerling (1976) extends an earlier argument by Burton Clark that it represents a “cooling-out” function, a socially sanctioned mechanism of class-linked tracking that ensures the continuation of social and class inequality. Cohen and Brawer (1991), on the other hand, question such conclusions, arguing that even if such tracking had never emerged, the educational system simply does not have the necessary influence to break down class distinctions, regardless of its organizational structure. Grubb et al. (1999) perceive the “cooling out” critique to be based on a faulty comparison; rather than being diverted away from four-year schools, most community college students are more likely never to have attended college at all.

In any case, the relationship between reality and the institutional rhetoric that the community college helps provide equal opportunity and upward mobility has been, and continues to be, problematic. Today, while the persistence rate is quite high—more than 70 percent—for community college students who complete a course of study and transfer to four-year schools (Adelman 1999), the highest proportion of at-risk students are those who enroll in two-year or less than two-year institutions (Kojaku and Nuñez 1998). Three-quarters of today’s community college students possess two or more of the factors that put them at risk for completion (CCSSE 2003).

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As we discuss later, the reasons that more community college students are at risk are complex. Learning communities, however, have been shown to improve retention rates at individual colleges and to raise student grade point averages as well. We of course make no claims that learning communities in and of themselves can resolve class inequalities. But they can provide students, including those middle- and upper-income students who also attend community college, with a different kind of educational experience, one that provides greater curricular coherence, intellectual engagement, and commitment to completing their academic goals. By restructuring the curriculum, learning communities can also help community colleges as they pursue their myriad and often conflicting goals, among them, training that is narrow enough to prepare students as workers for the highly specialized nature of twenty-first century employment yet broad enough to prepare them as citizens for the complexities of democratic participation in an increasingly diverse, divided, and socially and economically stratified nation.

How Learning Communities, by Fostering Coherent, Contextualized Learning, Help Accommodate the Contradictory Pressures of Professional/Technical Training and General Education

These contradictory pressures of professional/technical training and general education embedded in the mission of community colleges, as noted earlier, pose challenges to the contemporary community college in its role as a comprehensive college. These pressures even threaten to undermine its place in higher education since occupational education is seen by many theorists as the purview of secondary rather than higher education. In fact, some community colleges have sought to avoid any comparison to secondary education by aspiring to be more like four-year colleges. But even they face pressure by terminal degree students and some employers to provide quick training and access to the job market. Many experience stiff competition for students from certificate programs, from virtual schools offering less comprehensive degrees, and from employers providing training programs. At the same time, they face demands from transfer students, other employers, and national employer organizations to provide a more comprehensive education. As public institutions in a democracy, it is their responsibility to ensure a broad-based education for all students. By increasing curricular coherence across disciplines and across spheres—professional/technical education and general/liberal education—learning communities can help community colleges accommodate these dual pressures.

Currently, more than 90 percent of four-year and virtually all community colleges deliver their general education through distribution models, the cafeteria collection of courses meant to provide “curricular breadth” (Zeszotarski 1999). Such models frequently perpetuate the fragmentation and lack of curricular coherence long decried by educational critics. For both transfer and professional/technical students, these models often foster the perception that general education courses are “irrelevant” to their goals and therefore expendable. A science major, burdened with extensive prerequisites, may question the value of taking arts and humanities courses. In turn, an auto tech

student might well ask what political science has to do with working on cars. While distribution models remain the norm for transfer students, this kind of response can further increase pressure on community colleges to reduce general education offerings for students enrolled in pre-professional and technical programs. As community colleges bow to pressures to cut general education courses from technical programs, they become open to the criticism that they are not providing the broader education necessary for upward economic and social mobility. Yet, as one instructor in an occupational program observed, employment success involves more than “hands on” learning: “It’s the planning, the thinking, the organizing, the layout, the design. Otherwise they’re not going to get the good jobs out on the street, and they’re gonna be a gofer and they’re gonna be a helper if they can’t do the head work” (as cited in Grubb et al., 269).

As Dewey and others have noted, the issue is not the appropriateness of occupational education per se but the comprehensiveness of that education and whether it will provide citizens with what Dewey described as “the ability to become masters of their industrial fate” (as cited in Brint and Karabel, 228). Since distribution models for delivering general education have situated it in opposition to specialization, many students have come to perceive a comprehensive education as immaterial. Educational theorists, however, have long argued that a broad-based education is the *ground* for a successful individual and collective life. Stearns (2002), for instance, points out that a broad education will “enable students to appreciate a variety of issues [and] to think . . . *outside* as well as *within* their ultimate area of specialization” (44, emphasis added). Similarly, the 2002 Association of American Colleges and Universities report, *Greater Expectations*, argues that all students need a practical liberal education. While students “will continue to pursue different specializations in college,” it is critical that they are “empowered through the mastery of intellectual and practical skills, informed by knowledge about the natural and social worlds and about forms of inquiry basic to those studies, [and] responsible for their personal actions and for civic values” (xi).

