

# IV

## Developing Sustainable Learning Communities to Optimize Learning and Control Costs

Early learning community programs in the 1970s and 1980s often started as small-scale initiatives led by a few enthusiastic faculty members. By the mid-1990s, declining budgets and rising demands for accountability pushed institutions to think more strategically about learning communities and search for approaches to reach large numbers of students. This move to conceptualize learning communities as a major institutional programmatic initiative is essential if learning communities are to provide a *significant* response to the issue of enhancing student learning in the context of limited resources. For learning communities to become large-scale and garner the institutional support needed to thrive, the institution must take responsibility for the program and the effort must move beyond a few committed faculty.

Thinking about learning communities as a means of optimizing learning in an institution and controlling costs involves a number of conceptual shifts it requires:

- thinking in terms of investments and returns, committing to learning community models that enhance student learning, and building institutional capacity to implement them
- reconsidering relationships, structures, and boundaries within the organization
- consideration of high leverage points and issues of getting to scale in planning and situating the learning community initiative

**Thinking in Terms of Investments and Returns:** One important conceptual shift is to think of learning community costs as an investment aimed at addressing a particular issue or need. Clear goals are of paramount importance. Most learning communities require some initial investment by the institution, with a belief that subsequent increases in student learning, student retention, and/or other efficiencies will justify the initial costs. It is useful to note, as Ann Ferren does, that there are negative and positive costs (Ferren, and Salvings 2000). Positive costs, such as faculty development and tutoring support systems, are investments that build capacity for improving student learning. Because learning communities represent a departure from the traditional curricular and pedagogic models, they require necessary investments in faculty and staff development. They also require investments in marketing and student recruitment. But learning communities offer promise for substantial financial and educational returns on those investments.

*Areas of initial investment in learning communities usually include:*

- faculty and staff development and planning time
- assessment, data collection, and analysis
- marketing and recruitment of both students and faculty members

*This move to conceptualize learning communities as a major institutional programmatic initiative is essential if learning communities are to provide a significant response to the issue of enhancing student learning in the context of limited resources.*

- administration
- technology

*Areas that typically yield savings or positive returns on these investments include:*

- increases in student retention and persistence to the degree
- increases in student satisfaction, student engagement, and student learning
- increases in student achievement
- greater curricular efficiency
- increased sense of community and collaboration in the institution
- freed up faculty time (particularly if other professionals and peer learning are employed, or if technology is used to replace some faculty work)
- grant and other gift support if innovation is recognized
- government support (or at least no punishment) if retention and time-to-degree improve
- reputation capital and increased attractiveness as an institution

*Because many studies indicate that the program's benefits increase over time, campuses should develop an ongoing assessment effort.*

There are many different ways of demonstrating cost effectiveness and return on investment. The Appendix describes ways learning community outcomes for students, faculty, and the institution might be defined and assessed. Most institutions use multiple measures when assessing learning communities. While many institutions use locally developed instruments to assess program outcomes, standardized national surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement are also useful for assessing some outcomes. These instruments have been validated, provide comparisons with other like institutions, and are often fairly inexpensive. Because many studies indicate that the program's benefits increase over time, campuses should develop an ongoing assessment effort. A five-year study at North Seattle Community College, for example, found that students who had participated in learning communities had higher retention rates than non-learning community students (73 percent vs. 38 percent), and these students were much more likely to finish the Associate of Arts degree (54 percent vs. 13 percent) (Harnish 2002). Similarly, at the University of Texas at El Paso learning communities were associated with shortened time-to-degree in the sciences and higher pass rates in difficult gateway courses in mathematics and physics. Iowa State University and Indiana State University made it a specific goal in their assessment work to calculate return on investment, and both institutions reported a substantial return. (Taylor with Moore, MacGregor, and Lindblad 2004).

**Rethinking Institutional Relationships and Boundaries:** A second conceptual shift involves thinking of learning communities as an *institutional* initiative to enhance learning with implications for overall implementation, staffing, and funding. This shift pushes us to look at the entire institution and ask where the needs are, who might contribute to enhancing student learning, and what resources might be available. Framing the issue in this way often provides

access to a variety of new resources (people and dollars) in the institution. At the same time, it pushes us to ask where teaching and learning fits in overall institutional priorities. What is and is not central to promoting student learning? Institutional decision-makers will inevitably be faced with issues of setting priorities. In most institutions, emphasizing student learning will require some shifting of resources (Massy and Wilger 1996).

