II
Educational Restructuring through Learning Communities

Learning communities have emerged in the past twenty years as a major response to calls for greater efficiency and effectiveness in higher education. Adaptable to diverse institutional environments, they are now found in more than five hundred institutions, including two- and four-year colleges and both private and public colleges and universities (B. L. Smith 2001). They can provide a holistic and coherent means of enhancing student learning and of improving the quality of academic communities in a more cost-effective manner. Appropriately designed and situated, they can reach large numbers of students and offer a potentially more sustainable approach to improving the quality of undergraduate education than more narrowly based reform initiatives.

The term *learning community*, as we use it here, refers to a variety of curricular approaches that intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and that enroll a common cohort of students (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick 2004). By restructuring the curriculum into larger units, learning communities can intensify student engagement, increase opportunities for student and faculty interaction, and create more coherence in the curriculum. They provide a fertile arena for bringing skill and content courses together, integrating support services, and improving articulation among different parts of the curriculum. Learning communities often provide a rich environment for undergraduates to learn from peers and to gain leadership experience. Many learning communities are also living-learning communities, restructuring the residential environment to build community and integrate academic work with out-of-class experiences.

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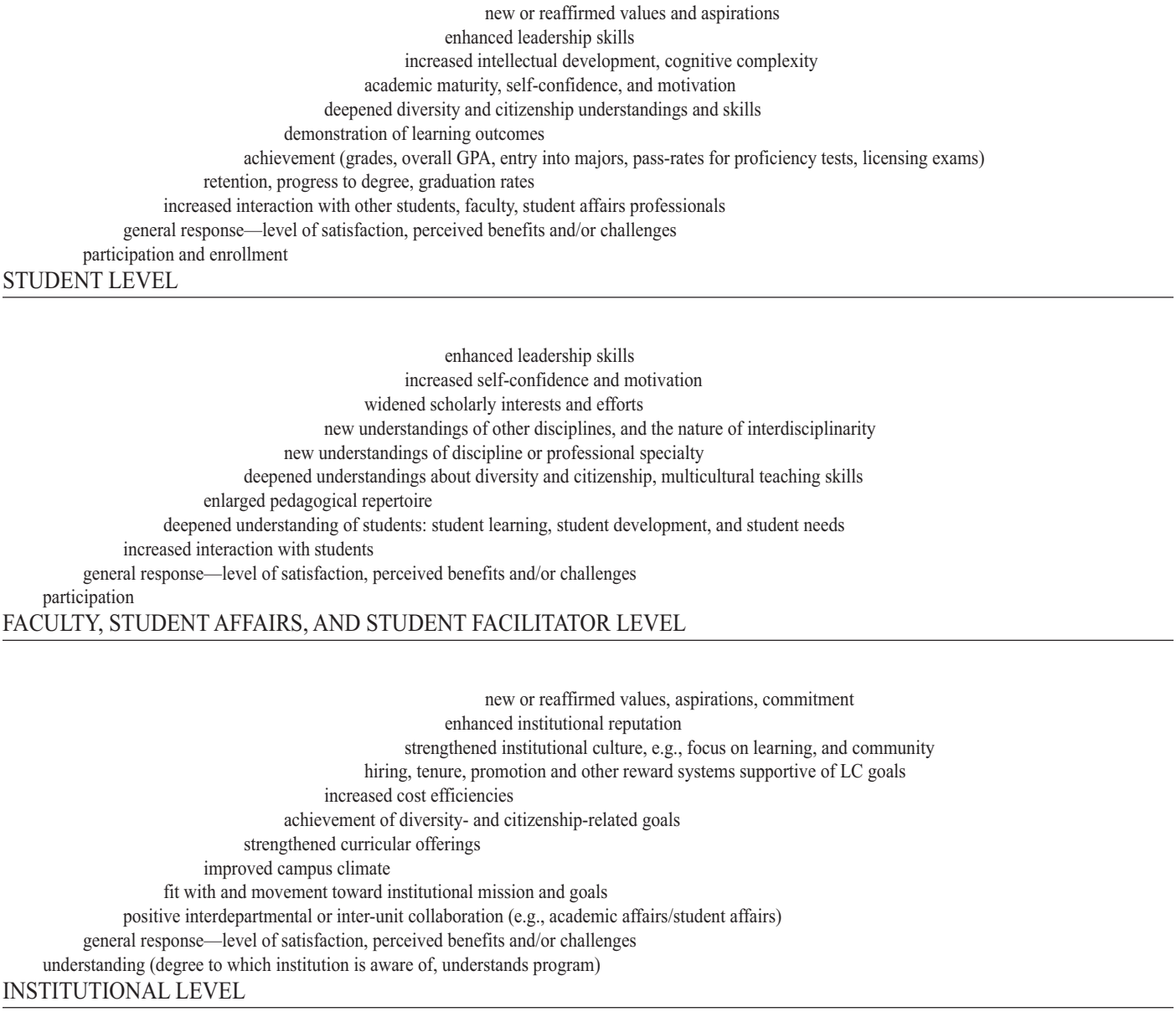
Well-designed learning communities frequently alter both the structure and the core teaching practices of traditional courses (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick 2004; Tagg 2003). Built around practices known to promote student learning, they provide high-challenge and high-support learning environments that embrace pedagogies of active engagement and reflection. At the same time, learning communities can provide a robust platform for implementing other reforms such as service learning, writing across the curriculum, and inquiry-based approaches to the sciences, creating a synergy and efficiency that is often missing when reform efforts run on separate tracks.