Learning communities are effective at countering the fragmentation of the prevailing general education model. In contrast to what Raisman (1993) describes as the “thin spread” of introductory disciplinary courses, they can provide liberal arts/transfer and professional/technical students the curricular coherence and contextualized learning that he argues are needed to develop the intellectual and interpersonal habits of mind crucial for long-term economic and social success. Because learning communities intentionally restructure time and credits and organize course inquiry around a theme or problem, disciplines are brought into relationship with one another and learning is contextualized. For instance, linking one or more science courses to a literature course can provide science majors the opportunity to explore some of the complex intellectual, ethical, and moral issues scientists face in their practices. Similarly, combining an auto tech course, a political science course, and a sociology course around a theme such as “The Automobile and American Culture” can reveal to an auto tech student the importance of governmental policies and social history to his or her occupational course of study. In a restructured academic environment, instead

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of taking a prescribed number of credits of “related study” separated from their field, students can explore connections through meaningful conversations with each other and with their teachers, relating their learning to their lived experience. Such contextualizing of knowledge and meaning-making is crucial for deep learning. As the Project on Strong Foundations for General Education (1994) report concluded, “breadth and simple exposure to different fields of study” is “not sufficiently rigorous for the demands that students will face in their lifetimes” (iii-iv). The emerging consensus among educators, the report argues, is that a well-designed general education program is “a coherent course of study, one that is more than the sum of its parts” (iv).

In addressing the theme of the learning community, cohorts of students are also challenged to explore and address real social problems or find answers to work-related questions and issues. Because they are more likely to see relationships among various disciplines, they are provided with a more realistic view of problem solving. When a theme or particular topic is explored from several different angles or disciplinary perspectives, students have opportunities to discuss and attempt to negotiate complex and sometimes conflicting views on topics, readings, or issues. Students who enroll in team-taught learning communities receive an additional advantage of observing their faculty mentors engage in this exploration in an immediate way. As Grubb et al. note, in this type of learning community “faculty from several different disciplines are in the room, providing different perspectives, so students get a real range of response from the different discipline areas” (264). Rather than an abstract notion, interdisciplinary complexity and competing intellectual frameworks become a reality as instructors “argue with one another, providing varying interpretations and modeling for students the active debate and discussion they want to encourage.” As a result, students come to respect the complexity of real world problems and the value of sophisticated skills for understanding and managing those problems. According to the faculty who teach in such environments, these kinds of interdisciplinary experiences, coupled with an increased emphasis on student writing and speaking, encourage a more complex worldview and higher order thinking skills—and thus greater coherence of general education outcomes—than is possible in their stand-alone courses (Tollefson 1990).

Strong Foundations describes the ideal education in just these terms, as one in which students would “acquire specific skills of thought and expression, such as critical thinking and writing . . . ‘across the curriculum’ and imbedded within several courses.” They would learn to “integrate ideas from across disciplines to illuminate interdisciplinary themes, issues, or social problems” (Project 1994, iii-iv). Implicit, and sometimes explicit, in similar reports is the understanding that such learning must take place in a collaborative context—another central tenet of learning communities—rather than as an isolated, individual effort. As Chickering and Gamson (1987) observe, “Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one’s own ideas and responding to others’ reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding” (3).

By engaging students in collaborative work and by providing a more coherent curriculum and more contextualized learning, learning communities effectively address the many current calls for reforming undergraduate education. The 1990 Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report argued not only that students need higher order abilities—competency in problem solving, teamwork, social skills, and communication—but also that those are best taught in context. Similarly, in 1993, Weinstein and Van Mater Stone wrote that “educational models based only on transmission of knowledge, vocational preparation, or both . . . will not prepare students for the lifelong learning so important to future growth and success” (31). Much of the literature of the 1990s underscored these calls, marking a significant trend “away from traditional content-oriented structure” toward a focus on “themes and abilities” (Ratcliff et al. 2001, 5). Most writers now agree that general and occupational education should foster the development of what Eaton (1993) describes as “habits of thought . . . ways of approaching information and experience that strengthen [students'] reasoning capacity . . . awareness of relationship and responsibilities in social and civic context, and . . . attention to values and moral issues” (28). As *Strong Foundations* concludes, “general education must be much more than breadth and simple exposure to different fields of study,” an approach that today “is not sufficiently rigorous for the demands that students will face in their lifetimes” (Project 1994, iii).

Nevertheless, the pressures to continue traditional approaches are enormous. Practical, albeit important, concerns—legislative mandates for cost-effective delivery of degrees, student enrollment and attendance patterns, the increasing complexity of coordinating inter-institutional compacts, the traditions of faculty autonomy and student “consumer” choice, and the need for departments to justify their specialization and to graduate majors—may all seem best satisfied by a loosely defined collection of distribution courses. For community colleges offering both career and transfer programs, the proliferation of conflicting and complex standards for core coursework also works against coherence. How then can community colleges deliver what is clearly a more ambitious program of outcomes that supports learning at every level—actively engaging students in contextualized learning, supporting faculty in engaged and effective teaching practices, and fostering a college culture focused on the values and purposes of both general and occupational education?