Of course, learning communities can be staffed, funded, and administered in various ways. In many institutions, broadening the notion of who can be a teacher has been an important aspect of learning community development. Collaborative teaching teams have become a common feature of many learning communities, and the level of collaboration varies widely. Some programs that involve large numbers of students such as the University of Washington's Freshman Interest Group Program and the learning community program at Texas A & M University - Corpus Christi, for example, rely extensively upon rethinking the division of labor by involving graduate and undergraduate students, adjunct faculty, librarians, technology experts, and student affairs' professionals in key instructional roles.

Learning communities can also be funded in different ways. In most cases, they are funded just like any other course, through student tuition, allocated largely on the basis of enrollment. Working out the accounting procedures between departments, however, is a difficult part of learning community planning since learning community faculty often come from existing academic departments or other budgetary units. It is highly variable whether the institution counts the faculty member as being contributed from a department to a learning community teaching appointment or being borrowed in such a way that the faculty member is replaced.

In some institutions, the learning community initiative is almost invisible from a budgetary point of view because the course loading is completely woven into traditional departmental expectations and procedures and the faculty development is built into regular faculty development programming. In other places, there are very sizable standing budgets for the program. Iowa State University and Georgia State University, for example, have annual Request for Proposal procedures to solicit learning communities and they reimburse departments. Similar reimbursement practices are often followed in many living-learning community programs involving faculty, but this can be a costly approach when the learning community curriculum is added to, rather than replaces, existing offerings.

Because learning communities often involve inter-unit collaboration, funding may come from several places: often academic affairs, student affairs, or other units. Funding is frequently the result of re-deploying existing budgets. While academic and student affairs collaborations are most common, the University of Hawaii started its first learning community with the support of the Athletics program. Special fees are sometimes attached to residential learning communities that help support the program. At the University of Wisconsin, for example, the Chadbourne and Bradley Learning Communities are supported by an additional housing fee, and the students help decide how a portion of this fee is allocated,

*In some institutions, the learning community initiative is almost invisible from a budgetary point of view because the course loading is completely woven into traditional departmental expectations and procedures and the faculty development is built into regular faculty development programming.*

*Learning communities do not have to represent a large financial investment—in fact, they can be revenue neutral or save money over time.*

thereby making this a learning experience in decision-making and governance as well.

Tuition waivers and work study funds may be a source of funding as well. At St. John Fisher College and the Goodrich Program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, for example, tuition waivers were redirected to support scholarships for students enrolled in the learning communities. Many institutions use work study funds to support peer advisors, but in some institutions peer advisors receive academic or internship credit rather than direct compensation for their leadership work.

Many learning community programs have been initiated with grant funding. U. S. Department of Education Title III and V programs have been especially important in supporting learning communities aimed at students from historically underrepresented populations.

**High Leverage Points and Getting to Scale.** Many innovations lie on the margins of institutions and never have a real impact on enough students to make a real difference to the institution (Elmore 1996). They are especially vulnerable in times of limited resources. To address this issue, reformers need to think about bringing innovations “to scale.” The decisions made about where and on what scale to implement the learning community approach can have dramatically different fiscal implications. As we saw in Section III, the learning community model itself makes a difference. Learning communities do not have to represent a large financial investment—in fact, they can be revenue neutral or save money over time. To be cost effective on a large scale, however, they do need to represent a substantial programmatic commitment. In fact, embracing learning communities as a large-scale innovation is likely to be less expensive, and have a greater positive impact on student learning, than using learning communities as a piecemeal addition to the existing curriculum.

The challenge of large-scale innovation, of course, lies in the need to secure institutional commitment to change and develop a program that has a substantial impact. Learning communities are often introduced as pilot programs in one area and scaled up over time. Table 2 provides a framework for understanding some specific decisions in implementing learning communities that strongly affect the cost of implementation.