Learning communities take a variety of forms, ranging from simple linked courses to highly complex integrated programs that comprise an entire year of a student's academic work. Although a few institutions, such as The Evergreen State College, are organized entirely around the concept of learning communities, in most institutions learning communities live alongside traditional courses and disciplines. The scale and goals of these programs vary considerably from institution to institution. Figure 1 summarizes learning community goals for students, faculty, and institutions.

Figure 1. Ascending Steps of Learning Community Goals



Source: Smith, MacGregor, Matthews and Gabelnick. *Learning Communities and Reforming Undergraduate Education*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2004.

The first major study of learning communities was conducted by Vincent Tinto of Syracuse University under the auspices of the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment at Pennsylvania State University in the early 1990s (Ratcliff and Associates 1995). The work of Tinto and his graduate students built on Alexander Astin's earlier research, published in *What Matters in College,* which concluded that strong relationships between students and faculty, connections with peers, and a sense of involvement were crucial for students' academic success (Astin 1993). Not surprisingly, small residential colleges were most likely to have these characteristics. The big unanswered question was whether large, commuter four-year universities and community colleges (not part of Astin's study) could intentionally create powerful learning environments, a question Tinto's research would address.

Tinto and his graduate students looked at the impact of learning communities and collaborative learning at three typical higher education institutions—La Guardia Community College, Seattle Central Community College, and the University of Washington. The two urban community colleges faced the challenge of creating a sense of community and involvement on a commuter campus. As the recent *Community College Survey of Student Engagement* notes, "capturing student time" is a critical challenge in most community colleges (CCSSE, 2002). Although it is a highly selective institution, the University of Washington (UW) faced some of the same challenges as a result of its large size, its urban location, and its mission as a major research institution. The institution's leaders wanted to know how first-year students, many from small rural towns, could find a sense of community in an institution of 32,000 students and how this major research university could pay more attention to teaching and learning and the first-year curriculum.

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The research of Tinto and his graduate students demonstrated that learning communities and collaborative learning could promote student involvement, student achievement, and student persistence in college, even on large commuter campuses (Ratcliff 1995; Tinto 1997, 2000, 2002; Tinto and Love 1993a,b; Tinto, Love, and Russo 1993, 1994). Learning community students were more engaged, socially and academically. They reported that the learning community activities and practices provided them with the personal support that helped them learn and stay in college. As one student with many competing commitments put it, "this program is like a raft on the rapids of my life."

The next decade produced a growing literature that confirmed Tinto's findings in 1990 on the impact of learning communities. A 2003 review of more than 150 studies concluded that learning communities are now widespread in all types of colleges and universities with promising results in promoting student achievement and student retention (Taylor with MacGregor, Moore, and Lindblad 2003). The programs are usually situated in the first year of college but some have also been designed for upper-class students. Notable and highly effective initiatives are described in this review for entering students' general education coursework, freshman engineering programs, living/learning communities, and in pre-college/developmental education. At the same time, the study points out that much of the assessment work focused on what is most easily

measured. Few studies tackle student learning outcomes, and there are only a few examples of studies of cost effectiveness. One of the most important conclusions of this review is that future research and assessment needs to better articulate the nature of the learning community intervention to understand what makes a difference, since learning communities alter many aspects of the environment.