We argue that learning communities are an effective way out of this impasse. As several of the case studies at the end of this monograph illustrate, learning communities have been used successfully at several community colleges to address these more practical concerns as well as the deeper educational issues raised here. On a practical note, integrating or linking existing courses within a discipline or program can ensure maintenance of both standards for coursework and articulation agreements. Clustering courses into larger blocks of time can appeal to both faculty and students, providing them with more convenient schedules and time to pursue complex intellectual tasks. Bringing disciplines into relationship with each other can allow faculty more meaningful exploration of disciplinary boundaries and specialization. Perhaps more important, learning

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communities can provide needed undergraduate reform. In contrast to existing cafeteria-style models of general education, which perpetuate fragmentation and often dichotomize occupational and general education, learning communities respond to experts' calls for inquiry-based, multidisciplinary, collaborative, and experiential approaches to learning. By providing a more coherent and contextualized curriculum, learning communities can help all community college students get the broad education they need to be successful in the workplace and as citizens.

How Learning Communities, by Improving Student Persistence, Help Accommodate the Contradictory Pressures of Providing Quality Education to a Diverse Student Population

One of the remarkable hallmarks of American education in the latter half of the twentieth century has been the expansion of access of higher education—from soldiers attending college on the GI bill after World War II and the Korean War, to people of color, women, people with disabilities, and older Americans entering college in the post-Civil Rights era. While this phenomenon of greater access is occurring across higher education, it is most visible in community colleges, which have been at the forefront of this democratizing trend. Conveniently local, with their open door policies, they have provided what is now near-universal access to post-secondary education, access that has resulted in an extremely diverse student body. Community colleges enroll a significant number of minority students—46 percent of African American and 55 percent of Hispanic undergraduates in the United States (Phillippe and Patton 2000). These students are a growing proportion of the population that will attend college in the next fifteen years. The average age is twenty-nine, and women now make up 58 percent of the student body. Many of the students entering community colleges are immigrants and English is their second (or third or fourth) language. Because many students must work in order to support themselves and raise families while they study, 63 percent attend part time. Many are highly mobile, attending a number of colleges, transferring from two- to four-year schools and even at times from four- to two-year schools. At the same time, as tuition at four-year schools has climbed, increasing numbers of students are again looking at the community college to fulfill its original role—as a junior college providing transferable general education and liberal arts credits. Many of these students fit a more traditional profile: they attend full time, don't have families of their own, and see attending college as their primary job.

While open door policies have attracted an ethnically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse student body, the community college's success with near-universal access has not been matched with comparable student academic success. Many students do persist, eventually earning certificates or degrees that enable them to enter the job market and achieve financial stability. Many more do not, although the rapidly changing nature of work, communication, and the geopolitical landscape has created an increased need for education beyond high school (Carnevale and Fry 2001). From 1983 to 1993, college-educated males aged twenty-four to thirty-four gained 10 percent in real earnings while those

with only high school credentials lost 9 percent in real earnings (Roueche and Roueche 1993, 15). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 20 percent of U.S. jobs are now classified as “unskilled,” and in the remainder of the decade, through 2010, more than 40 percent of projected employment growth will be in jobs that require college or postsecondary degrees (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2002). As Adelman (1999) notes, since the projected college access rate is 75 percent and since a college degree is increasingly used as a measure of employability, colleges have a responsibility to both students and society at large to determine how best to support the success of those who enter.

Because two- and four-year school degree completion has become increasingly important, it has become equally important to understand the complicated enrollment patterns of students in higher education. Enrollment intent and transfer patterns make it difficult to generalize about community college graduation rates. Some students enroll in only one or two classes for personal enrichment or certification or to update skills, and many—well over half—enroll as part of a complex pattern of multiple institutional enrollments (Choy 2002).

Nevertheless, some comparisons are suggestive. Of all students who enroll in college intending to earn a bachelor’s degree, 23 percent of those who begin in two-year schools—compared to 46 percent who begin in four-year schools—actually complete, with the rates lower for nontraditional students (31 percent compared to 54 percent for traditional) and lowest (11 percent) for students who are highly nontraditional (Choy 2002). Among African American and Latino students, the majority of whom enroll in community colleges, the rates of four-year degree completion lag more than 20 percent behind other students (Adelman 1999). As a group, community college students are three to four more times as likely to possess the characteristics that put them at risk for degree completion (Kojaku and Nuñez 1998).

The greatest risk for not attaining educational goals appears to be for students who drop or stop out in their first year of post-secondary education (Choy 2002). Students who take fewer than twenty credits in their first calendar year of post-secondary education are far less likely to complete four-year degrees (Adelman 1999). And those who begin their enrollment in higher education in the community college system are far more likely to interrupt enrollment before the end of the first year—22 percent of all two-year students compared to 9 percent of those who enroll in public four-year schools. Of these, nontraditional students are at even greater risk, with 28 percent stopping or dropping out before the second year of study (Kojaku and Nuñez 1998). “Academic intensity,” the preparation that students receive prior to entering postsecondary education, is the single most critical factor influencing this pattern. Although socioeconomic status by itself is not a key factor in determining success, students who enroll in two-year schools expecting to complete a four-year degree but then never attend a four-year school, are often from lower socioeconomic levels and arrive in college with fewer academic resources (Adelman 1999). Given that 51 percent of college students enter higher education through the community college system, it is crucial that community