**Table 2**

<i>Higher Cost</i>	<i>Lower Cost/Revenue Neutral</i>
Learning Community as addition to traditional curriculum, no structural change	Learning Community as replacement for targeted areas of curriculum
Small-scale program that reaches very small numbers of students in an erratic fashion	Larger-scale program that reaches substantial numbers of students in an intentional fashion
Faculty teach all aspects of Learning Community program	Faculty, staff (library, student affairs professionals, and others), technology, and peer learning all utilized in teaching
Focus on low-enrollment courses	Focus on high-enrollment courses
Focus on Honors Program students as an enhancement for student learning and engagement	Focus on large, gateway general education courses as a means of enhancing learning and retention

*Ultimately, building learning communities in high impact areas is a key factor in developing programs that optimize learning in a time of limited resources.*

If learning communities are seen as simply another program that involves no real systemic change, they can still yield some benefits in terms of increased student learning and retention. If no restructuring occurs and they are simply added to existing courses, they will represent a new programmatic initiative that adds modest cost with some benefits.

Ultimately, building learning communities in high impact areas is a key factor in developing programs that optimize learning in a time of limited resources. Developing programs around specific programmatic needs means that resources are allocated to these areas first, rather than simply building learning communities or other interventions where faculty interest may arise. A key element in sustainability and getting to scale in many institutions has been to use learning community approaches that work fairly closely within regular enrollment patterns and faculty/staff teaching loads using models and ratios described in Section III of this monograph. One of the paradoxes is that the programs with the biggest reach (in terms of numbers of students participating) are often the least ambitious in terms of the ways the curricular structure and faculty roles have been modified to promote learning.

Some of the most effective programs are an exception to this pattern and have become change efforts that are both broad and deep. As a result, they reach a large number of students and have a substantial impact on the students' undergraduate education. Table 3 briefly describes a number of these substantial learning community initiatives that have been scaled up. Understanding how these institutions use learning communities to optimize learning in a climate of limited resources is instructive in seeing the variety of approaches available.

*Costs are reduced by not running competing curricular structures and by enrolling learning communities at a student-faculty ratio comparable to the state funding formula.*

At one end of the continuum is The Evergreen State College, which is organized entirely around the notion of team-taught interdisciplinary learning communities. In this case, the entire institution has been organized around this notion and a congruent culture has been established to sustain this emphasis. Costs are reduced by not running competing curricular structures and by enrolling learning communities at a student-faculty ratio comparable to the state funding formula. Similarly, at Babson College, a holistic institutional vision defines the learning community program that is, in turn, part of a larger set of goals and values. New Century College at George Mason University is another example of a wholly transformed learning community program, but because it operates as a sub-unit within a traditional institution, it faces ongoing compatibility challenges and can easily be viewed as a costly, special purpose program despite its documented effectiveness.

**Table 3.**  
Learning Community Initiatives Involving Significant Curricular Restructuring

---

The Evergreen State College

Entire institution organized around learning communities with explicit educational philosophy and coherent structures that support this approach. Dramatically reconfigures faculty roles and teaching loads. Eliminates traditional departments and courses and integrates many of the other reforms in higher education. Cost of instruction comparable to other public universities in Washington state with demonstrable high learning outcomes.

---

New Century College at George Mason University

Small cluster college; holistic reform within the context of traditional institution. High impact in terms of student learning, but reaches relatively few students in larger institution. Faces compatibility challenges with values and practices of traditional research university.

---

Babson College

Known for its innovative approach to business education, undergraduate curriculum integrates core competencies, key business disciplines, and the liberal arts. All first-year students participate in the Foundation Management Experience, a yearlong immersion into the world of business where student teams create their own for-profit ventures. The Intermediate Management Experience integrates a variety of disciplines, while the students design their own learning plans in the Advanced Program.

---

Portland State University

Sequential interdisciplinary learning communities taught by well-trained teams. Learning communities and portfolio assessment are the centerpieces of innovative general education program. Learning communities made general education programs more efficient (consumed fewer credit hours) and increased student learning.

---

#### Wagner College

Large-scale effort supported by explicit educational philosophy and extensive faculty development. College requires students to take three team-planned, but not team-taught, learning communities encompassing both general education and the major, and integrating many other innovations in service-learning, diversity.

