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Tips on Getting Started
with Learning Communities

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As with any program or reform in higher education, introducing learning communities into a college and/or integrating an existing program into a college requires thoughtful attention to campus culture. Several available resources, many of which are listed at the end of this monograph, provide specific detail about how to design and implement effective programs. Our purpose here is to explain some of the key considerations and propose some guiding principles for establishing effective learning communities.

While it is sometimes tempting to adopt a successful program from another institution, this is seldom as practical or effective as it might seem. Institutions vary in small and dramatic ways, and the cut-and-paste method seldom works. In addition, colleges all initiate their programs from different starting points. Some receive substantial grant support; others receive no outside funding. Some develop out of faculty initiative; others from administrative directive. Some develop out of a focus on retention; others from a desire to create curricular coherence. Whatever the starting point, the experiences of existing programs suggests that those that succeed fulfill the needs of their particular campuses and develop an infrastructure grounded in the campus culture.

Successful programs are designed on the basis of a clear curricular rationale tied to the college's goals and mission and are effectively grounded in the institution's values and in its formal and informal structures. One of the first, most important steps, therefore, is to identify the role of learning communities in institutional priorities. Rather than presume that everyone on campus will accept on faith that the decision to provide learning communities is based on student need, it is more effective to establish a clear, well-articulated rationale for the learning communities program. Defining this rationale includes identifying how the program addresses the college's core values, priorities, mission, and/or strategic plan.

Successful programs also identify which students the program is intended to serve and why. Learning community design (the course combinations, themes, and activities) as well as program logistics (the time and place that courses will be offered, how they will be provided) should develop out of an understanding of the target populations of students and their particular needs. For example, learning communities might be intended to provide a bridge to upper-division courses, a means of providing intellectual challenge in a welcoming environment for minority or ESL students, a first-year experience for incoming students, a capstone experience for students who are completing degrees, or, quite often, several of these. Understanding the student population and culture of the institution will help in the decision about where to house the program and how it should be structured and supported.

Similarly, the decision about a learning community model must be based on the specific abilities and needs at the college. Models of learning communities range from linking two courses to creating fully integrated programs that constitute a full load for both students and faculty. The model or models chosen need to fit with student enrollment patterns and faculty teaching loads. Successful programs are usually built around distribution, core, or required courses that enroll large numbers of students. In addition, it may be necessary to

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remain open to accepting new ideas and models, ones that respond to particular student needs. Some colleges have found that it works best to establish specific learning community characteristics or criteria as well as specific schedule needs and to encourage the development of courses that meet those goals, which might include a mix of models as well as offerings on evenings and weekends, during intercessions, or through distance learning.

Not surprisingly, effective programs require both faculty and administrative involvement, communication with and support of advising/counseling, student involvement, and an appropriate structure. In addition, the most effective programs have an identifiable “lead,” usually a faculty coordinator, and a steering or advisory committee that draws from those areas of the campus that are needed for effective delivery.

Successfully implementing reform in any institution requires careful analysis of the institution and its willingness to change and identification of possible problem areas. In addition to understanding the identity and needs of students to be served, it is important to understand the college’s own culture and the faculty culture. Learning community pedagogy emphasizes collaborative and active models of learning. Colleges may already have a vibrant, innovative learning culture or an active teaching and learning center, or they may need to evaluate how to provide support for innovation in terms of time, compensation, and the incentives most likely to be effective for their particular faculty members.

Administrative commitment is equally essential for starting as well as sustaining an effective program. Administrators need to help identify what kinds of initial support is needed for program success and then to locate sources for that—for instance, support for initial planning and development in the form of faculty stipends, reassigned time, on- or off-campus planning retreats, and/or lower enrollments for pilot courses. Many learning communities do not cost institutions more and may even be financially beneficial, because they result in enhanced student retention and faculty development and—in the case of effectively structured and integrated programs—institutional efficiencies. Both initially and in established programs, administrative support is needed for space, schedule, and registration considerations, for advertising, and for ongoing scheduling support. Administrators, faculty members, and staff need to collaborate to identify critical student populations as well as support programs and college initiatives.

Programs also need sufficient and focused support for assessment of the learning community effort. In addition to planning for both staff and financial support for assessment, colleges should identify the kinds of assessments needed early in the formative stages of the program as well as later, when it is essential to document its effectiveness. The assessment plan should be directed to the specific measures identified in the rationale for introducing learning communities and should provide for both the formative and summative evaluations. At the outset, it is critical to gather quantitative data on student course completion, student academic success, and re-enrollment, especially in learning communities that serve developmental or ESL students and first-time entering freshmen. Evaluating students’ engagement, their experiences and what they are learning

can be accomplished through a number of strategies, including the Classroom Assessment Techniques described by Angelo and Cross in their book of the same name, self-reflective writings, and focus groups. Faculty experiences in learning communities can be gathered through exit interviews, self-reflective writings, or focus group discussions. Such assessments are important not only to document positive impacts, but to illuminate needs and challenges as well, and to help improve program delivery and the classroom experience. Both inexpensive, locally developed assessment tools and national surveys of freshman learning, such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) or the Community College Student Experience Questionnaire (CCSEQ), can be used in these efforts.