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One factor critical for many students is preparedness. While many are prepared for college-level work and can function well in an academic culture, others are woefully underprepared. McCabe (2000) argues that one of the greatest dilemmas facing higher education is the sheer numbers of students—one million annually—who enter college insufficiently prepared for college-level work. These students—29 percent of all college students, 41 percent of community college students—arrive needing remedial work in reading, writing, and/or math. Of these, 54 percent are under twenty-four years of age, 61 percent are white non-Hispanic, 23 percent are African American, and 12 percent are Hispanic, with “each minority group . . . overrepresented” (McCabe 2000, 4). The Roueches (1999) argue that the need to address underpreparedness is one of the most controversial challenges facing community colleges, especially since “there has been so little progress toward establishing better systems of remedial education” (41). Citing their own earlier 1993 study, they note that the problem extends beyond basic skills to one:

of a new generation of adult learners characterized by economic, social, personal, and academic insecurities. They are older adults, with family and other financial responsibilities that require part-time, or often full-time, jobs in addition to coursework requirements; they are first-generation learners with unclear notions of their college roles and their goals; they are members of minority and foreign-born groups; they have poor self-images and doubt their abilities to be successful; and they have limited world experiences that further narrow the perspectives they can bring to options in their lives. (Roueche and Roueche 1999, 42)

Another factor that works against success for many community college students is their competing responsibilities. The 2002 report *Engaging Community Colleges* indicates that nearly a third of community college students work more than thirty hours a week, and half of them work more than twenty. Many care for dependents: 21 percent have children living at home and 29 percent spend eleven hours or more a week caring for children. Moreover, 93 percent commute. Given these multiple demands on their time, it should not be surprising that significant numbers of students have never worked collaboratively with others outside of class (45 percent of part time, 29 percent of full time) nor met with faculty to discuss course concepts and readings (51 percent of part-time, 39 percent of full-time), both of which are significant factors in student retention and academic success (CCSSE 2002).

Finally, isolation among community college students can also work against their success. Since most community colleges are commuter schools, students often schedule classes as close together as possible, with a minimum number of hours on campus, so they can drive in for class and then quickly away to work or home. If instructors are not using collaborative or cooperative pedagogies—and according to numerous studies, many still don’t—students may have few opportunities to interact with their peers in or out of class. As one teacher noted, “There is no, of course, dormitory life or on-campus life because of the fact that

no one is resident at the school. And that means that many students are hungry or want some sort of experience that marks them as being part of a group” (Grubb et al., 262). Many community college students miss out on the coherence of their personal and academic lives possible at residential colleges and universities, a coherence that is often critical for their success.

To address these issues and provide an efficient means for improving student success, many community colleges are implementing learning communities. For many of the same reasons that learning communities counter fragmentation of the curriculum, they provide a means to strengthen students’ academic resources as well as their commitment to their educational goals. As Grubb et al. note, nearly every researcher looking at learning communities has observed higher motivation among students enrolled in learning communities. Long-term studies at various community colleges, including Community College of Denver, North Seattle Community College, and the QUANTA program at Daytona Beach Community College in Florida, suggest that students in learning communities have significantly higher retention, persistence, and graduation rates than students in traditional courses. Other studies have also demonstrated significant gains in persistence for learning community students (Tinto et. al 1994) as well as higher levels of academic achievement than students in stand-alone courses (Tokuno 1993). A recent meta-analysis of more than 100 studies of learning communities demonstrates that these findings have been replicated in learning communities throughout Washington and many other states (Taylor et al. 2003).

At the heart of learning communities’ ability to improve students’ achievement and persistence is their power to engage diverse students intellectually and socially in *community*, thus providing them with a sense of belonging. Research by Tinto et al. (1993), Ratcliff et al. (2001), and Zhao and Kuh (2003), indicates that participating in a cluster of courses characterized by collaborative, contextualized learning allows students to spend more time together and instills a strong sense of belonging and commitment that correlates with higher completion and persistence rates, particularly among underprepared and minority students. Learning communities, built on the premise that learning is a social endeavor enhanced by quality relationships, create academic community along multiple lines: among students, between students and faculty, and among faculty. In his studies of students enrolled in learning communities at Seattle Central Community College, Tinto (1997) found that students’ friendships, forged during their studies together, “bridged the academic-social divide that typically plagues student life,” especially among students unfamiliar with academic culture. While many students entering college experience their personal lives and their college lives as two competing worlds, Tinto notes that “learning communities helped students draw these two worlds together” (610).

As students experience intellectual inquiry in the context of deepening friendships, the college becomes a place to gather with fellow students and, sometimes, faculty. It becomes less foreign and more familiar, a place of belonging—sometimes more so than home. As one learning community student put it: “The learning community was like an extended family, and the friends that I made here became the most important reason for me to come to class and to continue with my college education” (Hesse and Mason 2003, 14). Grubb et al.

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also found that learning community students experienced a stronger sense of belonging among their peers. One instructor, describing a learning community as “a college within a college,” stated that “our students find in the learning community the closest thing to a real college, and having a continuity with classmates” (cited in Grubb et al., 262). Likewise, Grubb and his colleagues comment on “the development of group motivation” they frequently observed in learning communities (263).