---

#### Skagit Valley College

Large-scale, required general education program requiring three learning communities for AA-degree students. Designed to create curricular coherence and reinforce basic skills in the context of academic study. Highly effective in terms of positive student learning outcomes and faculty commitment.

---

#### Grossmont Community College

Pervasive learning community program built around English Composition links for all developmental and transfer students. Run at the same course loading and cost as previous approach, therefore, cost neutral but more effective in completion rates.

---

#### La Guardia Community College

Large-scale, required learning community program for all AA-transfer students as well as extensive learning community effort in developmental education. Dramatically increased student retention.

---

#### North Seattle and Seattle Central Community Colleges

Longstanding learning community programs in all areas of the curriculum with a focus on general education learning outcomes. Team-taught programs foster faculty development. Highly effective in student retention and achievement. Operates team-taught programs at conventional faculty loading levels. Seattle Central was one of the institutions studied extensively by Tinto and his colleagues. North Seattle has extensive assessment data over a ten-year period on the impact of learning communities on the various dimensions cited in the Appendix.

---

#### University of Texas at El Paso

Highly successful pervasive effort aimed at increasing the retention and graduation rates of students from underrepresented populations. Entering students' program began in science, technology, and engineering and is now offered across the university. Initially funded by the National Science Foundation, now faces the challenge of living on more limited resources.

*These institutions have invented new ways of thinking about instructional roles and relationships and who can be a teacher. Many of these institutions involve professionals in student affairs and the library, and peer mentors are the teaching and support team for the learning community.*

---

University of Washington

Freshman Interest Group learning community model built around high-enrollment courses. Now enrolls more than 75 percent of all freshmen. Most FIGs have little course integration; rather, the freshman seminar is led by undergraduate peer mentor. Used as a student leadership program for peer advisors and as a platform for introducing other innovations in technology, service learning, etc. Very low cost approach with extensive reach and positive impact on student retention, achievement, and long-term satisfaction with UW. Program was studied by Tinto and his colleagues in the early 1990s.

---

Texas A & M University - Corpus Christi

Pervasive general education learning community program for all first-year students built around high enrollment courses with support for implementation by teaching teams that include faculty, adjuncts, and graduate students. Is sustained on same funding formula as other comparable universities in Texas.

---

Iowa State University

Large-scale, decentralized learning community program based in the different schools. Includes substantial living-learning programs and peer mentor support. Extensive assessment effort demonstrates cost effectiveness and efficiencies in student retention.

The other institutions in Table 3 have strong learning community programs that live alongside traditional departments, disciplines, and majors. A number of these institutions (Wagner, Skagit Valley, UTEP, and Portland State) have chosen to make learning communities a robust multi-term focus of their general education program, in some cases (Wagner, UTEP, and Portland State, for example) weaving it into the major as well. These institutions have invented new ways of thinking about instructional roles and relationships and who can be a teacher. Many of these institutions involve professionals in student affairs and the library, and peer mentors are the teaching and support team for the learning community. At the same time, faculty involvement is pervasive and well supported in these institutions, a key factor in maintaining quality in large-scale programs.

On other campuses in Table 3, such as the University of Washington (UW) and at many of the community colleges, the learning community initiative is primarily a first-term experience for students, but the impact of the program is substantial because these programs are situated at a critical transition point for students. At UW, for example, the Freshman Interest Group program is deepened when it is connected to their Interdisciplinary Writing Program. Interviews of graduating seniors at UW indicated that Freshman Interest Groups were one of their most memorable and important undergraduate experiences. Most of these institutions with single-term freshman learning community programs also provide an array of other types of learning communities throughout the curriculum, some based in the major, some located at other transition points for



transfer students, and others focused on study abroad, undergraduate research, or service-learning.

What do these schools have in common? All of the institutions in Table 3 built learning communities around clearly defined needs, made appropriate investments with an expectation of a significant return, situated the initiatives in areas of high impact, and have demonstrated returns on these investments. While the learning community models vary dramatically in complexity, pervasiveness, staffing approach, and cost, they are all effective in their own way. Most important, these institutions have a well-conceived vision guiding their planning, and learning communities are part of a larger set of institutional goals to strengthen student learning.

*While the learning community models vary dramatically in complexity, pervasiveness, staffing approach, and cost, they are all effective in their own way.*