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What's Ahead

Many learning community programs now stand at a crossroads. There are many examples of learning communities that represent modest innovations and incremental changes, but these small-scale reform efforts may be highly vulnerable in a time of limited resources. There are also a number of programs that have been scaled up to reach substantial numbers of students, and institutionalized. Most of these efforts have found a way to minimize conflicts with the traditional organizational structures and values, usually by occupying “territory” that does not impinge on core values supporting the status quo. In most cases, even when these efforts reach large numbers of students, they are worthwhile but modest initiatives in terms of their design and impact on the overall academic program. In some institutions, even these seemingly well-established programs are coming under scrutiny as resources dwindle.

There are also a small number of institutions with learning community programs that are pushing towards transformative change. A number of institutions such as IUPUI and Arizona State University that started with large but modest first-year initiatives are now moving towards models that involve more ambitious restructuring of the curriculum. These more transformative efforts are characterized by greater depth and breadth in their reach in an institution. The successful initiatives have also made, to a greater or lesser extent, congruent cultural and structural changes in the organization that allowed them to gain a sinecure in the organization and the promise of sustainability.

Learning communities offer the possibility for dealing with some of the most difficult fiscal and learning challenges facing higher education. But, in order to realize the potential inherent in these educational structures, they must be implemented in a much more intentional way than has been done to date, with a few exceptions. Measuring cost effectiveness and the return on the investment remains a very crude art, but it is worth pursuing. Learning community assessment is no further ahead or behind most educational innovations on this front. Nonetheless, assessment is important. It helps us clarify our goals and see whether we are achieving them.

We already know that learning communities are cost effective in many different ways. A convergent literature suggests that these reform initiatives promote student retention, reduce course repeats and drop out rates, and improve persistence and graduation rates (Taylor with Moore, MacGregor, and Lindblad 2003). We know learning communities promote student satisfaction and student achievement. They can improve the climate on residential campuses and promote academic engagement. Many have the potential to realize deep learning. Learning communities are often a move towards greater curricular efficiency to promote more focus and less duplication in the curriculum. Many colleges use learning communities to accomplish several of these outcomes at once, seeing them as a student learning initiative, a student leadership initiative, a faculty revitalization effort, and a “skunkworks,” or platform for innovation. It is difficult to put a price tag on what is gained when learning communities revitalize an institution and become a signature program, but they can provide a kind of reputational capital that makes a big difference.

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Still, to deal with the twin issues of enhancing learning and controlling costs, we think learning community work needs to go further than it has to date. There are now a variety of convergent reform efforts that can be brought together to create more powerful learning environments. Better defining and working with clearer educational outcomes is an important next step in learning community work. Using technology in appropriate ways could also strengthen learning communities. A related innovative effort called “The Course Redesign Project” offers useful lessons for redesigning courses to enhance learning and cut costs with technology (Twigg 2003). While many learning communities take advantage of community connections and non-classroom-based learning, this effort could also go further on many campuses. Better attention to the complex issues of diversity would also strengthen learning communities as we strive to reach an increasingly diverse student body (Bensimon 2004) for a model diversity assessment and planning approach that could be usefully adapted to learning communities). Using more classroom-based assessment and program assessment to improve our programs will also strengthen our efforts and will strengthen our capabilities. Finally, the Project on the Future of Higher Education at Antioch University has developed a set of principles and actions for supporting faculty vitality and enhancing student learning in different budget climates (downloadable at www.pfe.org). Learning communities are one innovation that can fit into the vision created by this project, for they offer a cost-effective means of supporting faculty, staff, and students. As this project begins intensive work with a select group of campuses, learning communities and their advocates should be challenged to look closely at how learning communities can enhance learning and reduce costs.

Learning communities are facing a transition challenge as many of the early leaders are retiring. Recruiting a new generation to sustain this innovation will be crucial to its survival. For learning communities to reach their full potential, institutions will need to pay much more careful attention to professional development.

As Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini point out, it has become clear that “the quality of undergraduate education may be much more a function of what colleges do programmatically than it is of the human, financial, and educational resources at their disposal” (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 637). Outstanding academic programs and educational quality are not limited to the highly selective, well-endowed institutions. They are within the reach of most of our colleges and universities. But they require a commitment to innovation and dynamic change, even—perhaps especially—in the face of fiscal challenges. Do we want to embrace minimal change efforts that will have some impact or do we want to take on the process of more fundamentally restructuring our institutions to support student learning?