Another way learning communities foster a sense of community among community college students and thus help them persist and achieve their goals is by creating academic arenas in which their experiences and views count. Patrick Hill, former provost of The Evergreen State College, points out that learning communities try to create new kinds of communities. He has defined community as a place or process by which diverse others engage in “conversations of respect” (Hill 1991, 41). In such conversations, each recognizes that the other’s views are grounded in assumptions and beliefs that are at least as valid as their own. Each, too, recognizes that diverse points of view contribute to a more complete understanding of the topic or issue at hand and thus is willing to be changed as a result of considering those other perspectives.

Both structurally and pedagogically, learning communities support the intentional creation of such conversations. Faculty from different departments represent varying disciplines in “conversation” with each other, which enables students to experience complex and sometimes competing views on topics or issues. Similarly, students from widely divergent ethnic, socioeconomic, and academic backgrounds bring to the classroom the diversity of their life experiences and worldviews that, in the context of community described by Hill, become a rich resource for learning. As Grubb et al. observe, one important strength of learning communities is the exchange of different disciplinary perspectives that students experience in class. By modeling intellectual questioning and providing contrasting points of view, teachers are able to “socialize students to more active roles” as well (264). Tinto found that the exchange of diverse views among faculty and students became “an important factor in their learning *about the content*” of their courses. As one student stated, “We learn how to interact not only with ourselves but with other people of different races, different sizes, different colors, different everything. I mean it just makes learning a lot better” (Tinto 1997, 612).

Such exchanges, in addition to fostering community among community college students, can also help students meet the learning outcomes for cross-cultural understanding called for by many education experts. As *Strong Foundations* suggests, students’ long-term economic and social success will depend on their capacity to “understand and deal constructively with the diversity of the contemporary world.” Their ability to “construct a coherent framework for ongoing intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic growth in the presence of such diversity” will likewise determine their success as local and global citizens (Project 1994, 4). While a recent survey of 226 academic administrators showed that global and domestic diversity would be “the most important agenda on their campuses in the coming decade” (Gaff 1999, 5), in the wake of the

events of September 11, 2001, we have an even clearer sense of the urgent need for a “globally competent populace,” skilled in collective action that depends increasingly on cross-cultural understanding and cross-cultural communication (AACU 2002, 5). Because one of their fundamental principles is the deliberate attempt to make students’ lived experiences a rich resource for learning, learning communities can help students build from their own lives and the shared experiences of the classroom toward a deeper understanding of how to build community across difference. When the themes explicitly place difference at the center of course inquiry, as in the learning communities, “Ways of Knowing: The African American Experience in America” and “New Words on the Native American World,” diverse students may also see themselves reflected in the classroom and the curriculum, further undergirding their sense of counting in the academic enterprise.

Again, to return to Tinto’s insights about the Seattle Central learning communities, the correlation between students’ sense of meaningful social engagement and their interest in intellectual inquiry is important, suggesting that an effective curriculum must provide students with ways to “attach themselves to relevant social groups as a way to cope with the difficulties of ‘getting in’ to college” (Tinto 1997, 618). For students who have not found themselves in the traditional curriculum, attaching to “relevant social groups” around issues that matter to them may help provide the necessary impetus for remaining in the intellectual enterprise. As Laura Rendón has argued, first-generation and culturally diverse students, many of whom find college culture different and intimidating, learn to trust their own abilities and become confident learners when the learning environments, both in and out of the classroom, provide the opportunity for validating, relationship-centered experiences both with other students and with faculty (Rendón 2002, 12). In such environments, she continues, students are transformed from non-traditional students to “powerful learners and persisters” (17).

In addition to building community among diverse students through a heightened sense of belonging and validating students’ diverse experiences and views, learning communities also help community colleges succeed by fostering exciting teaching. Grubb and his colleagues saw some of the most innovative and engaging teaching in learning community courses (Grubb et al., 263). In many respects, the range of abilities and interests of the diverse students who enroll in community college classes necessitates approaches that can engage them all. “They’re all out there in that classroom,” one instructor observed, “and you have to make it interesting for all of them” (7). In learning communities, faculty often pool their experience and expertise to create more sophisticated, more interesting reading and writing assignments. Linked courses allow faculty to reinforce content in both classes through a wide variety of connections and divergences among disciplines. Grubb et al. also observed how learning community faculty frequently related course themes to students’ lived experiences, increasing their motivation and learning (263).

Learning communities, because they intentionally foster community and exciting teaching, also help community colleges address the structural problem

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of connecting diverse students with the curriculum within a limited number of available hours. To reach students, colleges must find “powerful engagement strategies,” ways to connect effectively and efficiently with students during what *Engaging Community Colleges* calls “capture time,” those few hours actually spent in class (CCSSE 2002). Because learning communities intentionally restructure student time and credit, they effectively and efficiently capitalize on traditional class time, particularly, as is common, when the courses are scheduled back-to-back in “blocks,” thus creating schedules that not only are convenient and attractive but also allow students to experience one thoughtfully integrated course with well-paced assignments and activities. By providing class time for collaborative work on integrated assignments, learning communities increase students’ time on task—one of the critical factors in academic achievement. Through their powerful engagement strategies, learning communities connect students, give them the sense that they are using their time more efficiently within a more coherent curriculum, and help lessen the isolation and reduce the pull of competing priorities.

