PREFACE

The deep purpose of education, in its best sense, is to support people in developing the capacity to live well together in the world. The ultimate measure of any educational reform effort will be the material changes we see in our communities. Such a transformation may not happen in our lifetimes, but the value of remembering the larger purpose for any reform effort is that like a constellation, also beyond reach, it helps us navigate a true course.

The learning community reform effort is a movement with promise, as many educators have noted. To make good on its full potential, we have to connect this powerful reform effort with the decades of work done primarily by scholars of color on issues of access and equity. Diversity is a demographic reality in the United States, and students in postsecondary education are increasingly diverse in terms of their ethnicities, races, socio-economic status, religions, ages, the languages spoken at home, physical abilities, countries of origin, and life experiences. In the mid-seventies, only about 15 percent of college students were members of minority groups. By 2000, the percentage of African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American students had risen to 28 percent. But this fact of increasing diversity does not translate automatically into educational equity. Higher education in the United States continues to be marked by issues related to unequal access and retention—from the question of who even has a chance to begin to who completes their course of study. Moreover, focusing on improving access and retention alone doesn't translate automatically into making sure that all students have access to rich and rigorous curriculum.

Moving from the facts of diversity to the achievement of educational equity as measured by student learning and student academic achievement requires analysis, commitment, and sustained work at all levels. As a curriculum restructuring project, the learning community reform effort has a role to play in helping us achieve education equity. Nevertheless, in the absence of a clear analysis of who is served by the current learning community reform effort, as well as an analysis of the nature of the learning provided, this reform effort risks repeating the patterns of exclusion and segregation that characterize education overall and have for many years.

I grew up in Rock Island, Illinois, in the 1960s and 70s. My diverse town was racially segregated: most of the white families lived "up on

the hill" and most of the African American families lived on the floodplain of the Mississippi River. I went to predominantly white schools. As a junior high school student, I participated in a cross-town exchange and spent a day at a racially-mixed school. Everything at this other school was different—clothes, voices, movements—and I realized that my "success" in one setting had little to do with negotiating social relations in this new setting. All public school students in my town eventually found themselves in a single consolidated high school. In 1973, race riots closed the high school for several days and the town was under a general curfew. Within the white community, rumors abounded about the possibility that busloads of Black Panthers were arriving from Chicago. My sister got into a fight in her gym class. My cousins and their friends drove to school with chains in the trunks of their cars. When school reopened, it was under the scrutiny of police and security guards who checked ID's and looked for weapons. In response to the tensions, high school administrators introduced a process called *Positive Peer Culture* (PPC) that had been developed in prisons for incarcerated youth. PPC is designed to mobilize the power of peer groups in a productive manner, by helping youth develop their collective abilities to identify problems and work toward their resolution.

When PPC was implemented at Rock Island High School, the goals for the program were to increase communication among students, reduce violence (especially fights), reduce racial prejudice, and lower the truancy rate. Student leaders and "problem youth" were recruited to form a racially-mixed group, which was facilitated by two African American men. As one of those student leaders, I found myself engaged in significant conversations with people whose life experiences and world-views were very different from mine—not only because of racial differences, but also because of class differences. Through our conversations, I became aware of the separate worlds within our high school—including the highly segregated academic and vocational tracks—as well as within our town. Supported by two extraordinary teachers, who encouraged us to listen and learn from each other and who believed that as a group we would figure out how the climate at our high school might be changed, we persevered in our conversations and efforts to appreciate the differences in our perspectives.

In spite of a wave of reforms, thirty years later the academic classes at my high school are still segregated. My parents reported that last spring there were no African American students enrolled in precalculus, and a disproportionately low number of students of color were honored

at the Honors' Society Awards night. Schools across the nation report a similar academic achievement gap, at all levels. In spite of good intentions, in spite of three decades of efforts to respond to racial tensions, inequities remain. The lesson I draw from this is simple. We need to rethink our fundamental strategy for change. We need a deep shift from a charity-based model of social and educational change to a model based on justice. Charity-based models offer strategies to reduce the achievement gap—enrichment programs, bridge programs, scholarship programs. All are important. Nonetheless, we need to address the very causes that lead to educational inequities, and we must work on this collaboratively and consistently. Without a commitment to justice and to making sure that everyone has access to quality schools and to the living conditions that lead people to be ready and able to learn, educational equity is impossible. A genuine commitment to educational equity means acknowledging the importance of—and then working for—access to affordable and safe housing, ample and nutritious food, clean water, medical and dental care, and living-wage jobs for everyone. Unless we reverse the current social trends of privatizing social services and reducing public spending on basic rights, we will move further away from educational equity. The resources needed to address inequities found inside schools, which are exacerbated by deeper inequities outside of school, are not adequate, nor are the resources allocated for addressing the root causes.

Learning communities can help address inequities by educating citizens who have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to address our collective public and social issues. The purpose of this monograph is to integrate strategies drawn from decades of diversity work with the most current thinking about the elements leading to effective learning communities, the focus of the monograph's lead essay. The second section of the monograph consists of case stories from five campuses across the country that describe local efforts to bring the lessons of diversity work to bear on their learning community initiatives.

~ Emily Lardner