Partnerships/Consortia

Interinstitutional relationships and programs provide important learning community support and resources. Active regional centers of learning community work now offer opportunities for interinstitutional sharing through planning retreats, conferences, and visitations. They provide a network of kindred spirits, important to change agents who often find the experience of promoting change efforts an emotional roller coaster. Learning from others can expedite the process of learning and stop those new to learning communities from “re-inventing flat tires.”

The oldest consortium is in the **Pacific Northwest**. The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education is located at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Nearly all of the state’s colleges and universities are affiliated with the Washington Center. From its inception in 1985, the Washington Center has focused on learning communities, which the founders, Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor, regarded as Evergreen’s most significant transferable innovation. For many years, the Washington Center brokered interinstitutional faculty exchanges as a way of promoting learning communities. These efforts led the State of Washington to have the most pervasive learning community effort in the nation. Currently, the state-funded Washington Center offers a variety of resources to assist institutions interested in learning communities, including a significant website on learning communities (<http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu>), an annual conference, publications, annual curriculum planning retreats, and summer institutes for institutions offering learning communities. The Washington Center also supports other regional networks in a variety of ways and frequently develops ambitious grant-funded national projects. For more information, contact Washington Center co-directors Emily Decker Lardner at lardnere@evergreen.edu or Gillies Malnarich at malnarig@evergreen.edu.

In the **Midwest**, a consortium that began at Delta College in Michigan now has an interinstitutional leadership team that includes Delta College, William Rainey Harper College, Metropolitan Community Colleges of Kansas City, and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). For seven years this consortium has sponsored an annual learning community conference that draws hundreds of people from across the nation. The consortium is considering other

ongoing activities including summer institutes, open houses, and curriculum planning retreats. Information on the Midwest Consortium can be obtained through Jacque Mott at jmott@harper.cc.il.us.

In addition to Midwest Consortium events, periodic learning community events in the Midwest are sponsored by individual institutions and other organizations such as The Collaboration for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning or the living-learning networks.

The **Atlantic Center for Learning Communities** (ACLC) is a new consortium of New England and mid-Atlantic colleges and universities committed to supporting institutions in the region that are developing learning community initiatives. This network includes a diverse array of public and private two- and four-year colleges dedicated to enriching discussion of innovative, learner-centered pedagogies and the professional development that supports them, both within individual campuses and among the campuses in the region. The center will offer resource consulting, open houses that showcase learning communities practice, on-campus site visits, and an annual retreat for faculty/administration/campus teams interested in deepening their understanding of learning communities, related pedagogies, and assessment. Wagner College in New York is presently the lead institution for the network. Additional information can be obtained through Roberta Matthews, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, Brooklyn College, at rsmatthews@brooklyn.cuny.edu.

In **California**, several networks exist. Most active at the present time is the Regional Community College Consortium led by De Anza College in Cupertino, California, which involves the community colleges in Monterey, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz counties. This grant-funded consortium focuses on learning communities for underprepared students. The consortium has been supporting curriculum and faculty development with significant efforts to build collaborative leadership among the participating colleges. For additional information, contact Edwina Stoll, Coordinator of Interdisciplinary Learning Communities Program, at stolledwina@fhda.edu.

The California Learning Community College Network, consisting of Moorpark College, Cerritos Community College, Diablo Valley College, and the Hutchins School of Liberal Studies at Sonoma State University, has also worked on curriculum development, conferences, a website, and faculty development. The Hutchins School has also promoted discussion between colleges and high schools about learning communities. For more information, contact Victoria Bortolussi, Dean of Student Learning, at vbortolussi@vccd.net.

Other collaborations continue to emerge, such as the one between California State University-Hayward and Diablo Valley in Pleasant Hill, California, which are collaborating on ways to facilitate two- and four-year connections around learning community practices.

In the **Southeast**, both Arizona and Texas institutions have emerged to convene periodic interinstitutional events in their region. In Texas, Richland College and Collin County Community College have been leaders in sponsoring one-day regional conferences while the Maricopa Community College District has led the way in Arizona.

In the **South**, learning communities have been promoted for many years through the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, which offers an annual national conference, conferences in other regions, an extensive publication series, and teleconferences. In addition, a number of institutions ranging from the University of Miami to the University of Central Arkansas have offered periodic regional conferences. An emergent regional listserv is based at the University of Central Arkansas and managed by Florida International University. For additional information, contact Jayme Millsap Stone, Coordinator of Undergraduate Studies, at jaymes@mail.uca.edu, or Jeffrey Knapp, Director of the Freshman Interest Groups Program at Florida International University, at knappj@fiu.edu.

Regional consortia offer many benefits. Consortia can facilitate conversation, stimulate innovation, reflect on developments, encourage new leadership, and build a strong community of faculty and administrators. They can promote meaningful interaction among institutions with common issues and needs, bridge the hierarchical rift between community colleges and universities, and provide credibility for the local learning community programs. Finally, consortia can serve as a platform for acquiring grants, as happened in California when twelve community colleges were awarded a \$250,000, three-year Packard grant to use for individual campus seed monies, training workshops for faculty teams, and support for program development and assessment.