Importantly, in addition to making the time spent in class more cohesive, the highly collaborative nature of learning communities and the deep engagement most students experience often lead them to spend more time working with others outside of class. As Grubb and his associates point out, as a result of this intentional community building, community college students in learning communities report that “they come to know their fellow students better and are able to work with them more both in and out of class—in contrast to conventional practice in community colleges, where students typically find a new group in virtually every class they take” (Grubb et al., 264).

Not only do learning community students spend more time interacting with their peers, they also experience more interaction with their teachers, as researchers such as Tinto, Grubb et. al, and Tollefson have observed. Intentionally designed to increase such interaction, learning communities provide the frequent faculty-student exchanges that are a critical factor in student intellectual development, in fact, “the most important factor in student motivation and involvement. Faculty concern helps students get through rough times and keep on working. Knowing a few faculty members well enhances students’ intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans” (Chickering and Gamson 1987, 2). Likewise, as K. Patricia Cross (1998) points out, “when faculty show an interest in students, get to know them through informal as well as formal channels, engage in conversations with them, show interest in their intellectual development, then students respond with enthusiasm and engagement” (7). Although it was based on data from 365 four-year colleges, a recent analysis of the National Survey of Student Engagement confirms a consistently positive correlation between “student academic performance [and] engagement in educationally fruitful activities (such as academic integration, active and collaborative learning, and interaction with faculty members)” (Zhao and Kuh 2003).

The benefits of learning communities to community college students—the building of community through a greater sense of belonging and through

validating course structures and pedagogies; the fostering of innovative, exciting teaching; and the increased efficacy of time spent on campus, including greater contact with faculty—are particularly important to the success of developmental students. More than other community college students, the success of these students is threatened by factors such as underpreparedness, competing responsibilities, and isolation. At Jackson Community College, Michigan, when learning communities were developed to address the needs of at-risk students, the results were impressive. The college found that their:

retention rate for all students enrolled in learning communities topped 93 percent—30 percent higher than [the] regular rate. Of the at-risk students enrolled in learning communities, 92 percent of them re-enrolled in the winter semester. Furthermore, on a four-point scale, the at-risk students enrolled in learning communities had a four-point average of 2.41 compared with a GPA of 1.68 for other at-risk students at the college. They completed 92 percent of the classes they enrolled in. And at the end of the first semester, 30 percent were on academic probation compared with 41 percent for other at-risk students. (Howser 1998, 4)

The results at Jackson Community College are not untypical of learning community results in community colleges in general. Local studies at Spokane Falls Community College and Skagit Valley College in Washington, as well as long-term studies at Grossmont College in San Diego, California, and LaGuardia Community College in New York, also demonstrate that students in developmental skills courses linked with content courses like biology and psychology performed as well as or better than those students enrolled in comparable stand-alone courses (Taylor et al. 2003).

As community colleges endeavor not just to enroll but to graduate an increasingly diverse student population, learning communities provide a pedagogical and structural means for improving student persistence and retention. While research demonstrates that failure to persist may be less of a problem in community colleges than previously thought and that, to be accurate, persistence data must take into account students' complex multi-institutional attendance patterns, it also reveals that continuous enrollment is a significant factor in degree completion rates (Adelman 1999). If the community college is to provide equal education, not just equal access, its students must stay in school and complete their education. Thus retention and persistence remain a central concern for most administrators and faculty, a concern that must be understood as a much more complex phenomenon than previously recognized.

Retention and persistence rates also concern the local communities that community colleges serve. Community colleges view themselves as closely integrated into the fabric of their local communities and responsive to their needs: local employers serve on the admission and advisory boards for technical and professional programs, and the scope and quality of education materially affects local communities. Thus, keeping students enrolled is also a local concern.

A growing body of literature suggests that learning communities are a highly effective strategy for enhancing student retention and graduation rates within

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institutions. As the cases at the end of this monograph show, several community colleges have designed learning community programs specifically to address these issues. In well-designed learning communities, students, particularly underprepared students, have the opportunity to experience a powerful sense of belonging. The diversity of students’ lived experience—their ethnic, socioeconomic, and academic differences—can become a rich resource for learning and understanding. Students can experience innovative and motivating teaching and more valuable use of time spent in class, including greater contact with peers and faculty. Learning communities can help community colleges go beyond equal access to fulfill the promise of equal education for all students.

How Learning Communities, by Fostering Faculty Development and Cross-Campus Community, Help Accommodate the Pressures of Providing Quality yet Cost-Effective Education

As we have noted previously, at the same time that community colleges are experiencing declining budgets, they are facing new external pressures: demands for greater accountability to legislatures and the local community, calls for a “seamless” K-20 education, and requirements by accrediting bodies for more extensive and more meaningful assessment of learning. While recognizing that these initiatives will improve the quality of education, community colleges worry about their cost. Because they serve as the point of access to higher education for large numbers of students and because community college students are often their own primary source of financial support, colleges tend to resist tuition increases. It is important, therefore, that community colleges make judicious decisions about how to direct their limited resources to achieve maximum quality education for students.

One critical way community colleges can improve both efficiency and quality is to recommit themselves to good teaching and closely analyze how they support it. As John Tagg (2003) points out in his recent book *The Learning Paradigm College*, higher education is usually organized around the instruction paradigm rather than what we know about learning. In order to shift their focus from teaching to effective learning and student outcomes, community colleges must educate themselves about the nature of learning and make conscious decisions about the level of institutional support they provide to faculty. In their study of teaching and learning in community colleges, Grubb et al. focus on this key aspect of educational reform. They observe that the pervasive “lofty rhetoric” praising American education is not matched by an equivalent understanding of what constitutes effective teaching and how teaching practices can be improved. Little consideration is given to the quality of teacher preparation and to systematic support for improving practices. Instead, as John Murray (2002) found in his review of research about faculty development in community colleges, few colleges tie faculty development to the college mission of teaching, few attempt to measure the effects of their efforts on student learning, and few faculty members participate.

Grubb et al. argue that to improve students’ classroom experiences we must understand the role of faculty in providing those experiences and must better

support faculty development. The quality of faculty teaching, they suggest, is dependent not only on faculty education, the availability of resources, and campus culture, but on “the network of peers they create (or fail to create)” (Grubb et al., 2). However, many efforts at educational reform overlook the importance of building a faculty community. As *Strong Foundations* notes, although the vitality of this community is empirically related to the success of education programs, “intellectual isolation, disciplinary fragmentation, and minimal interaction among faculty and students are still facts of life at many American colleges and universities” (Project 1994, 31-32). Seidman (1985) and Grubb et al. have shown in the two major studies of community college faculty that this isolation and fragmentation are true for community college faculty as well. Even in colleges that acknowledge the value of community, teaching is usually a solo enterprise with little opportunity to observe other teachers’ classes and to engage with them in meaningful conversation about disciplines and pedagogy. Committee and departmental responsibilities create additional demands on full-time faculty members’ time. Library and counseling faculty are even more isolated by the constraints of their staffing schedules. The need to work at other colleges and/or jobs to provide sufficient income limits opportunities for adjunct faculty members to exchange ideas and leaves them unable to attend workshops, retreats, and other professional development venues—when these exist. Ironically, the conditions that give rise to the need for community and support among faculty—classroom isolation and lack of time—are exactly those that work against it. As a result, too many faculty members in community colleges experience deep alienation and isolation in their work. Grubb et al. refer to this isolation as a “defining aspect of instructors’ lives” (Grubb et al., 283).

To counter this, many critics argue that good teaching must be seen as a collective enterprise, not just among students and between students and faculty but among faculty members themselves. As Stephen Brookfield (2002) notes in an article about how reflective practice can help faculty members respond to the “varied and sometimes volatile mix” created by the diversity of community college students, the effort to improve teaching “is most fruitfully conducted as a collective endeavor” (31, 34-35).

Because learning communities provide the opportunity for faculty members to engage in sustained, daily conversations about teaching practices and theory, they offer colleges a powerful and cost-efficient way to foster best practices, counter faculty isolation, and re-energize faculty commitment to student learning. Just as students report greater intellectual commitment and a sense of belonging, faculty members who teach in learning communities report greater intellectual and social engagement, enhanced commitment to their teaching, and greater respect for and connection to their colleagues as a result of teaching with others. In his study of learning community faculty in Washington, Tollefson (1991) found that even those “burned out” in their profession described the experience of collaborative teaching as energizing and transformational. The results of their experiences included “the emergence of a new credible faculty leadership, a reinvigorated sense of faculty purpose, and an interest in seeking new

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perspectives on the discipline” (10). As Jean MacGregor (2000) observes, these experiences strengthen faculty community:

As they look back on their learning community teaching experiences, the faculty teams (or faculty/student affairs teams) who feel the most engaged speak repeatedly about their own learning and their own sense of community, beyond what they created for and with their students. They speak of the intense stimulation of discovering each others’ disciplines and teaching practices, the affirmation of reflecting together on students they had in common, and the deep satisfaction of learning to collaboratively create a curriculum. They reflect on a newfound trust and respect for their colleagues. (9)

Ongoing, daily modeling and critical reflection of pedagogical practices among faculty members, particularly in team-taught classes, deepens and improves teaching and student learning. As learning community faculty members explore the ways in which their disciplines reinforce and diverge from each other, they not only develop an appreciation for their colleagues’ work, they also begin to understand their own disciplinary specialties from new perspectives. Discussions of assignments and activities often lead to clearer learning outcomes and better strategies for achieving those goals. Faculty members report greater confidence in using a range of strategies that challenge and engage students, including collaborative and cooperative strategies, student self-reflection, techniques for seminars, workshops, one-on-one instruction, and more meaningful integration of lecture and discussion (Finley 1990; Rye 1997; Bystrom 1997; Tollefson 1990; Brown 2003; Smith et al. 2004). As one learning community instructor in a community college remarked:

It’s very, very enriching to see other teachers work, teachers who are already quite adept, quite experienced, veteran teachers with enormous reserves of technique . . . So there’s an enormous kind of fertilization, different sorts of ideas, and also you get a chance to run things up the flagpole, and so there’s that kind of enrichment that would never be possible in the normal traditional venue where you are going into the classroom every day by yourself. And you might get some feedback from students [or] from the division chair and other peers, but it’s not the same. *This is continual. This is every week.* (as cited in Grubb et al., 265, emphasis added)

Significantly, these relationships and this rich cross-fertilization of content and pedagogy often continue when faculty members, returning to their stand-alone classes, revise their teaching practices to include the new strategies they have adopted, as Nancy Finley (1991) found in her interviews of thirty-four faculty at Seattle Central Community College. Learning communities can thus provide a strategic approach to improving instructional practices throughout the curriculum. Those who teach with student services professionals often discover services and strategies that can better help students succeed. Similarly, faculty who teach with composition instructors can learn how to design productive essay assignments and to evaluate student writing more effectively and efficiently.

Finally, the close collaboration necessary to create and sustain communities of student learners in the classroom can lead to a broader sense of community,

not just among faculty but for the whole college. Studies of community college faculty, such as those of Tollefson, Finley, Bystrom, Brown, and Rye, as well as of four-year faculty (Cornwell and Stoddard 2001; Eby 2001; Tommerup 1993) have found that in addition to broadening faculty interest in interdisciplinary research and strengthening teaching practices, learning community experiences help to build stronger relationships within the whole institution. The private nature of isolated classrooms, with each faculty member teaching “his or her” students, becomes a shared enterprise to support “our” students. The work of identifying the best course combinations, student needs, and schedule and space considerations for learning community courses and programs requires a collaborative effort from many areas of the college, including student services, public relations, and admissions. Conversations about effective learning and how best to achieve it can lead to greater understanding of the value of—and constraints upon—the work of all members of the college.

The effort to improve student learning should not be piecemeal. As Grubb et al. note, “All too often debates about education become mired in conflicts over means—funding, political control, personnel policies, the allocation of space and equipment” rather than the nature of learning and effective teaching (1). As a result, the responsibility of educational reform falls to faculty members with the time, will, and energy to focus on their own individual practices. To be successful, however, the shift to a learning paradigm must be a collective effort pursued *by institutions*, not just individual practitioners. To that end, Grubb and his colleagues argue that colleges need to provide more effective professional development by “shift[ing] focus from one-shot, Friday-afternoon affairs—‘fancy educators coming and talking to us about things’—to more sustained and collective efforts.” They need to create “a culture that supports teaching—that recognizes its complexity in *every* subject, that respects its collective nature, and that communicates these beliefs to faculty and students consistently” (Grubb et al., 363).

Learning communities, we argue, are a powerful vehicle for just such an effort, one that provides ongoing, effective professional development. Gabelnick et al. (1990) describe them as a “low-cost, high-yield approach to educational reform” (77). Because faculty who teach in learning communities have the opportunity to engage in daily, critical reflection of their teaching practices and because learning community programs can bring an entire campus together in the effort to improve student learning, this reform can help improve the quality of undergraduate education by re-orienting community colleges to their central mission—good teaching, which is, as Grubb et al. observe, “necessary to reconcile the conflicting demands placed on community colleges” (362).

Conclusion

Community colleges continue to be a fertile arena for innovation and change, as is evident from the way that so many community colleges have experimented with learning communities as a way to fulfill their many, often-competing, missions. As we have seen, learning communities are used to address a variety of goals in general education, in technical and professional programs, and in

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developmental education. A highly adaptable form of curricular restructuring, they have been important in promoting student persistence, curricular coherence, student engagement, and student achievement. As higher education strives for higher standards of performance for all students, finding cost effective structures that work is vitally important. Thus, approaches that are holistic and can encompass the many other important reform efforts on the landscape—in service-learning, in assessment, in multicultural education—deserve particular consideration. Learning communities are especially promising in this regard.

Learning communities can also contribute to the pressing need in our society for community. In its 1988 landmark report, *Building Communities*, the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges defined the term “community” as not only “a region to be served, but also as a climate to be created.” Community needs to be purposefully created, especially in institutions increasingly characterized by specialization, disciplinary fragmentation, and mobility. Commuter institutions face special challenges since many of the students attend part time and many of the faculty serve on part-time contracts as well. We now know that learning communities can help us develop engaged communities of learners by altering classroom structures and practices. But they are also helping us build more collaborative communities across our institutions, bringing faculty and administrators together and forging new partnerships between academic and student affairs. Through the experiences of establishing and sustaining coherent programs to support learning community classrooms, faculty and staff learn from one another and begin to value their differences as resources for student learning and for institutional improvement.

Finally, learning communities allow all of us to practice the habits of the mind critical to working with others and living in community. Increasingly, colleges are recognizing that they can play a crucial role in preparing students for civic engagement. Learning communities extend this role and reinforce it through classroom practices and experiences, from which students can move outward, transferring their understanding of the practices that foster community within the classroom and on the campus to the communities beyond the campus. In doing so, they are better prepared to meet the ultimate objective of community colleges, which is, as Harlacher and Gollattscheck (1992) observe:

The improvement of community life through the renewed ability of individual citizens to participate in the affairs of the community, to cope successfully with continuous social and cultural change, to contribute to the economic stability and well-being of the community as productive workers rather than liabilities, to partake of and contribute to our cultural heritage through worthwhile use of leisure time, and to collectively strengthen the various institutions and organizations that make up the community. (32)

Learning communities, perhaps more than any other reform, can help realize this ultimate objective of public education for all citizens: a vital community life brought about through the active, informed, reflective participation of a productive citizenry.

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